

OMAR



CRAIG O.
THOMPSON

WHAT READERS SAY ABOUT OMAR (Comments on File):

"...Within pages, I was hooked and anxious to see where the whole adventure would go...I didn't spend much time eating or sleeping for a couple of days. (Thompson is) faithful to the genre in which (he) wrote while asking the reader to give more serious thought to the ideas brought up...a smashing success."

— Earl B. (NH)

"...guaranteed to hold your interest...WARNING!! You'll want more..."

— Roxanne T. (AZ)

"**Omar** is a well-written, well-researched, captivating novel. Craig O. Thompson has mixed politics, advanced technology, diabolically realistic characters into the greatest treasure hunt of all time. Intriguing, ingeniously crafted, excellent plotting all add up to a first-rate story."

— Janet P. (CA)

"...It has to be made into a movie...I'm telling everyone I know about (**Omar**)."

— Chris L. (VT)

"Finished **Omar**...good company during (an) ice storm...I usually find that my reaction to a book I like is a feeling of wanting more, when I reach the last page...and that I want to revisit its characters...I had that reaction to **Omar**!"

— Michael R. (ME)

"...I have just one word for the book. WOW!!! ...I ordinarily read other types of genre, but I couldn't wait to come home from work to dive in."

— Evalyn C. (MO)

"...It is a thriller! What vivid descriptions (he) weaves. I would certainly place (Craig O. Thompson) right up there with Jack Higgins, Stephen Coonts, and Clive Cussler.

— Alan L. (IN)

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"I truly enjoyed *Omar*. Will probably read it again, soon..."

— Laela H. (CA)

"...It has to be made into a movie...I'm telling everyone I know about (*Omar*)."

— Chris L. (VT)

FROM TEST-MARKET BOOKSIGNINGS...

"This is one author you should have on your must-have list (His protagonist) makes Indiana Jones look staid and a little boring by comparison...the right ingredients for a great read. ...many (customers) return on follow-up visits to get signed books for friends and relatives..."

— David J. **Hermanson**, Books Manager
Hastings Entertainment Superstore (AZ)

"During three separate appearances, Mr. Thompson sold more books at each signing than any previously scheduled author. Would invite back again and again."

— Lee **Loftus**, Manager
T. Charleston & Sons, Book Purveyors (MO)

TEST-MARKET READER REVIEWS (continued)

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"...I have just one word for the book. WOW!!! I can see this on the big screen! I ordinarily read other types of genre, but I couldn't wait to come home from work to dive into (OMAR)."

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cont'd

MORE TEST-MARKET COMMENTS ABOUT *OMAR*...

"In Print: Summer Reads" (Recommendation to Subscribers)
— *Scottsdale Magazine*

"...a literary treasure...with high regard reserved for only those few writers who show brilliance...this work is clearly of that caliber."

— Dr. John Maestas, Consultant, Published Author
and Producer of 8 PBS Documentaries

"I am impressed by (Thompson's) strength of his storytelling, command of dialogue, and ability to evoke a scene...(with) text brought to a high finish...to a degree that one does not often see these days."

— Joseph Foote, Journalist, Writer, Literary Consultant
and Editor to the White House and Congress

"...Omar draws the reader into the story right from the opening paragraphs...(with) the usual twists, turns, and surprises that readers look for, know are coming, and--in the case of good writers--somehow are caught off guard. (Thompson writes) in the tradition of Robert Ludlum, Clive Cussler, (and) Tom Clancy..."

— Rev. Paul Wharton, Historical Expert

"Omar is an exciting, thought-provoking novel...(an) outstanding page-turner (that) puts the reader in the story from page one...(with) the depth of Tom Clancy (and) story-telling ability of Wilbur Smith. *Omar* needs to be in your collection...can't wait for the sequel."

— George Jones, Writer

**CRAIG O.
THOMPSON**

OMAR

A NOVEL

StrataGem Press
Indianapolis

This book is a work of fiction. With the exception of events, names and companies factually and traditionally associated with the tragedy of the **Titanic** and those who are associated with the **Titanic's** discovery in the mid-80's, all of the names, characters, incidents, dialogue and plot events in **Omar** are fictitious. Any other resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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For those who love life
And do not mistreat it.
For those who are endeared to their children
And will protect them at all cost.
For those Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, and Hindus
Who know we must love one another regardless of our
Religious beliefs.
And for those who know that violence is wrong.

The opposite of love is not hate...it is fear.
Dr. Gerold G. Jampolsky

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters are from the Electronic Version of the novel OMAR by Craig O. Thompson - ISBN 0-9675207-2-X. These chapters, and all preceeding material, are for preview purposes only.

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PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR begin at page 75.

NEW SCOTLAND YARD, LONDON
16.18 Greenwich Mean Time

“GOD almighty!” exclaimed the commissioner of New Scotland Yard. John Lawton placed his phone in its cradle. His usually sanguine face turned ashen. Without removing his hand, he picked up the receiver. A four-digit autodial security code brought up an instant conference call for a predetermined group of local and international forces dealing with terrorism.

Immediately the call was directed to the heads of MI-5 Security, C-13, SAS, all British international airport security departments, and New Scotland Yard’s Division Heads. It also connected with local offices for CIA, FBI, Israel’s Mossad, and the recently admitted replacement for the KGB elite anti-terrorist Alpha Group, known as the Secretariat for International Investigations (SII)—now with a small out-of-the-way office in Kensington.

Each organization had treaties with Britain and held membership in Interpol. All secured phone lines were picked up before the second ring.

“Lawton here. *BBC* just received an anonymous tape. Damndest development. We’ve been warned of a possible terrorist attack at Heathrow within the next twenty-four hours. But it must be treated as imminent. Rather bizarre—the warning uses a Sinn Fein code.” Lawton’s dove gray eyes searched his mind for answers.

“Must be a connection with the Interpol circular we received this morning on Ragem and his ALFAHAD,” said the local head of the Mossad. “The piece fits the puzzle. Any more information?”

“We don’t know if they’re going for planes, people or both,” said Lawton. “Anyone pick up anything?”

“T-COU’s circular reported Ragem in Belfast yesterday,” came a quick reply from the the head of C-13. “But we had a slip-up in the office last night. The Alert didn’t get to me until quite late this morning.

“Manchester notified us Ragem has already slipped across North

Channel and made it possibly as far as Birmingham. One of our operatives spotted him at Liverpool's train station, but was eluded by Ragem before help arrived."

"Something's going on," said the voice from MI-5. "There may be a connection between Ragem and the murder of an unlucky young couple who chanced on an IRA safehouse Friday night—their throats slit from ear to ear. Not an M.O. typically associated with IRA. No fingerprints for Ragem. But they found prints for his top lieutenant, Khorassani. Seems there was a joint meeting that went awry. Sean Paisley and John Springer were both mortally wounded. Why U.L.F.'s Paisley was in an IRA safehouse defies logic. But the youth—the unfortunate dead young man, had the letters 'AL' and an unfinished line, in blood on the palm of his hand. The blood-type matched Springer's. Our guess is the 'AL' was Springer's way of saying ALFAHAD before he croaked."

"Not a good sign," said Lawton. "Spread the circular everywhere." Pensively, his fingers combed thick silver hair straight back. "Lawrence, are you there?"

"Here sir," answered Gerald Lawrence, Chief of Airport Security, Heathrow. "The circular's coming in, sir."

"Distribute at once."

"We're inundated with travelers. It'll be a miracle if we spot anyone now. But we'll give it a go."

"If Ragem's involved, he's there. We're activating T-Plan A. Cover every entrance. Have London Control hold all planes. Redirect large airborne to Gatwick and Foulness—smaller planes to Rochester, Southend or Biggen Hill. If fuel's low, work it out best you can. Look for bombs and watch out for sprayguns. Try to hold until SF gets there. But do what you have to do. Don't wait for the rest of this conversation. You know the drill. Go!"

"Done!"

A click on the line and a red light going off on an electronic wall-board signaled Lawrence was already in action.

"Townsend, mobilize SAS to Heathrow. Especially the bomb squad. Take every copter and personnel carrier at your disposal."

“Yes, sir.”

“Contact London Transport. Have them slow down the tubes. Block every U.G. entrance and exit from Heathrow Central on out. Be wary of false-looking wigs, mustaches, and other hair pieces. Ragem’s a master of disguise. Get him and any of his band alive. But take the bloody buggers down if you must save civilian lives. They’re busier than hell out there.”

The commissioner checked the giant wall map opposite his desk and continued, “Move Mobile Op to Heathrow’s back gate, off Great West at A30, north of Staines Road. We’ll keep all priority lines open for you.”

“Right, Commissioner.”

Another click off the line.

T-Plan-A, short for “Terrorist Attack Imminent—Highest Priority,” directed coverage with pairs of soldiers, placed in concentric circles, throughout the entire airport and outlying area. SAS would coordinate personnel from military and civilian police branches. Each group would be staggered no more than 200 yards apart in any direction. Every road in or out of Heathrow would be blocked all the way out for 3 miles.

All airport runways would shut down. Baggage carriers and conveyors would slow, at first, then freeze in place. Airport personnel would be placed quietly on alert with photos of terrorists delivered to all stations.

Ticket issuance would be intentionally slowed to a crawl to allow for counter-to-counter searches and possible identification of the terrorists—if still arriving on site.

As a precaution, every hospital administrator, ambulance company, firehouse and emergency volunteer group would be placed on alert, in case of emergency or casualties. They would be considered as “Tier 2” level security, having no information regarding possible cause. It would be treated as a highly regarded “test situation” until further notice.

“Gatwick, you still there?”

“Yes, sir.”

"You know the rules. Follow the plan. You won't have ground forces for backup if they've pulled a switch on us. Get all available security on heightened alert and cover your ass. Your air lanes will double from this moment on. So give your Traffic Controllers shots of adrenaline and caffeine. We don't need any mid-airs right now."

"Already ordered full alert."

"Good going man. Keep me informed."

Another line clicked off.

"Five?" Lawton asked for the MI-5 Commander.

"Sir."

"The Queen's back from Windsor Castle. We don't know how many terrorists are in country, so double your security around the three P's. Use T-Code to access the Queen and Prime Minister. If the press inquires, quote Shakespeare, but hold on anything else. It's 16.21. My god, the rush hour is on. Use the bus lanes. Don't bloody waste time."

As the Plan was implemented, intense security covered the "3-P's" as they were called—The Palace, Parliament, and Prime Minister's residence. SAS moved to the "Royal Triangle," shielding an area roughly from Whitehall and Victoria Embankment at the bend of River Thames, near King's Reach, to points stretching through Piccadilly, and The Mall, then to Knightsbridge, and down Grosvenor Place and Buckingham Palace Road on the north and west sides.

Security would extend over Victoria Street and beyond, on the south, over to and including Lambeth Palace Road, between Lambeth and Westminster Bridges, covering Parliament from the eastside of River Thames.

Lawton was left with the heads of the international bureaus.

"We'll set up field operations and communications at our Mobile base," he said. ". . . just outside Heathrow. Your people know anything new about these buggers?"

Mitchell, of CIA, answered first, "Langley's been following Ragem for the past two weeks. Colonel Bramson's Mideast Bureau

thought they had a handle on him. But he played chameleon and disappeared into the woodwork in Oman.”

A buzzer interrupted the conference call.

“Yes?” said the Commissioner.

“Sir, Lawrence here. All planes have been redirected and will check in if problems. So far, no alarms in the air. All airport doors are covered and T-Plan is in effect.”

Another buzzer.

“Lawton, here.”

“Townsend, sir. SF is out in force. The mobile unit should be in place in less than 15 minutes, with communications up within five minutes after arrival. And Underground is taking all precautions.”

“Keep me informed.”

Back to the directors on line, “We’re within minutes of being fully operational. Moshe, anything from your side?”

“Ragem’s eluded us completely,” said Moshe Levy of Israel’s Mossad. “If he was in Belfast yesterday, he’s moving quickly to pull this off.”

The Russian SII Director broke in, “With Ragem anything is possible. Libya helps float him in and out of heaven and hell whenever he needs assistance. We’ve not been able to contain either since the Putsch.”

Lawton wasn’t comfortable expressing what he knew, since the previous Soviet government had funded Ragem through covert operations.

The directors knew Ragem for what he was—one of the coldest perpetrators of violence. He perceived people as entities within a religious or sociopolitical framework, not as human beings. For Ragem and his supporters, even children had no innocence. Calculated assassination, murder, abduction and torture served to coerce the political systems with which they were at odds.

The irony of this potential attack was clear as they were forced to protect vulnerable people and sites of their political houses, modern transportation systems, commerce and international

trade—the obvious reasons terrorists were so successful.

Nothing was sacred or safe.

If terrorists could not hold people as hostages, in one way or another they would hold all the playing cards in the western world's deck—weaponry, transportation and communication—at one time or another.

The ease of obtaining weaponry; the smaller scale of weapons; the irony of instantaneous communications and media coverage; the swiftness of modern travel, all contributed to the successful murderous outcomes of terrorist organizations such as the ALFAHAD.

"Frankly, I'm praying it's a hoax," said Ron Bantam, FBI. "Along with your potential for calamity, we've got Agent Nakamura . . . in the air and arriving at Heathrow at any moment with one of CIA's operatives on that *Titanic* project."

"That's right," CIA's Mitchell interjected. "We were to meet with you in the morning."

"Isn't their investigation connected with the ALFAHAD?"

"Ragem's a busy son-of-a-bitch."

"Yes, well, if their plane hasn't landed already they should have been directed on to Gatwick or Foulness," said Lawton. "What's their flight number?"

"Eleven sixty-one. United," said Bantam. "I have a driver at Heathrow waiting to pick them up."

"Better get your driver out of there."

Lawton entered a restricted code into his computer, punched up the international carrier reservation system, accessed United, and entered the flight number.

"Hasn't landed yet. We'll shuttle them from Gatwick. Shall we meet at Mobile Op?"

"We'd be grateful," said Bantam.

"I'll arrange private transport to pick you up. You'd never get by the roadblocks. My secretary will patch you through to the plane. Hold the line."

Inspector Wingate entered the office. "Sir, your helicopter is

ready.”

“Right.” Lawton concluded his conference call, and all lights went off the board as he switched the FBI agent to his secretary.

He glanced across the room at Wingate. “Now it’s a waiting game. Let’s go.”

“T-Plan A” took effect immediately. Airport Security Forces instantly received information and took action. Ragem’s photo and that of Khorassani came in first, followed by data regarding known accomplices Haji Al-Masud and Atak Abu Rahman. No one was aware of Subhi Al-Mamun, Adnan Rashid, or the “pregnant” terrorist Zaynab’s identity—the latter two recently recruited into the organization to serve Allah. Expendable for the cause.

Chief Airport Inspector Clive Harper, assigned to alert international carriers in Terminal 3, moved casually between counters to avoid panicking travelers. Lanky and taller than most, he vigilantly scrutinized every passenger—all the while smiling a broad smile.

Harper approached a counter as the baggage carriers and conveyors slowed, at first, then came to a stop.

A voice came over his MX300 radio earphone. “Sir, confirming power is out to the conveyor systems until ordered otherwise.” Harper pressed a button on his portable unit, sending a *message received* double-beep sound back to the senior electrician.

As the whirring from miles of conveyors diminished, a first-level silence was evident only to the inspector and a select few. But as seconds ticked by, passengers noticed the change and questioned anyone official-looking.

Harper spoke intentionally out loud as he proceeded past Air India’s counter. “Must be a power outage. I’ll get the crew right on it.” He repeated the message as he delivered his ID photo sheets to counter personnel.

Passengers were mildly irritated by the thought of any delay

in travel plans. Especially at rush hour.

The Chief Inspector's inner strengths had been put to the test before. But this was truly the closest he had come to dealing directly with the possibility of terrorists on his own turf, since he took the position three years before. The IRA bombings in the business district, Victoria Station, South Kensington and some of the other subway stations had been hit by terrorists. Even a Kentucky Fried Chicken shop in Camden.

They had been luckier at Heathrow. Only dummy mortar shells from IRA, so far—and this despite a truce. But the odds had turned against them that some type of fanatic could get through.

Assistant inspectors carried the classified information to various security sectors in Terminals 1, 2, and 4. Counter personnel used the power outage excuse to slow down ticket issuance. Lines backed up toward the main doors as the first announcements emanated from the public address system.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention, please. Flight departures have been temporarily suspended until further notice. To repeat, flight departures have . . .”

Passengers looked toward the arrival/departure video monitors, placed throughout the terminal. Fears were confirmed. Virtually every plane was listed as “Delayed.” Passengers, with nowhere to go, wearily tolerated the announcement. A few suspected the reason and evacuated the terminal.

United Flight 1161 from Dulles International had begun its descent in preparation for landing at Heathrow when, less than sixty miles out, at seventeen thousand feet descending to eleven thousand, a cryptic two-part message had been transmitted to the flight crew from London Control.

All inbound planes received the same message. One: they were

to be on guard against, and check in immediately with any news or indications of terrorist activities, potential hijackings, or suspicious passengers. Two: all large inbound flights to Heathrow would be diverted to Gatwick or Foulness—immediately placed in holding patterns—and classified by fuel status for alternate landings between planes already scheduled for either airport. Smaller planes would divert to regionals.

Captain Rinehart glanced at his flight crew with a questioning look and responded to London Control.

“London, United flight eleven-six-one. Over.”

“Go ahead eleven-six-one.”

“Uh, roger your inquiry. Negative regarding problems on board. Will keep eyes open. Request new heading and divert frequency.”

“Roger eleven-six-one. Amend altitude to flight level one-six-zero. Proceed direct Gatwick when able. Reduce and hold two-five-zero knots for spacing into Gatwick. Over.”

“Roger. Level one-six-zero. Able Direct Gatwick at this time,” Rinehart confirmed. He took the plane to sixteen thousand feet, changed his heading and reduced speed.

“United eleven-six-one. Contact Gatwick tower at ten miles out on one-six-two-point-one. Over.”

“Confirm, one-six-two-point-one. Good day.”

Rinehart’s navigator plotted the new course and potential fuel consumption to cover delays, noting they had less than three hours of fuel. At ten miles out, Captain Rinehart switched from London Control to the Gatwick frequency.

“Uh, Gatwick. United eleven-six-one on divert from Heathrow. Over.”

“Go ahead eleven-six-one.”

“Holding at flight level one-six-zero, for further instructions on direct Gatwick heading, at two-five-zero knots. Over.”

“Gatwick, roger. Expect holding instructions. Give fuel

status.”

“Two plus hours hold, with no problems, if traffic is running on less. Over.”

“United eleven-six-one, roger and thank you. Descend and maintain at flight level one-two-zero. Cleared direct Gatwick, hold on the zero-niner-zero radial, right turns, one-five mile legs. Expect further clearance at one-six-five-five Zulu time. Over.”

“Confirm EFC of one-six-five-five Zulu. Advise traffic condition. Over.”

“Traffic heavy. Expect to hold an hour.”

“Gatwick, roger. What’s reason for diversion?”

There was a long pause.

“Gatwick, any word?”

“Uh, eleven-six-one, we have little information. Purely precautionary stance, Captain.”

“Roger that.” Then Captain Rinehart asked one question that gave him more answers than he probably wanted. “Will buses and trains be running?”

“No word on that, captain. Trains on hold. Will inform as we receive new data. Gatwick over.”

Captain Rinehart looked at the navigator of their 747 widebody. It was standard procedure to hold trains and buses if suspected IRA activities were occurring. But to check for potential terrorist activities on board planes, then divert from an airport meant something more delicate and dangerous had developed. Rinehart silently prayed there were no live Barometric Improvised Explosive Devices on board—the type that took down Pan Am 103.

Groans and murmurs erupted from the main cabin, following Captain Rinehart’s obligatory announcement of the Gatwick divert. Passengers contemplated changes in plans, families and friends waiting on the ground back at Heathrow, or the delay in getting transport.

The Captain continued, “Uh, weather on the ground should be about forty-six degrees Fahrenheit, eight degrees Celsius, winds

out of the north at . . . ”

The Captain interrupted his message to receive an encrypted call on a special phone. Then he resumed consoling passengers, hardly missing a beat.

“Northerly winds at ten miles per hour—slightly overcast. Visibility about fifteen miles on the ground. Flight attendants will provide you with anything you need to be comfortable until our arrival. Uh . . . we’ll keep you informed as we, ah, approach our turn for landing.” The microphone clicked off with a burst of static, then clicked back on once more.

“Will the chief flight attendant please report to the cockpit?”

Nakamura turned to Parker.

“What do you think it is?”

“No idea,” said Parker. “Seems a little odd. Didn’t sound like they’re anticipating wind shear.”

“Maybe the IRA issued a new threat.”

“But it wouldn’t make sense to try anything now,” said Parker. “Negotiations have gone too well.”

“Must be serious if they’re diverting to Gatwick.”

“Who’d you say is meeting us at Heathrow?”

“Excuse me,” The chief flight attendant interrupted, whispering loud enough to hear over the jet engines. “According to our seating chart, the two of you should be Ms. Nakamura and Dr. Parker.”

“Yes. May we help you?” said Parker.

“The Captain requests your company in the cockpit. You have a call.”

“May we take it on a cabin phone?” Parker said.

“The call’s directly patched to the cockpit.”

Nakamura threw a questioning look to Parker as she rose from her seat. “Do you know who’s on the other end?” she asked the steward.

“A Mr. Ron Bantam, I believe.”

"The agent arranging for our Heathrow pickup," she said. "Must be new instructions." The three moved to the plane's foresection.

Captain Rinehart greeted them at the cockpit door. He skipped introductions, though he managed to break a friendly smile.

"Come in, please." He glanced down the aisle beyond them, as they entered the cockpit, excused the attendant—asking him to remain close by—then closed and locked the door.

Rinehart handed Nakamura a portable satellite encrypted phone.

"Agent Nakamura, here. Dr. Parker is next to me."

"This is Ron Bantam in London, Ms. Nakamura. Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"My apologies for the inconvenience you'll be going through. But there are serious problems on the ground."

Agent Bantam explained circumstances involving the anticipated attack and what the British were doing to head it off. With her hand cupped over the phone, Nakamura relayed the essence of the conversation to Parker.

Bantam continued, "I can't greet you at Gatwick, but an SAS helicopter will bring you to Mobile Op for the counter-offensive operation. We'll want to meet with you immediately. You'll be quickly cleared through Customs."

"Any suspects?"

"The ALFAHAD," said the encrypted voice. Nakamura looked at Parker. The captain, monitoring the call for security, glanced up from his phone, knowing they were treacherous.

"Put Dr. Parker on," said Bantam. Nakamura handed over the phone.

"Dr. Parker?"

"I'm listening."

The scrambled voice continued. "Ms. Nakamura will give you the details on our change in plans. Colonel Bramson asks that you continue with scheduled appointments. But be prepared if we

have to appropriate your services.”

“Understood,” he said, uncertain what he could do to help.

“That’s all. Don’t want to take more air time at Captain Rinehart’s expense. Thank you Captain.”

“No problem. Over and out.” The captain turned to his cabin guests. “We’ve been through this drill before. We feel helpless, knowing what could be going on down there.”

“May be a false alarm,” said Parker. “To disrupt services.”

“Pray you’re right.”

Jennifer put her hand on Rinehart’s shoulder and smiled, “Just get us safely on the ground, Captain.”

Rinehart turned to his controls and checked in with Gatwick.

The “white noise” that emanated from Heathrow’s miles of conveyor belts had covered a multitude of sins for airport authorities. Now the silence generated a different reaction from Ragem and his accomplices. They knew their plan was discovered. The curiosity of nearby passengers, the seemingly unperturbed actions of terminal employees, together heightened the urgency for quick action.

Out of the newfound silence came the sound of distant sirens. Ragem smiled at the foolishness of the police. *They can’t sneak up without their noisy sirens proclaiming their egos*, he thought, and quietly laughed to himself. Outside, gridlock had formed on all inbound traffic lanes. Military, civilian police and other emergency vehicles found it difficult to pass.

From two miles out a pack of SAS manned, Westland Lynx Ah Mk.1 land-based assault helicopters bore down on the airport.

The bearded Ragem glanced at a wall clock across from his post. 4:28 p.m. 16:28 Greenwich. He put his cigarette out in a nearby ashtray, folded his newspaper in half, tucked it under his arm and maneuvered through the crowd—away from the area that

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 179.

Everyone withdrew from the bedside as the doctor and nurse went into action. "Hand me the epinephrine," the doctor ordered. The nurse picked up a large ampoule and hypodermic needle from a nearby table and passed it across the bed.

The nurse placed suction tubing into Khorassani's throat to clear blood from his passage, while the doctor pulled back the chest dressings, jammed a large needle through the center of the breast, and injected synthesized adrenalin into the heart.

For a few moments the rhythm of the life-support monitor returned to a semi-uniform cadence, as Khorassani's breathing became even and relaxed. Within a minute, a random series of beeps appeared with irregular blips on the monitor. The line between the blips got longer and the rise on each became shorter.

Then Khorassani's eyes opened wide. He glanced directly at everyone. An iniquitous smile overtook his countenance and pierced the shields of those in the room. His eyes widened as though he were experiencing a form of ecstasy and rapture.

Not unexpectedly, the line on the monitor went flat and its elongated beep took over. Khorassani expelled one last, protracted breath as air gurgled through fluids and escaped from his chest and throat.

"He looked rather happy for a man going to hell," said Bantam.

"Frightening, isn't it?" said Nakamura.

The respirator still moaned as Lawton tapped Nakamura and Bantam on the shoulders to signal a withdrawal from the room. The doctor and nurse confirmed the patient's condition, switched off the monitor and respirator, and prepared to order an autopsy.

NORTHEASTERN AFRICA

A sophisticated voice scrambler sat on a table next to the phone. It could be disconnected quickly and was small enough to fit into a

briefcase if it were suddenly necessary to go into hiding. The scrambler was an important companion, whether at home or traveling. Stolen from the American Embassy during the Iraqi war, its technology and codes had since been rearranged so as not to be unscrambled by anyone with counterintelligence capabilities.

Four other scramblers had been stolen or bought on the black market, through operatives in eastern Europe and in the Mideast, in order to protect secret conversations between Arab factions closely connected to the ALFAHAD.

Fluttered ringing emanated from the phone with every other hollow pulse of sound. A large, darkly-bronzed hand set down a cup of mint tea and reached over to push three security buttons on the scrambler. Then, in no hurry, the hand picked up the phone's receiver.

"Ahlan," a deeply resonant voice cautiously greeted the caller.

"Ragem?" queried the voice. "You are answering your own phone now?"

"Taari is pissing. Times are rough. What do you want?"

"Khorassani is dead. And so is Al-Masud."

Ragem let out a long sigh and silence followed.

The voice awkwardly explained how Ragem's top lieutenant had proudly served their cause, back at Heathrow, and how Al-Masud had attempted to blow up passenger planes with the transfer bus. By now, Ragem's thoughts were light years away.

Al-Masud was expendable. But Karim Abdul Khorassani had been a childhood friend. They had grown up together as children of poor peasants, in the slums of Cairo. Ragem remembered the laughing, running, and dodging as they stole bread, fruit, or an occasional strip of charcoaled meat from the stands in the thatched-roof market stalls.

Ragem, the faster of the two, had always managed to get away. Khorassani—big-boned and slim, gangling, and forever tripping over himself, as a teenager—got caught every now and then. It was usually up to Faheed to create a diversion that would allow his

friend, Karim, to break loose in the confusion.

Eventually, Karim grew out of his gangliness and became taller, muscular, swift, sure and self-confident. Traits any terrorist could use against the enemy. Traits that brought him honor among his people. Along with Ragem, the two built the ALFAHAD into a small but highly respected team of terrorists who could hit a target and disappear before anyone knew with whom they had had an encounter.

Memories of Ragem's closest ally and compatriot flashed before him as if he were reliving the years they had spent together, fighting against political oppression and on behalf of the lives of both their families. Khorassani's, imprisoned by the government or lost to purges of Islamic Fundamentalist uprisings in the ghetto, and Ragem's—all tragically lost except for his brother, Taari—aboard an Iranian airliner accidentally shot down by an American warship.

"Ya akhi," Ragem said. *My brother*, he thought once more, in remembrance of Khorassani—though they were not related.

"I am sorry for your friend," said the voice.

"Why? He is with Allah. Insh'allaah." *God willing* he prayed in silence again.

Faheed Al Mar Ragem had left his childhood behind at a very young age. A large, hirsute young man, even in his teen years, he was compared and known for features that were less angular than a Greek's, yet more sensual than what one might find with a typical Lebanese. His features drew attention and he stood out, at times, when he preferred not to. Hence the necessity for disguises.

Taught to be cunning, deceitful and shrewd, at an early age—just to remain alive—Ragem began leading his small fanatical group of revolutionists in the days immediately following Jamal Nasser's assassination. Their operations left death and destruction in their wake.

Originally well-financed, for years, through his Sudanese, Eastern-European, and Qadhafi's Libyan connections, most of

his operational monies were fast drying up. And new links and allegiances were a necessity to remain in operation.

"There is a meeting scheduled at CIA, with Bramson and the diver from Montreal. In two days," said the voice. Parker is to be there."

Ragem's silence implied he wanted more information without asking for it. The voice continued.

"I'm certain they will want Dupont to give up his expedition. But my operatives cannot tell me if they know about your plans for the *Titanic*."

An awkward pause and more silence greeted the caller. The voice was not certain if he should go on. Ragem said nothing.

"Parker is in London. He arrived there with an FBI agent about the time of your attack. They say he was on the airport bus with Haji when it blew up, but reports place him back at Terminal Three after the explosion. The FBI agent's name is Nakamura. Jennifer Nakamura."

"A woman," Ragem broke his silence. "A female FBI agent?"

"Yes. The two are there to learn more about the *Omar*. CIA still wants Parker to dive for the book."

"A female FBI agent," was all Ragem could say. "Miss . . ."

"Nakamura. Ever since Heathrow, she has been asking much about you and the attack. She and Parker will be here at least one more day."

"One more day," he reassured himself with finality. "Good. Arrange for their disposal. That should keep everyone away from our dive."

"I do not wish to provoke my operatives, by pushing too hard."

"Yours is not to decide. Yours is to carry out as ordered."

"They have been good to me. For now, I'm keeping my distance. If they are provoked, I could lose my American visa. I must be careful you know. I must be very careful," the voice rambled.

"You must, my friend," Ragem finally spoke with a measured annoyance in his voice that insisted on complete caution. "You must be extremely careful. Leave no room for error. But you must

also do as I request.”

“You are not angry with me? You will provide protection if something goes wrong?”

“Allah willing,” Ragem evaded a direct answer. “When we get the *Omar* and the lost jewels, we will never want for anything.”

He knew how to appeal to the terrorist’s cupidity. Both men were greedy. Ragem’s own avarice arose from his overwhelming need for retribution against the American and Israeli war machines. And vengeance was as sweet as the millions he would have in his hands in a matter of weeks. Millions to purchase weapons and explosives on the black market, the finest false ID’s from Iraq, and training for his soldiers in Libya, that surpassed the zealousness of the word of Allah and His resolve.

The free-lancer was filled with a desire for a lifestyle that secret bank transfers from Ragem could provide. And he would do anything to obtain it.

“I just wanted to keep you informed, Faheed. Rest assured. Your orders will be carried out.”

Ragem clicked off the line.

The leader of the terrorist organization slowly moved across the room. He lowered himself to the floor where it was cooler. The heat was stifling. Two overworked ceiling fans squeaked as they pushed the warm air around the room. Beads of sweat dripped from Ragem’s forehead and was absorbed by his loosely fitting white galabiyya as he turned on his back.

The white latticed window shutters were closed more to shade the room and keep the afternoon heat out than to shield his wife from viewers on the street.

Until the Russian coup, and the eventual collapse of Ceausescu’s government in Rumania, Ragem had maintained extremely close ties with Rumania and the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc nations, many terrorist organizations found it increasingly difficult to fund their activities. Ragem’s ALFAHAD was no exception. Most of the Eastern Bloc had fallen into hard

times. Money, funneled through those countries allied with or a part of the former Soviet Union, was now almost totally nonexistent.

Terrorism was taking on a new look. Former East-German intermediaries were more interested in local struggles to maintain status-quo or to finance renewed racist and Neo-Nazi activities against foreign immigrants flooding the job market.

One bond now holding Ragem's small band together, particularly since the Iraqi-Kuwaiti war, was secret payments channeled from the Saudis just to keep the ALFAHAD out of the way. Ragem's activities were an embarrassment to the Saudi government. In their realm, Palestinian peace negotiations caused many of the ALFAHAD's financial spigots to be turned off.

More desperate than ever, Ragem's only remaining financial source was Arabic oil—Libyan, in particular—where royalties could be used for financing their “holy war.” But even that was dwindling. Changes in the geopolitical structure of the Arabic nations were placing a serious burden on the faithful.

Western nations, becoming more self-sufficient with their own oil reserves, helped to modify dependence on the Mid-East oil cartel. Mexico's new discoveries, new fields in Montana and New Mexico, and the reopening of old wells in Texas and California aided in creating a glut on the world market.

Ragem was no longer certain who his true friends were from one day to the next. Only his old friend, the psychotic gun-for-hire terrorist, Abu Nidal, and helping hands from Libya and Iraq, provided meager financial and moral support.

The old ways of operating through the Hizballah—doing business under cover of constantly changing trade names—felt steady pressure through the seemingly endless Peace Initiatives. Abu Nidal had been compelled to join forces with the Iraqi leadership. But rigorously sympathetic to the cause, and one of the few truly loose cannons remaining in the Mideast, Saddam Hussein was more than willing to finance both Nidal's and Ragem's operations.

Ragem sensed he was losing control and had felt obligated to make a statement that would shake up man's perception of fairness—one that would stop politicians from justifying worldwide discrimination against Arabic cultures. Maybe world leaders could deny payment for the release of hostages, or luckless victims. "But," he had told his brother, Taari, "once they realize a new movement in terrorism is taking place, the world press will not be able to ignore, and politicians will not deny demands the Arabic world will make."

"The Western world will have to take notice," Taari answered. "First, Heathrow. Next, a series of banks and tourist sites. Then, bridges and main arteries leading in and out of cities."

"And if all else fails, germ warfare," Ragem had said.

Ragem allowed himself to revel on the thought. *The fourth estate will bow down to pressure from the other estates of the realm. The media will have a feeding frenzy, competing over who the culprits might be. Even the Americans won't be certain. After all, it could be one of their own.*

The world's morning shows would provide what the American's call "Monday morning quarter-backing," over pronouncements of indiscriminate slaughterings and other violations of international law. Nighttime media analysts would invent new parallels to replace the tit-for-tat arguments invented by instant-soup journalists. And political pit-bosses would grope for a "hook" to get sound bites on TV and radio.

Now that the PLO had been weakened through the peace negotiations and the Soviet Union could no longer be blamed for every "cold war" scheme taking place around the world, the print and electronic media needed shock-value stories to fill the gaps between earthquakes, hurricanes, serial killers, and rapists. Instant bulletins and we-were-there-first pronouncements would interrupt soap operas to sell the news, in an attempt to outstrip the competitive networks. Even the BBC would wax intense, in portentous discussions about the new wave of terrorism.

Out of the headlines would flow the bylines crediting the latest dispatches from the scenes of the crime. Exclusive reports would editorialize, articles would portray the “new menace,” and television and radio talk shows would vent the world’s frustrations over such atrocities. Experts on terrorism would be called in to invent new excuses for the failures of government to provide fair and reasonable solutions to the ills of the world.

Yes, thought Ragem, *our cause will get the coverage back that it once had*. He knew the world’s networks and news syndicates were too selfish to let the ALFAHAD’s actions slip through their hands. Each would scratch and claw at the other to beat paths to the closest broadcast satellite time. “Besides,” he laughed, “with too much time to fill, on too many channels, they’ll overlook that I’ll be using them. And they’re too greedy to care.

“*Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows*,” the Oxford dropout quoted Shakespeare to himself. He smiled at the irony. It seemed to ease the pain of loss.

Ragem’s wife, Asma, walked in from the kitchen with his brother, Taari. It was apparent to both that something was on Ragem’s mind.

Asma followed the dictates of her husband—veiled, and wearing the traditional ghata head covering—despite being within the confines of her own home. Especially around his brother. Two small children followed close behind. Ragem’s daughter, Samar, was just ten. She carried her young infant brother, Samir.

“Was that Zahid on the phone?” Taari asked.

Ragem nodded in distant thought.

“What did he want?”

Faheed looked at his wife, not wanting to discuss the call in front of her.

“We’ll talk later,” said Ragem.

Not to be shut out of the conversation, Asma spoke up.

“You may talk in front of me. I know what you are up to.”

“Insh’allah,” Ragem repeated out of habit.

Her dark eyes spread wide above her hidden smile as she set a tray of dates and a plastic thermos of mint tea on the floor, next to her husband. Her long, black curls fell out of their covering and cascaded onto her shoulders. The gold brocade on her flowing, black dress danced with each movement while she refilled Faheed's cup and turned to serve his brother.

"The news is bad," Ragem spoke softly, still finding it difficult to believe his closest friend was not infallible. He cradled the side of his head in the palm of his hand and stretched out on the bright colored carpet, massaging his left temple as he reclined. Asma knelt nearby and offered him an oblong date. Ragem waved it away.

"Karim Abdul was wounded and captured. He died last night. They will not release his body."

"His spirit is with Allah," Taari said, his defiance difficult to conceal.

"Yes," said Asma, "his spirit is with Allah." She turned back to Ragem. "But you are with us. Praise be to Allah."

"I will never forgive them," Ragem said almost under his breath.

"We will avenge our brother's death," said Taari in a knee-jerk reaction to Ragem's comment. Asma avoided Taari and looked to her spouse.

"You must not harbor these thoughts."

Taari threw a look of disgust at his brother's wife. *She should not be speaking these traitorous ideas.*

Asma knew what was going through Taari's mind, but avoided looking at him directly.

"The *Quran*," she said, "speaks of the unbelievers. It is not for us to decide their fate." Asma moved closer to her husband. "Allah has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a covering, and there awaits them a mighty chastisement," she quoted.

"Allah has given me that right of chastisement," Ragem shot back.

"No. You have *taken* it . . . upon yourself to judge."

Taari quickly stood up. "I will not hear you speak to my brother in such an impudent tone. In case you've forgotten, the **Quran** also tells us that ' . . . men are the managers of the affairs of women—and those you fear may be rebellious, admonish and banish them to their couches and beat them.'"

Asma shot back at Taari, "You will not speak to me so brazenly in my house, as our guest, or in front of the children."

Ragem raised his hand at his brother and Taari left the room in anger. Ragem rolled to his back and sighed. His daughter, Samar, sensed her father's sadness, pulled back his head covering, and stroked his hair. Faheed closed his eyes, hoped the day would begin anew, and wished to return to his childhood when he and Karim Abdul played simple games in the streets.

Asma stood in silence, not certain how to approach her husband. She turned away as her eyes became wet with fear. Samir crawled to his mother's feet. She picked up the infant, caressed her head against his, and held tightly, hoping the child could hold their world together.

Without looking at her husband, Asma spoke softly, "Faheed, I cannot sit idly by without telling you my thoughts." She waited to see if he would object. There was silence.

"What you continue to do is dangerous. And senseless. I do not understand the anger inside your mind. It binds you as though you are a criminal tied to a flogging post. You strike at your enemies. And they strike back. You strike again and they keep coming back at you."

"Even the *Torah*, given by Allah to the Jews, says 'A life for a life, an eye for an eye . . .'"

Asma turned and faced her husband, straight on. "Can't you believe for a moment that your enemies are just as us. They have children . . . beautiful daughters hugging their fathers and comforting them at times of loss. Little babies like Samir, who know nothing of guns, bombs, or killings. They want to grow up like their fathers. The fathers they think they know."

"Yes, grow up forced to steal food from the marketplace, because fat politicians pass laws that keep our people out of schools and out of jobs. Why do you think I grew up this way? My family eventually destroyed by an American missile, after spending their life's savings to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Karim Abdul's family imprisoned by our own corrupt politicians, until they died of unspeakable diseases, chained to urine-stained walls."

Asma spoke with extreme care, "My husband, when you are abroad, there are times I wish you were here with us—a common thief, instead. The authorities would cut off your right hand and your left foot, and you would not be physically capable of doing these things that you do. We would have you with us—a loving father and husband. A father who could watch his children grow up, get married, and raise families. We would not have to constantly move. If you were not doing these terrible things, you could work to throw out the corrupt politicians."

Asma knelt by Faheed's side and placed Samir across his stomach. "You must stop the hate burning inside. You can find other things to think about. Something else to do. Think more of your family," she begged.

"I know of nothing else," Faheed sighed. "I've been doing this for too long."

The black veil covering Asma's face was now stained with tears. She pulled back the veil to reveal her richly burnished features. Her tawny complexion emphasized the slight pouting that always managed to weaken Faheed to his very soul.

Asma bent over to kiss his forehead. She held the kiss until she knew it had burned into his mind. Faheed put his arms around her and gently brought her to his side. Without a word, Samar placed her arms around her mother and the family became one.

"Your children need you to be here," whispered Asma. "Think of your family."

Faheed held her for the longest time. His mind twisted with confusing and conflicting signals that drove him crazy.

"Please, think of your family," Asma kissed his cheek.

The late afternoon sun had already begun its descent over the nearby buildings and sand dunes encircling the city. Inside their house an involuntary darkness had taken over.

At last, the terrorist rose to his elbow, holding Samir close to his chest with his other arm. He handed the baby to his wife, stood up, and walked across the thick Persian carpets. Asma could see he was fighting old battles with himself.

"I am thinking of my family," she could hear him quietly say from across the room. Ragem turned to his wife. "I am thinking of my children.

"First it was the British imperialists who said we must accept change. Now, with these British and American infidels spreading their western ways—women exposing themselves on billboards for colas, and unveiled women on television—do you want our children growing up that way? Wearing short dresses and lipstick? Working and drinking with men as they do in Saudi Arabia?"

Asma glanced to the ceiling. "Allah forgive me for saying this." She gazed into her husband's eyes. "If that was my choice—if I knew I could keep you alive, knowing the alternative to accepting their western ways was your death at their hands, because you chose to fight them, I would drink colas until they rotted my stomach and clothe my children in the skin Allah gave them when they came into this world.

"Let Allah fight the battle. He'll provide for the judgment when the time comes to punish the unbelievers for their deeds."

"Allah says that retaliation—*kisas*, is ours to employ upon unbelievers," said Ragem.

"Allah also told us, through our Prophet, that He has conferred his blessings upon *us*, not on those who have gone astray. For unbelievers, there is no asylum from Allah. But the children, Faheed. Not just our children. Their children, too. I cannot believe Allah is a cruel god. . . . One who would let them suffer at another's hands, for they're too young to have sinned. One cannot hate children and destroy them, Faheed. The children who die

have no choice. They're innocent victims."

Asma looked deeply into his eyes, searching for his soul. "It's as though you have a need to hate them in order to survive. And it's eating you like a disease from the inside out."

Ragem turned away from his wife. "Don't judge me by counting victims. We are all victims. Our people have been victimized for centuries. Someone has to stand up for them. And someone must avenge my brother, Karim Abdul Khorassani. It is written in the *Quran*."

Faheed Al Mar Ragem walked steadfastly to the tray of honey-covered dates, picked up two and shoved them into his mouth, as if to say "subject closed." He poured himself another cup of mint tea and washed down the taste of death that had so quickly risen over his own home.

As the sun set, loudspeakers intoned the Call to Prayer from the lofty minarets at the nearby mosque. Ragem softened his resolve and silently gathered his wife and children onto the burgundy, gold and azur-colored rug. They began to kneel. Faheed put his hands at his baby's side, lifted, and turned him to face Mecca. His wife and daughter knelt closeby.

"We must make the pilgrimage to the Kaaba and the holy well of Zamzan," Ragem spoke to his wife softly as he stared straight ahead.

Asma turned to look at her confused husband, and placed her hand on his. They slowly bowed together until their heads touched the floor in prayer.

LAUNCH OF THE *TITANIC*—FOR FITTING-OUT BELFAST, IRELAND—MAY 31, 1911

THE day was exceptional, lacking the usual fog and cloudy skies. An early morning chill lent a crisp feeling to the air as small and large vessels negotiated across the water. River Lagan would soon be filled with steamers and tugs waiting for the biggest event ever to happen in Ireland.

By 7:30, the *Duke of Argyll* steamer had crossed the channel from England with distinguished guests and invited newsmen. Thousands of festive gawkers would witness the *Titanic's* official launching and observe the immense ship as it moved to its berth for its final months of fitting-out—before the maiden voyage.

“They say the ship’ll have a golf course,” said a reporter. The natural shoulders of his checked-flannel sack suit gave him an air of expertise that few questioned.

“Truly?” his assistant asked in astonishment. “Where would they put it?”

“Don’t know, man.” He gazed across the water at the towering steel silhouette, then turned to a rival. “But the *Titanic's* large enough for a golf course, wouldn’t you agree?”

“All conjecture,” the rival, skeptic reporter protested—his single-breasted, gray-striped worsted showed more wear. “But I’m told it will have dairy cows.”

“We’ll know in a year when she’s properly launched, won’t we?” The reporters postulated and moved about the *Argyll* searching for confirmation to other rumors and speculations, of which most were quite outlandish.

By 9:30, spectators covered the prime harbor areas. Entire families made a holiday of it. On each shore, the wealthy and the paupers congregated in their usual cliques, unknowingly personifying every level of society who would fill eight of the decks on the *Titanic*.

Moneyed passengers would eventually reside on the top decks with their opulent life-styles and excessive convoys of servants. Shipping magnates expected second class levels to be occupied by the middle class. Each would spend his life-savings for the thrill of sailing on the largest ship afloat.

Immigrants would fill the steerage section, well below-decks. Dreamers of a better life in America, they would leave most possessions behind to begin anew—hoping to build fortunes out of ashes from their pasts.

The lowest depths of the *Titanic* would become the working bowels of the ship. There, the sweating laborers would stoke the giant steam-engines with dust-laden coal, while electricians powered the mighty generators to activate the first-class elevators, light the ship, and run the Marconi.

But that was a year off.

Harbor Commissioners closed a section of Albert Quay for paying guests. And a fleet of small boats and large ships charged the curious for viewing spots on the water itself.

An unpaid holiday, no one minded. Thousands of poor workers, from Harland & Wolff shipbuilders, watched with pride from piles of timber and coal scattered along the wharf at Spencer Basin. The ship's shell-riveters—the Cloot-men—stood with co-workers, the heater boys and catch boys. Each had a hand at either heating, catching, throwing or hammering over 3 million steel rivets through its inner and outer shells. Wives and children came along for the free show.

Many of the world's richest industrialists and captains of industry would soon dine and celebrate at intimate affairs and gala buffets afterward. It mattered not, since those who sweat and toiled

through forty-nine-hour work weeks for just two pounds sterling, physically building monuments to the illustrious Edwardian tycoons—almost as slaves had built the pyramids—would soon return to their meager repasts in modest homes and tenements. Swelling with Anglo-Saxon pride, they knew their place in society.

The black-painted hull of the *Titanic* rested in its massive gantry—its belly empty of the soon to be installed lavish outfittings—waiting to be fed as the bellies of those who had built her. Though the ceremony would be simple, lacking the christening usually associated with such affairs, this was not a time for humility.

By 11:30, expensively outfitted participants and observers covered the shipyard from one end to the other. Irish pride was pardonable, as all eyes gazed at what newspapers would proclaim the day after, “A Masterpiece of Irish Brains and Industry.”

It only occurred to a select few, and the financiers who risked their capital on this venture, that most of the money invested in the *Titanic* came from American capitalists. U.S. Steel magnate J. Pierpont Morgan and his Trust—International Merchant Marine—had controlling interest in the group of White Star Line investors.

The bow of the *Titanic* was surrounded by a number of rapidly constructed, bunting-covered observation stands—just meters from the wharf entrance to Harland & Wolff shipyard Queen’s Road offices. Distinguished guests were privately received there. Owners, investors, members of the board for White Star Lines and for Harland & Wolff. Political dignitaries. All would eventually parade as peacocks to their reserved seats.

At the center, near the bow, ninety press corps members shared the main grandstand with important guests. Naval architects, port officials, and engineers gathered to celebrate a ship built to be, in reality, part of a new breed—a fleet produced to make money.

The *Titanic* and its smaller sister ship, *Olympic*, represented a line of extravagant transportation launched to compete against older ocean-going liners originally built with safety in mind. Hull design was now dictated by investors’ greed, not by naval engineers.

Full double hulls were replaced, instead, by double bottoms.

Safety factors were controlled by cutting costs. Lifeboats were outfitted to meet legal specifications, rather than serve the full list of passengers. Amenities were there to attract and serve the wealthy, at the expense of other lives on board.

Class determined status and social status determined class.

One small grandstand had remained empty until noon. Precisely at 12:00, the photographer's magnesium powder flashpots exploded nearly at once as the main door to Harland & Wolff opened for its distinguished, white-bearded chairman, Lord Pirrie. Jauntily dressed in his vested suit and topped with a yachting cap, he and Lady Pirrie confidently led honored guests to the vacant stand.

Heads and eyes turned to financier, J. P. Morgan, and Joseph Ismay, White Star's powerful chairman and managing director, as they led Belfast's Lord Mayor and other members of the party to their reserved seats below *Titanic's* port bow. The crowd applauded out of respect, though few could identify the dignitaries.

"Joseph," Lord Pirrie spoke to Ismay above the noise, "we must excuse ourselves to make our final inspection."

White Star's chairman, Ismay, nodded in agreement—caught in the glory that was theirs for the moment. J.P. Morgan excused himself from the effort.

"We'll have to make it quick. More for show you know."

"Of course," Ismay replied.

Except for the workers, assigned to last-minute duties in preparation for the launch, Pirrie and Ismay were the only two figures who stood out as they walked the dock in a cursory fashion—heads held high as show horses. No one could be certain they were inspecting anything.

Ismay carried his walking stick and animatedly conversed with Harland & Wolff's chairman. Occasionally, Ismay pointed his walking stick high toward an area of the bow or another section of the ship, as if to say, "We should have put another rivet in there,

but no matter.”

Edwardian overconfidence guided the day. If something wrong were found at that moment, there was little chance anything would be done. The clock was in motion.

“Look!” a youngster exclaimed from the wharf. “Look at the man.” Attention focused toward the rear of the ship.

On the *Titanic*’s sternpost, a solitary red flag signaled a “stand clear” warning to the tugs and spectator fleet. It was exactly 12:05.

The ways were set for the ship to glide down the huge stocks of timber and into the bay. Eighteen tons of tallow, train oil and soft soap greased the way for a smooth entry at Spencer Basin. Thousands of spectators felt tremendous anticipation as the time drew near.

Unexpectedly, a rocket fired into the air to announce the five-minute mark. Throughout the bay, talk and laughter turned to whispers. Last minute clanging and banging of tools up and down the wharf, and on board the *Titanic* itself, became silent. The time was 12:10.

The expectation of an exemplary moment was close at hand. Young and old stood together knowing history was being made. The warmth of the early afternoon heightened the excitement. Nothing would dampen the success of the launch.

With a loud whoosh, another rocket signaled the moment for which everyone had been waiting. Total silence took over Spencer Basin. Children held their breath. Parents squeezed their hands tightly in anticipation.

And investors and shipbuilders said silent prayers.

At 12:14 the *Titanic* was officially launched. But the 882-foot, 46,328 ton giant appeared to lay motionless on its stocks. Inertia held on tightly as the massive hulk of steel imperceptibly inched forward. Everyone stood in awe, wondering if the ship would move down the ways. The hush and stillness over the crowd of thousands froze the moment in time.

High above, on deck, the ship’s workers perceived slight

movement beneath them. The first to cheer, their joy echoed across the quiet shipyard from building to building and boat to boat. Everyone realized the *Titanic* was moving. The spirited cheering became contagious and grew louder and louder with each inch—then each foot of movement.

The entire section of Albert Quay was awash with cacophonous sounds. Gigantic anchor chains thundered behind to slow the ship as she floated into the water. Ship whistles and boat horns, yelps and hurrahs, laughter and applause mixed with sounds of crackling brace-timbers that had once held the mighty ship at bay.

The vessel gained momentum as it slipped over the well-greased ways. And sixty-two seconds later the *Titanic* floated toward the fitting-out berth, deftly guided by a contingent of tugs.

In the private grandstand, investors breathed a sigh of relief and allowed themselves a cautious smile. Then, Victorian taboos aside, strangers hugged strangers. Children and adults jumped up and down with joy. And laborers gleefully beat co-workers with their caps as the *Titanic* moved to its temporary berth.

LONDON—1995

PARKER rose early and took a taxi to the fashionably old Sotheran's of Sackville Street—an Antiquarian Bookstore—in Piccadilly.

He and the shop's manager, Stephen Llorayne, had spent a better part of their morning in the Edwardian-style book shop, confirming much of what Byron White had shared about the *Great Omar* the day before. And Llorayne recounted how his predecessors, in 1912, had prepared the actual packaging and wrapping of the valuable masterpiece for shipment overseas.

All the while the shop's constant background noise emanated from old typewriters, computer keyboards, a persistently ringing phone, and chatter from customers and salespeople. The shop's

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 207.

"A young boy as courier?"

"Actually, closing in on his late twenties, I believe. His father, George Widener, was a famous manufacturer of rail cars. No . . . streetcars. Amassed a fortune. His son Harry was involved in his father's business."

"I see," Parker casually sat back in the chair and glanced at his watch. It was 11:50. He rose quickly. "My apologies, I lost track of time. I'm due to meet Ms. Nakamura and Mr. White for lunch in less than ten minutes. Shouldn't have eaten that third scone."

Llorayne smiled, "No fat. I guarantee."

Parker insisted the store manager join them at Wolfe's. The two caught a cab out on Sackville Street and headed across town.

"I'm looking forward to seeing Mr. White again," said Llorayne. "Been a couple of years since we last met."

Caught in their conversation, neither man noticed the black Ford that followed close behind.

Nakamura and White arrived at the Hans Crescent restaurant at the same time. The two introduced themselves and secured a booth next to the large plate-glass window looking out on the street. They flagged the scientist and rare book dealer to the table as they arrived.

"What a pleasant surprise," White said to Llorayne. "Haven't seen you since *Omar Three* was presented for display at British Museum."

"Good to see you, Mr. White," Llorayne said as they shook hands. "You look in excellent health."

"Just glad to be alive." White turned to Nakamura, "I tell that to everyone." He smiled broadly. "Keeps me going you know."

Parker introduced the manager of Sotheran's to the FBI agent, and the party took their seats. As they glanced over the menus, Nakamura spoke up.

"Cary, we have a slight change of plans to get to the airport

this evening. The terrorist, Khorassani?"

"Ragem's top man . . ."

She nodded. "Died last night. Commissioner Lawton feels the situation could get tense. And we shouldn't rely on public transportation for Gatwick. He's arranged for a Scotland Yard driver, and insisted we take up his offer."

"Considering the circumstances I'd prefer it," he said. "Any word on the other terrorists?"

"Forensics is still involved. Those closest to the detonation zones—suspected of involvement by the level of destruction, around them and their dismembered bodies—appear to be of Arabic extraction."

"But," interrupted Parker, "there could've been innocent Arabic travelers who were victims because of their proximity to the blasts."

"Of course. It's still difficult to establish specifics this early. But there's no question Heathrow was masterminded by Ragem. We suspect he's already out of the country...has been for some time. One thing we know, the bomb signatures don't match IRA."

Nakamura realized she should not discuss so much about the case in front of White and Llorayne, though most of the information had already gone out over the BBC.

"This isn't quite the lunchtime conversation, is it?" Nakamura's dark eyes flashed with apology.

"I understand," said Llorayne. "Between the various fanatic organizations based here, that threaten to blow up something every other week, perhaps we're too cavalier about it. But we steel ourselves against fear or we'd go nuts."

White shrugged his shoulders. "I've seen a lot in my day. Nothing bothers me anymore."

Nakamura smiled and relaxed for the first time since arriving in London.

The restaurant's atmosphere was warm and inviting. They savored pleasing mixed aromas of hearty beef stew, steak, grilled fish and hamburgers. Even Parker was suddenly hungry, again.

A jovial waitress stepped to the table and took their order. And each of the four settled back to enjoy their meeting.

Following the meal, they gave in to temptation and ordered slivers of chocolate mousse cheesecake.

Parker looked at White and Llorayne. "We should tie up loose ends about the *Titanic*. Between the three of us we could recount what we know about the sinking and compare notes on the *Omar*." He glanced at Nakamura. "I'm sure you'll find this interesting."

"Altogether fascinating," she assured.

White nodded, "Happy to share what I know."

"I probably know the least about the ship," said Llorayne. "But I'll chime in when apropos."

White set the scene and recounted what he knew about the last few days—and final hours—of the liner, *Titanic*, as she set out on her maiden voyage. Throughout the discussion, Parker and, occasionally Llorayne, offered information on the circumstances that led to the loss of the ship, and to the loss of the elegant binding.

APRIL 10, 1912
11:50 Greenwich

“THE deadliest of all sins is Pride,” repeated Samuel Hollis to his wife, Nelda. They stood on the noisy quay, witness to the 20th century’s most ostentatious example of pride—the *R.M.S. Titanic*.

Samuel’s wife nodded in agreement. Even with the sun, she felt a chill as a cool sea breeze mixed the briny smell of the ocean with the scent of oil and burning coal. Nelda Hollis pulled her worn gloves over protruding fingers and was openly glad not to be aboard the largest, unsinkable ship ever.

Ten months of fitting out the *Titanic*, now complete—and sea trials behind her—the liner rested in berth 44 at Southampton’s White Star pier, awaiting its scheduled sailing of 12 noon. Sitting at the dock, its horns blasted for all the world to hear. In ten minutes, the *Titanic* would steam into the history books. Everyone standing on both sides of Southampton water was proud.

First it would stop at Cherbourg. Then, Queenstown. Destination, New York.

By 11:00 a.m., London’s boat train had deposited the last of its travelers at *Titanic*’s dock. The carefree rich mixed for only brief moments with the courageous poor, as passengers waited for their assigned gangways. For most of the rich, this trip would be an experience they had complacently accepted as a necessity of life. For steerage passengers, many felt they had embarked on an adventure of frightening proportions.

Tons of luggage had been conveyed aboard ship—most of it

belonging to first and second-class travelers. Baggage brought by third-class passengers amounted to everything they owned that could be carried on board. Each of the 2227 passengers and crew had found their quarters and temporarily settled in. Unless assigned duties as a member of the crew, nearly everyone found some place on board from which they could watch the imminent departure of their ship.

At 11:55 a.m., all but one gangway had been pulled from White Star's pier, as preparations were made to cast off for the maiden voyage. Much to the dismay of a noncommissioned officer stationed on dock at gangway's end, a drunken surly group of greasers and stokers dashed up to board the ship.

"Stand back," the petty officer commanded the disorderly men, and blocked their way. "She's preparing to cast off."

"Listen 'ere bloke, we have work on board," one yelled, hastening to get by. The others pushed forward with their gear, cussing at the officer.

"It's too late," the petty officer held his ground. "We've taken replacements who came on time."

"Replacements 'e says," someone yelled.

Furious, another stoker jumped out from the group. "I'll replace 'ye, ya' bloody bastard." The group moved forward, challenging the man's authority.

Two seaman raced down the gangway and assisted the petty officer. Harsh words were exchanged and a shoving match ensued. The crew maintained their stance, and the thwarted stokers and greasers left the pier, loudly threatening revenge and secretly regretting their drunken night. Little did they know how fortunate they had been.

With the last gangway removed and sailing permission secured from the harbor master, the seamen released the mighty hawsers from their moorings. And the *Vulcan* and two other tugboats proceeded to draw the liner from the quay.

As Samuel and Nelda Hollis stood with hundreds of others at

the end of the wharf, they watched the *Titanic* move from its enlarged berth. Deep down, Samuel and his wife felt sudden pangs of envy—the second deadliest sin.

By late afternoon, April 14, the air had turned bitter cold. Few people strolled the decks, or even left their cabins. It was an occasion for writing letters, spending moments with families in warm rooms—a quiet time before the elegant social gatherings of the evening to come.

As usual, Captain Smith would prepare himself for his night ahead. On this evening, he would dine as the Guest-of-Honor at a dinner party hosted by the George Wideners. Smith looked forward to such gatherings as much as he did to his upcoming retirement.

At about 7:30 p.m., one of numerous ice warnings, received that day, came from Leyland's *California*, and reported "Three large bergs five miles to southward of us." At 9:40 p.m., a final warning placed the *Titanic* within the specific rectangle covered by a message from the *Mesaba*. It read, "Lat. 42°N to 41°25'N, Longitude 40°W to 50°30'W, saw much heavy pack ice and great number large icebergs, also field ice."

As they had done throughout most of the day, the *Titanic's* crew smugly ignored the warning—though one of the largest lines of ice ever reported continued to be in its direct path. A line of ice, seventy-eight miles long, lay dead ahead.

To the quartermaster it looked as though an eerie ghost ship had passed—a fully-rigged, tall-masted windjammer lit by the reflection of thousands of stars cast upon the water on a moonless night. Within moments it disappeared into the darkness.

In the calm waters of the North Atlantic, at 11:40 p.m., April 14th, 1912, the First Class dining room silver, set for breakfast the next morning, rattled slightly.

Few people on board noticed the grazing of the starboard side

of the ship, and most went about their business. Lovers resumed private walks on deck. Many passengers continued to sleep below. But to Mrs. Graham and her teenage daughter, Margaret, there was a terrifying noise that sounded like thousands of plate glass windows had broken.

Steward Johnson was certain the ship had dropped a propeller.

Some passengers saw a wall of ice go by their portholes. Chunks of ice fell into James McGough's cabin through his open porthole on A-Deck. McGough knew what it was.

After standing on A-Deck watching the 10-story berg scrape and drop off tons of ice chunks in the water and onto the starboard well deck, some die-hard passengers resumed their late-night games of bridge in the first-class smoking room. Books were read, highballs were consumed. Unconcerned, topside passengers felt the iceberg's impact, but knew the ship was unsinkable.

In the lower third-class depths of the ship, the scraping sound was haunting. Most of the immigrants had never traveled on a seagoing vessel, let alone a ship as massive as the *Titanic*. Unlike the wealthy, above them, everything they owned was on board. But steerage passengers were assured of their safety, before boarding. Indeed, there was nothing to worry about.

After excusing himself from the Widener's dinner party, the ship's captain had checked in briefly with the bridge then turned in early for the night—although this was one of the most critical points in navigating the northerly course.

Smith knew the *Titanic* had been hit the moment the grinding sound was silenced. He raced to the bridge from his nearby cabin.

"What did we strike?" the captain asked of his First Officer.

"An iceberg, sir. I hard-a-starboarded her and reversed engines on full. I attempted to hard-a-port around it, but she was already near at hand. We hit, and I could do no more."

The First Officer confirmed that he had already closed the

emergency doors and telegraphed “Stop” to the engine room. A clawing feeling grabbed at his gut. As chief navigator for the watch, Murdoch peered out from the bridge to starboard and prayed any damage to be undone.

Captain Smith tried to reassure himself, *Nothing can happen to my ship.*

Philadelphians, George and Eleanor Widener, had just gone to sleep in their starboard first-class stateroom, following their dinner party in honor of Captain Smith. Their son, Harry, choosing to remain topside, played cards with Major Butt—President Taft’s Principle Aid-de-Camp—and other friends.

George Widener’s eyes bolted open as soon as the ship was rammed. Disoriented and still trying to escape the paralysis of deep sleep, he tried to comprehend what had happening.

A new silence overtook the ship—the halting silence one feels when listening for an intruder in the house. Since leaving Europe, the *Titanic* had averaged 21 knots, with its reciprocating engines and one turbine vibrating through the hull as they turned the triple screws driving the ship’s propellers. Now the routine, customary noises were gone. The constant, rhythmic sounding engines had stopped.

Widener heard bits of conversation, in the corridor, but could not make out their meaning. He was afraid to wake his wife. She was sleeping soundly.

There appeared to be no urgency to the words slipping under his door.

“Ice . . . ” something, they seemed to say.

“Ice . . . ” ran through his mind several times. “Ice . . . berg!”

Fear took over. Widener moved across the darkened stateroom, switched on a small desk lamp, then hurried to open the cabin door. The extreme icy, bitter cold had reached the corridors. It chilled him deeply and caught him off guard. But he listened intently.

A steward hastened by, not saying anything. Except for the

distant sound of music drifting from the first-class lounge, the outside corridors were more quiet than ever.

Abruptly, men's laughter cut through the arctic air as sharp scissors. On the well-deck, steerage passengers played a haunting game of soccer with ice chunks from the berg. And echoes of laughter mocked the silence that accompanied the killing of the engines.

Then, the elder Widener heard the confirmation he needed to hear.

"She hit an iceberg," a strolling passenger said casually, noticing the pajama-clad man at the door.

"That cannot be good," replied Widener. "Not when we've been moving at such a clip for the past four days . . ."

The traveler quipped back over his shoulder, "I overheard a crewman back at Southampton say, 'God himself could not sink this ship.' Not to worry, man."

The passenger disappeared down another hallway.

Widener closed the door and pushed the bell to summon their steward. Then, he moved to the edge of his bed. Without hesitating, he quietly pulled a pair of pants over his pajama trousers—attempting not to wake his wife—threw on a robe and slipped into his shoes. He did not stop for socks.

"Gabriel would expect Harry to check on the *Omar*," Widener said of his close friend, Gabriel Wells. Widener's son had been assigned as the courier for the newly purchased book.

Their steward softly knocked at the door, and Widener slipped out into the corridor.

"Thank you for coming at this hour."

"I was still up. How may I help you, sir?"

"They say we hit an iceberg?"

"I haven't confirmed that, sir. Someone else said we might have dropped a propeller. Remain in your room, where it's warm. I'll verify what's happened."

"All right. But please summon my son, Harry. I believe he's up in the first-class lounge with Major Butt. I must see him immediately."

"Right away, sir." The steward politely excused himself and hurried down the hall.

"Ask him to come to his room, not mine."

"Yes sir," the steward replied as he turned a corner and headed for A-Deck.

Mr. Widener returned to his stateroom, unsure what to do next.

"What's the matter George?" his wife asked softly. "Why are you up?"

"I didn't mean to wake you, Eleanor. Go back to sleep. It's nothing." His pure white hair glowed in the soft light, as he pulled the heavy covers and quilt up over his wife's shoulders.

"I heard you send for Harry. Has the ship stopped?"

"It appears we're at a standstill for the moment."

"Why is it so quiet?"

"Might have dropped a propeller. Nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep." He pulled on a silk robe and drew the belt tight.

"Come back to bed soon," Eleanor said, as she placed her head on the pillow in compliance with her husband's wishes. Exhausted from hosting her party for Commander Smith, and with a busy schedule planned with friends the next day, it was not difficult to return to sleep.

The streetcar baron slipped through the door to their son's connecting room. The lights still burning, he crossed to a nightstand set against the wall, pulled open the top left drawer, and fished out a key. The door from the corridor opened.

"Father," a tall, dashing dressed Harry Widener said, surprised to find him up so late, and in his private room. "I was playing a winning hand when you sent for me. What is it?"

"They say we've hit a berg. What do you know of it?"

"Why yes. Quite impressive," Harry said, pulling a Cuban cigar from his mouth and resting it in a large ashtray on the nightstand. "Too bad you missed it. We felt a jarring of the ship

and ran over to the windows for a glimpse. But it was difficult to see anything. So we raced on deck in time to watch this monstrous mountain of ice scrape by. Biggest we've seen the entire voyage. You would've loved it—must've been a hundred feet or more. Towered over the top deck."

"My God, son, did it do much damage?"

"Of course not. It dropped a bit of ice on the well-deck and some along starboard. But no one's concerned. They say we're perfectly safe." He picked up the cigar and took a large draw. "That's why we returned to the table and dealt out another hand. I had a full-house going. Could've beat the major."

"Son, I don't want to panic your mother . . . that's why I asked to meet you here." He handed his son the key and pushed the drawer closed. "I apologize for getting into your personal effects. But I feel you should check on the *Omar* for Mr. Wells. And perhaps, move the book from storage to a higher deck, in case we take on water."

Harry almost laughed at the suggestion. "There's nothing to fear, Father. The ship's unsinkable." He drew on the cigar once more and exhaled a large puff of blue smoke.

The elder Widener had been a transportation industrialist too long, and knew that freak accidents do happen. "Don't argue with me Harry. Please do as I ask. Remember, that book is your responsibility, not mine. And you're doing this favor for my best friend."

Harry was properly chastised. "You're right. I apologize." He deposited the cigar back in the ashtray, and grinned to reassure his father. "I'll check on the book lickety-split."

"See if you can raise the chief purser. Ask if the book can go into the captain's strongbox, and verify if the ship is foundering. I still can't understand why we've sat this long in the water, if nothing's seriously wrong."

The young Widener left the room, and closed his fist around the key to a private storage closet on C-deck. No one else, beyond the chief purser, had access to that area.

George returned to his suite and sat in the winged-back chair

at the writing desk. The shadows around his owlish eyes grew darker as he awaited news of the ship's condition.

As Harry rushed down the stairs to retrieve the book, passengers converged in the hallways and corridors. They were perplexed. Should they leave their warm cabins or stay inside for safety sake? *There certainly couldn't be any danger on the safest ship in the world.*

Most had speculated the *Titanic* had casually absorbed the piercing thrust upon its hull. But with tons of pressure against it—taxing the strength of the ship's sulfur-laden plates—the rivets had popped, and the cold steel fractured, like glass, while the ice ripped through it.

In less than thirty minutes, the world's grandest ship lurched forward at its head. The series of catastrophic ruptures caused tons of water to flow in through the *Titanic's* starboard side. And not quite imperceptibly, the bows began to dip forward.

The first scream came from below decks. No one heard it topside.

Those who had too much to drink questioned their minds to see if they should panic. Strains of a waltz came from the band that had positioned itself in A-deck's first class lounge. With the lateness of the hour, few paid attention.

"What do we do now?" a gentleman in the first-class saloon said as he greedily drank down the rest of his hot whiskey and water. He set the empty glass on a gold-gilded table. Even with the table's raised edges, the glass slid to the floor, hit the leg of a chair and shattered.

"Oh my God!" said a young man standing nearby. He and others staggered sideways as the ship deviated from its center of gravity and listed slightly to starboard.

Widener continued to move toward the forward section with

one goal in mind. No longer thinking of himself and the abandoned card game, he had to protect the one unique and valuable item on board entrusted to him.

His parents, the captain, and purser were the only other people to hold the privileged information. The specially bound bejeweled edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, enroute to its new owner in New York, rested in its waterproof container in the locked storeroom. But Widener was responsible for protecting it from any serious disaster that might befall the ship.

Gabriel Wells and Mr. Sotheran would expect no less.

Widener passed others in the corridor and noticed them walking slightly uphill as the ship's listing to starboard became more pronounced.

"Does it feel like the bow's dipping forward?" someone said to another.

"I hear the ship's taking on considerable water," the other answered back as they maneuvered the corridor with less than perfect sea legs.

By 12:25 a.m., with little success at raising help with the traditional C.Q.D. message, the wireless operators had already switched to the newer "S.O.S." Following the rule of "women and children first," Captain Edward J. Smith, knowing there was little hope, finally gave the order to fill the lifeboats. It took time for the order to get past a select few, since several of the crew were not immediately informed, and many passengers had not yet received word to abandon ship.

Many expensively dressed men and women—people who had thought their lives secure in their wealth—were now bewildered and disoriented. No one provided advice regarding their situation.

Was the ship in danger? they wondered. *Was this just a practice drill? And why so late at night?*

Somewhere deep in the ship, arguments between steerage passengers and crew took form. Anyone beyond first and second class passengers soon found they must fend for themselves, or

experience an insidious form of life-threatening discrimination between the classes.

After contending with crowded corridors and stairwells and, with most passengers now rushing in the opposite direction, Widener reached the door to the storage closet. He glanced down the hallway. With everyone crowding the area, Widener knew he could not retrieve the valuable book without being seen. But there was no time to waste.

He pulled the bit key from his pocket, slipped it into the door's cavity, past the wards, and rotated it until the tumblers engaged. Widener tugged the door open. Though he knew it to be secure, he was relieved to find the large leather bag on the shelf. The book was stored inside a wax-covered, wrapped teak box.

"Water has submerged the boiler rooms up to the first four decks," someone yelled from another hallway. "Everything below E-deck including the racquet court, is under water."

An attractive woman passed by and Widener saw increased panic in her face as she rushed to hug a gentleman who had just come from above.

"I've been at the forward crews quarters," the man spoke out. "E-deck is taking on water."

Passengers questioned anyone with authority regarding the abandonment of ship. But answers conflicted.

Widener quickly seized the leather bag and left the skeleton key behind. He turned and headed back toward the first-class staircase, leading to the Boat-deck and the officer's quarters. Excusing himself as he cut past several slower moving passengers, Widener now understood the impact of the disaster unfolding before him. He would protect the book for which he had been entrusted, then warn his parents of the possible danger.

Off in the distance, wafting down through the Grand Staircase from the first-class lounge, Widener heard the musicians playing strains of a ragtime tune.

Odd, a calamity accompanied by such stirring music, he thought.

The glacial air now permeated every corner of the ship. Widener struggled up sections of the tilting staircase and held tightly to the banister to prevent sliding across the steps. The weight and size of the *Omar* made it more difficult for the courier to maneuver toward each level above.

Lines of passengers proceeded to the boats in a semi-orderly fashion. Panic had not yet set in. Some had found life jackets in their cabins. Others were caught without them. But stewards provided life preservers to those who couldn't return to their rooms. Most believed they would not need them.

As weary travelers entered the top decks, the frigid air reached the main staircase doors and raced to find low spots in the hull.

"Mr. Widener," someone called from behind, then tapped him on the shoulder. "Mr. Widener."

Harry turned to look. Their steward, who earlier had sought him in the lounge, held an armful of life jackets.

"Sir, I've warned your parents to come to the Boat-deck." He shoved a jacket at Widener. "You must meet them there. We've been ordered to abandon ship."

The steward did not wait for a response, but hurried past him and disappeared through a door.

Widener reached the vestibule at the Boat-deck and found it an unpleasant experience to get through. A mass of thoroughly confused families and individuals had congregated at the first-class entrance near the Marconi room.

He watched passengers scramble back and forth, across the deck, as crew determined who would be saved and who would remain behind. Since there had been no required drill following embarkation, none was aware of boat assignments.

Widener hoped his parents had prepared to leave ship. He would search for them as soon as the *Great Omar* was safe.

Across the deck, Widener looked through the sea of faces and spotted Colonel John Jacob Astor and his second wife, Madeleine,

patiently awaiting instructions—Astor holding his pregnant wife tightly for protection from the crowd and the polar-like air.

Isidor Straus, one of the partner's of Macy's Department Stores, and his wife, Ida, stood close by. Each had been introduced to Widener and his parents at dinner, two evenings before. It saddened him that new-found acquaintances might lose their lives or be split apart by fate.

"Level off," a crew member shouted instructions to lower a portside boat.

"Pull the rope aft. Careful, mate. Now the stern. All right, level off. Level off . . ."

As Widener headed for Captain Smith's quarter's, near the wheel house, he recognized the wealthy American, Molly Brown, preparing to enter portside boat number six. A young bellboy, no more than 14 years of age, carried an armful of bread-loaves to the boat, then went back for more. Near the first funnel, a dozen men tried to free a collapsible boat from its storage site.

For a brief moment, Harry peered out over the assorted collection of travelers as they gathered with family, banded in their cliques, or stood lonely and apart without friends. Convinced the ship was safer than the small lifeboats, many waited for someone to convince them otherwise.

Harry noticed the new dress code that prevailed—a total and radical social transformation. Some passengers wore their pajamas and robes, others had hastily pulled pants and a shirt—or dress—over their nightclothes. Still others had not yet changed from their evening gowns and tuxedos.

Drab, colorless, and frayed clothes wrapped those who had escaped from steerage. Yet, fur coats covered satin nightgowns as passengers scurried across the Boat-deck...resembling the former pelted creatures that had once inhabited their skins.

Unconsciously, the classes had been liberated from all social values as chic and rakish façades were burst, and their new disguises provided transient asylum.

Widener shook off the eerie sight before him and crossed over to the captain's cabin, holding the jewel-encrusted book and casing close to his chest. The young assistant wireless operator, Harold Bride, was delivering a message to the commander.

"Captain, we're fortunate, indeed. The *Carpathia's* wireless man returned to their radio room to check a time-rush with the *Parisian*. Otherwise, he may not have received our S.O.S.

"They're putting about and heading right for us," Bride said over the clamor. "They promised full speed."

"Wire the *Carpathia* again. Tell them the engine rooms are taking water."

"Yes sir." The young man tacked to leave.

"And Mr. Bride..." The British Marconi employee turned to the captain with a questioning look.

"Tell them the dynamos might not last much longer."

Bride acknowledged the order, excused himself as he bumped into Harry Widener, cut through the crowd, and headed back to assist Chief Operator Jack Phillips in the wireless room.

A whooshing sound emanated from near the Bridge, as Quartermaster Rowe fired the first rocket signaling distress to any passing ships.

Widener approached the captain and spoke quickly.

"Excuse my interruption, Captain Smith, this is the least of your worries. But if the **Omar** can be secured in a water-proof safe, topside, until we return to the ship, I'm certain the owner will be grateful."

"Ah, the young Mr. Widener," Smith remarked to others in his cabin. "Come in. Quickly," Smith almost pulled him through the door. "Wonderful party your parents gave in my honor this evening. Shame it's turned out like this." His voice cracked with emotion.

In the room stood a distracted Bruce Ismay, Chairman of White Star Line; Thomas Andrews, the ship's builder and manager of Harland & Wolff Shipyards; and, First Officer William Murdoch.

"You remember George Widener's son."

Their minds were on other concerns.

"Our chief purser's placing valuables in my strongbox." He directed Widener to the corner safe. The purser had just opened it. He placed small bags, loose jewelry, papers, and intimate size boxes inside for protection—until such time as they could be recovered.

"Had to bring some of the items up from below, what with the water and all . . ." The captain's voice faded slightly.

Widener handed the leather bag to the purser.

"Thank you Captain," Widener said as he turned back to shake his hand.

But Smith was already out the door. At the Boat-deck he offered assistance and used his megaphone to give advice to passengers and crew. The other men followed Smith and dispersed to perform their own assignments. Harry emerged from quarters to search for his parents.

Nine life boats had been launched over the port and starboard sides. At the bows, the *Titanic's* name was nearly covered, and the upper decks began to submerge. Within forty minutes, the forward well-deck was completely under water, with such a heavy list to port that passengers found it difficult to reach and enter the lifeboats.

Henry T. Wilde, the *Titanic's* chief officer, made a quick decision and called out for all remaining passengers to move to the starboard side.

"It'll straighten her up," he reassured. And sure enough, as the passengers banded together and shifted over to starboard, the *Titanic* unwillingly and lethargically reverted to an even keel. The crew returned to loading the remaining boats.

By now, the orchestra had moved to the boat-deck. They continued to play ragtime hits and spiritual hymns—hoping to calm the soon-to-be-disenfranchised passengers who had unwittingly put their faith in corporate folly.

To those who viewed the ensuing disastrous events from the water, the picture was haunting. By 2:15 a.m., the ship was in an ominous downward tilt. Looking on at what was thought to be the most majestic and safest vessel ever to sail an open sea, survivors in lifeboats, and those quickly dying of exposure in the water, were numb with the horror of something they could not wish away.

Treading legs and arms fought with the ocean, in a surrealistic battle to prevail against the elements, as other arms rowed boats to escape the screams of those crying for help.

The ship was ablaze with lights glowing from every porthole and window.

At first, from a distance, survivors in the lifeboats heard subdued and muted sounds of debris falling across decks—striking saloon and cabin walls as they broke apart. Eerie sounds of breakage, as if numerous couples were having spats in houses down the street.

What began as a series of distant noises aboard ship—pieces of crystal and faint sounds of bottles and glasses crashing to the floor—grew louder as the seconds passed. Slowly at first. Then, gathering momentum with deadly force.

Chairs, tables, couches, and statues slid and tumbled across rooms. They fell into stained glass windows and ripped apart ornate sconces, filigreed balustrades, and opulent mahogany and French walnut-paneled walls.

The destruction of the *Titanic* grew. Collisions of heavier objects whose weight or fastenings had initially held them down, broke loose and raced in a stampede to meet the incline. Space heaters, iron bathtubs, gymnasium equipment, pianos, ship boilers and engines were wrenched from their bonds. Along with tons of coal, they breached their containment areas and explosively fell downward.

Passengers, who less than two hours before had been partying, were now pinned against giant broken mirrors and elegantly

decorated walls. Then water overtook the upper decks.

Haunting sounds cut through the icy night air, reverberated across the water, and pierced the vulnerable silence of the sea. Instantly, wailing cries, shrill screams and catastrophic sounds metamorphosed into a deafening roar.

It was like the devil, himself, had upended four city-blocks of Manhattan and dumped everything into one place. The momentum of objects caused multiple blows to the body of the ship, as walls gave way to weight and steerage passengers were crushed and drowned beneath tons of rubble.

At 2:17 a.m., Monday, April 15, 1912—glowing as though a ghost ship—the *Titanic* began its slow plunge for the deep—its stern now rising higher in the air. Many defenseless passengers, swimming from the ship, never saw the first massive funnel as it tore from its supports, toppled from above, and crushed them in the water.

What had started as a series of distant noises became explosive bellows in the darkness. The cacophony grew into a final, violent and raging sound of thunder, as the hull split in two and the second funnel parted from its base.

In an indelible display, sparks shot from the smokestack's tube and dropped to the ocean like the afterglow of fireworks. An eerie red glow emanated from failing shipboard lights, as the dynamos faltered. Then, as if giving one last sigh, the lights blinked and went out deck by deck as each level submerged.

The aftsection of the *Titanic* continued to rise, exposing its hundred-ton rudder and the three gigantic propellers—frozen in time—never to turn again. As if ashamed, the remains of the once magnificent ship turned in its place, exposed its keel, and hid the grotesque and hideous ending from many of those who were left to tell its story.

Figures surged away from the attacking water as the hull of the *Titanic* rose. And the world's greatest modern ship began its slide

into the numbing abyss.

As the two ends of the *Titanic* ripped apart, the forward bow section and its entombed passengers were sent, first, to their grave. Second by second their wailing was silenced, and the foresection slipped quietly into the algid water on its mission of mercy.

Those remaining on the rising stern were dazed and confused as they watched events unfold—helplessly and seemingly alone—among hundreds of strangers. Then, husbands and lovers, drinking and dancing partners, children and adults—the poor and the mighty—grabbed at railings and lurched for anything left that might float.

The *Great Omar's* courier, Widener, and his father, George, had earlier bid farewell to Harry's mother as she set out with Mrs. John Jacob Astor and other prominent women in lifeboat number 4. On the upper edge of the fantail, father and son clutched at the ice-cold railing, now rising high above the ocean.

George Widener had spent most of his sometimes venture-some life building streetcars. He had put his faith in all forms of modern transportation, and it had brought him immense wealth. It was said that the Widener name meant as much in Philadelphia as the Vanderbilt name meant in New York. Known throughout the United Kingdom as “the buyer of the Lansdowne Rembrandt, ‘The Mill,’” and progenitor of the Widener Gallery of masterpieces in Philadelphia, none of his wealth could save him now.

His son, Harry, twenty-seven and a Harvard graduate, had been primed to take over the famous Philadelphia-based business. Described by his closest friends as “widely liked, very capable, and amiable,” the young Widener had many of the traits of his father.

George looked at his son. And he searched his mind, and the black starlit sky, for an answer to his question, *Why?*

Harry gazed out over the pandemonium surrounding them, now oblivious to the screams and cries for help. He could do no more. In the last hour, he, his father, and their friends, Arthur Ryerson and John B. Thayer, had gallantly helped load women

and children into the boats. Then, they turned to help each other through the rest of the night. In their personal silence, punctuated occasionally with muted conversation, the men stood calmly together, thoughtful and reminiscent of the past—and of what might have been.

I'm sorry, Mr. Wells, the young Widener quietly thought to himself. He had felt personally responsible for his assignment as the *Great Omar's* courier. A tear froze on his cheek before it could drop to the sea. *Forgive me, Henry Sotheran. Likewise, I have failed you.*

For an instant he thought of Francis Sangorski's vision . . . the most beautiful binding in the world. Only a select few had had the privilege of witnessing its beauty. He told his father of his thoughts, "It appears no one else will ever see Sangorski's grand book and know of its wonder."

The elder Widener slowly nodded his head in agreement. He gazed out into the darkness, hoping to see the outline of his wife, Eleanor, in Boat No. 4.

Grasping the railing tightly, the younger Widener struggled to maintain balance and turned to gaze out over the dark waters. The *Titanic's* band had just completed the final strains of a Spanish melody, *Autumn*. It had lilted out over the hundreds of victims to soothe their inner panic.

*When temptations fierce assault me,
When my enemies I find,
Sin and guilt, and death and Satan,
All against my soul combined;
Hold me up in mighty waters,
Keep my eyes on things above,
Righteousness, divine Atonement,
Peace, and everlasting Love.*

Some would later argue they had heard *Nearer My God to Thee*. But no one mind was focused on the music. The brave musicians had

played until it was impossible to play any longer. Their melodies had helped warm the subconscious, covered up the white lies that convinced wives to leave husbands, shaded the horror of pending death, and provided temporary balm to quell the pain yet to come.

The nearly upright stern seemed to howl, *This cannot be!* as it tried to stay afloat, rising at least 15 stories above the water for what appeared an eternity—but could only have been minutes. Teeming masses of bodies appeared to freefall through space into the twenty-eight-degree water. Hands and fingers outstretched to loved ones and imaginary saviors, as they struggled to hold on, or touch goodbye for one final time.

The *Titanic's* aftsection continued to rise. And Harry and George Widener could hold on no longer. Shivering beyond control, their fingers—frozen from exposure—slowly gave way to the weight of their bodies as the upended stern held itself perpendicular to the sea. Without words, the two men looked into each other's eyes. Then Harry's father gazed to the heavens, prayed for God's mercy, and fell silently downward into the salty, foaming cauldron of death. The courier for the *Great Omar* followed.

Stunned by the fall into the glacial-like waters, the elder Widener's prayer was answered. His heart failed instantly, sparing him from the agony of terror that others felt as they slipped between the ice floes. The younger Widener was not as fortunate—his life slowly ebbing, with hundreds of others, as weary, exhausted bodies gave in to hypothermia in the ebony sea. Some released their life jackets and were quietly swept into the abyss.

Screams from the ship were lost to the darkness as the stern sagged hopelessly, lurched downward, and headed toward the depths with the remainder of over fifteen hundred souls still on board the ten million-dollar casket. Almost as quickly as it had begun, the thunderous roaring sounds reverberated across the calm, lonely sea and faded into the distance as though it were a passing storm.

What then came upon the senses of the seven hundred five who would survive in the boats—what all survivors would forever carry to their own graves—were the ominous, helpless sounds from a macabre chorus of wailing voices, emanating from hundreds of mortals lost among the flotsam. An oppressive grief penetrated their spirits as victims begged to be pulled from the glacial waters and wearily struggled for life with cries for which there would be no response. And a penetrating sorrow overtook those in the boats as the catastrophe folded in on itself.

As if in a sepulchral reproduction of *The Last Judgment* . . . the good and the wicked, the impoverished and greedy, the sheep and the goats, those who had faith and those who would find faith, gave way to the archangel's weighing of souls as the devil watched on. And their souls passed, ironically, not through a molten river, but through the frigid waters of the North Atlantic.

WOLFE'S RESTAURANT

THOSE who had discussed the fate of the *Titanic* were completely silent. The world around them had disappeared, momentarily.

As though in another dimension, waitresses poured lagers and delivered food to other tables. New customers stepped down from the street-level entrance and animatedly waited in line for seats. Outside, autos and lorries inched by in the traffic. In front of Harrod's Department Store, uniformed valets—in gold-tasseled epaulets—assisted wealthy shoppers in and out of their limos, Rolls Royces and Jaguars.

It all appeared trivial now, up against the backdrop of lives tragically and senselessly lost aboard the world's grandest ship. Then, there was the tragedy at Heathrow. It was almost too much to endure.

For the elderly bookbinder, the respected scientist, the expert on antiquarian books, and the FBI agent, earthly thoughts had given way to a silence that, at once, had bound them together. The power of the past had melded with the present and grabbed hold. And for the longest time it would not let go.

Finally, Parker looked up at White and broke the hush.

"Tell me, Byron, what happened to the *Omar's* creators?"

White suddenly felt the years tugging at his life. He found it difficult to speak. Then he smiled at Parker.

"We've discussed the ironies that plagued the *Titanic*, Dr. Parker. But there are a few more," he sighed. "As we've pointed out, if events hadn't occurred as they did, we might not be sitting here,

today.”

Jenny placed her hand over White’s and squeezed it gently, as she winked at Llorayne. “But, Mr. White, I wouldn’t have had an opportunity to meet you.”

A broad smile lit up the binder’s face. “Fate perhaps? I just wish it were under different circumstances.”

“So, there were more incidents?” asked Parker.

Llorayne spoke up. “Who would have guessed, for example, that several years after the sinking, Henry Sotheran would be killed in a motoring accident? And Wells . . . Gabriel Wells, the rich American collector who bought the **Great Omar** at auction, would become the new owner of Sotheran’s Bookshop.”

“Fate or circumstance?”

“*That* is the question,” White smiled.

“The ironies are extraordinary,” chimed Parker as he turned back to Mr. White. “However, you still haven’t answered my question about Sangorski. I thought he drowned with his *Omar*. But, of course, he never boarded the *Titanic*. At least his name has never been on a list of passengers.”

“Ah, yes,” said White, glancing at Llorayne. “He was supposed to have boarded the ship, but business commitments prevented him from doing so.”

“Fate,” Nakamura proffered.

“Coincidence,” Llorayne lightly rebutted.

“I should tell you the ending to Sangorski’s dream,” White smiled. “But first I’ll remind you that on the *Omar*’s binding there were three peacocks. Remember?”

Parker nodded.

“Some believe peacocks to be a symbol of disaster,” said Llorayne. “A sign of fate interceding.”

“Just so,” said White. “And that, coupled with the signs of life and death—the snake, the human skull with a deadly basilisk serpent stealing from its eye, *and* the field of poppies, all contribute to make the story even more intriguing and full of superstition. Though I’m not the least bit superstitious.”

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 293.

master console. "Be prepared to take back control if this works." He hit the switch. "Anything?"

"Nothing," said Parker, simultaneously attempting to feed new directions into his on-board computer. It was unresponsive.

"He's tracking for the underwater inlet on a direct heading to Franklin Swell," Holt called over the intercom from the bridge. "He'll implode against the swell if he continues his descent."

"Workin' on it," was all Calder could say.

Imperceptibly, at first, *Shelty* began to roll. Then, Parker experienced disorientation, as the sub turned over in a complete loop. Then another. And another, end-over-end.

He compelled himself to relax, knowing he might soon be breathless from centrifugal force. He attempted to control the rolling motion with the diving planes and tried to shut down the cycloidals and thrusters, to ameliorate the problem.

The computer would not respond. The autogyro had taken over completely.

"Andy, I have no control. . . . all micro-valves are operational and jammed. Any ideas?"

"Workin' on it." Calder looked at his crew for suggestions.

"Hurry, 'cause I'm spinning out of control."

"Can you turn off your batteries and drain power?" He waited for a response.

"No go. This thing's locked up tight."

Calder looked at Dupont. "Any ideas?"

Dupont shrugged, "His computer may be shutting down. If there isn't enough memory, it won't accept new commands. Transmit increased memory output to his panel, to buy space in the application for new orders. Then bypass the override and send a kill message to the motors."

Andy did not like Dupont's choice of words, but he thought about it for a split second, then turned back to his computer.

"Hold on Cary, we might have something."

Parker did not respond.

Calder hit his keyboard and opened up the *Shelty's* software application. He brought up the control panel icons and, in a matter of moments, pulled up the memory dialog.

"If we increase the disc cache on Cary's hard drive and allow for more virtual memory, that should give us enough, shouldn't it?" He looked at Dupont for approval.

Dupont nodded.

Calder quickly entered several commands on the keyboard and looked up at the monitor. Sonar displayed *Shelty* still careening farther out through the water. He fed it a new set of directions and pushed Enter.

Sonar painted the same dire picture.

"*Shelty*, your terrain guidance is holding. Do you copy?"

There was no response. "I repeat, *Shelty*. Terrain guidance is holding. Do you copy?"

With the gravitational force of his spin, Parker impelled his hands forward in an attempt to grab for the console and reach the Talk button. But gravity's pull threw his arms back and held them against the cabin wall, above his head.

Again, he willed his right hand toward the button and, slowly, his tensed muscles brought it down toward the console. He gripped the edge of the console with his thumb for a handhold and inched his fingers up toward the button.

With his chest compressed, he struggled to breath and talk, "Sonar shows . . . terrain . . . immediately below . . . but clearing," he said.

"Same here, partner. Hold on. It's bought us some time."

Calder, Holt and the others watched from their stations as the Terrain Guidance Sonar held the sub to the natural boundaries of the sea floor. Even with the wild ride, the computer program matched stored geographical data to Parker's actual position, and kept him above the gradient.

Calder fed commands into the master on-board computer, and punched home the orders. But *Shelty* continued to skim the Atlantic basin, as it catapulted through the water end-over-end, and headed farther out toward the sloping swell.

Calder pushed the intercom to the bridge. "John, the *Shelty's* getting away from us. Weight anchor at full-speed and track him out over the margin. Bearing zero-four-five. We need to intercept at a line intersecting approximately six-niner degrees, fifteen minutes west by forty-two degrees north."

"You got it," came a quick reply from Holt. And the crew jumped into action as the *Neptune's* cycloidals kicked in and the research ship headed due east to intersect their sub.

Parker sat helpless in his cabin and watched his sonar display near misses from underwater canyon walls, outcroppings, and minor swells rising from the basin.

Slowly, the tumbling submersible shifted through an arc that brought it back around. And it headed in the opposite direction. Continuing to hold onto the console's edge—his strength and endurance waning with every moment—Parker realized what was happening. He pushed Talk.

"We've . . . come . . . around . . . copy?"

Calder was too busy reprogramming to notice the submersible had reversed direction. He looked to the sonar. Not only was *Shelty* coming back, it was ascending.

"Hold on partner," Calder encouraged. "Henri, give me bearings and a DR on rate of ascent."

Dupont fed numbers into the plotting table's computer.

"He's heading directly for the ship," confirmed Dupont.

"Oh shit!" Calder exclaimed. He returned to his keyboard and entered more commands. But the sub continued its heading.

"John," he called to the bridge, "Turn *Neptune* around. The *Shelty's* coming at us. Reverse direction and give us full ahead."

"Reverse at full. Copy."

The ship's alarm sounded, and the deck crew and divers jumped

into action—prepared for what might happen next.

Calder's mind raced for solutions as he continued to enter new codes into the computer. Nothing worked.

Neptune's Knot came around bearing west and south toward its original position. And *Shelty* tore through the water like a hungry shark as it bore down on them at full speed.

"Damn it!" Calder hit his fist on the control panel. Then a thought occurred to him.

"Cary, can you open up your console?" He waited for a response, but got only silence. "*Shelty*, do you copy? Can you open the top of your console?"

Still no answer.

"Cary, listen to me! This is your only chance. Get inside the console. Remember the release at center, underneath? I repeat, a release to your console is at the center under the dash. You've got to open it up. Do you copy? Over."

Parker nearly blacked out from blood rushing to his head and from his inability to breathe enough air—his lungs compressed from centrifugal force. But his partner's voice called him back. Dazed and confused, he knew he did not have enough strength to reach for the Talk button and open the console.

Got to get to the console. The console, his mind begged.

Inch by inch he forced his arms down toward the console, every second fighting back the forces that held him tightly to his seat. He was dizzy, sick to his stomach, and close to losing consciousness, but his mind pushed him to reach down in front—forcing hands to grasp his pant legs to keep from flying back—as fingers inched forward and up under the dash.

"Cary, pay attention. If you have any stamina left, reach inside the console and rip out the power source and data plugs. Concentrate."

Still no response.

"This is Andy, focus on my voice—open up the console lid and reach inside to the back. You know where they are. The data

plug is the large, black, striped-edge plastic connector. And the connector to the power source is the round green plug with the yellow, red and black wires. Rip them out. Do you copy?"

I copy partner, I just can't answer, Parker thought over and over.
I copy partner . . .

In the control van, everyone's eyes were riveted to the holographic sonar screens. A three-dimensional *Shelty* flew like a bat above the eastern coastal slope, still heading toward the *Neptune* as if it had a homing device. Calder continued to encourage Parker, hoping he was somehow getting through.

Time lost in turning the ship around had allowed the *Shelty* to gain on the larger vessel. And the *Shelty* was traveling twenty knots faster than the fastest speed the *Neptune* could attain.

Parker grappled under the dashboard. Feeling for a catch release, he hit home and pulled up. The console lid crashed up against the hull. The sound startled Parker and his adrenaline pumped faster.

He looked into the console's cavity, and his blurred vision literally doubled the number of wires and connections inside. *Andy said two connectors . . . two connectors . . . black and blue. No black and . . .* he was fading in and out as he reached inside the casement and held onto anything he could find.

Hundreds of wires and cables were fed to scores of components and connectors.

Pull the power . . . pull the power and . . . the data connector.

John Holt hailed the control van. "You guys figure anything out? Sonar's got him only a third of a mile from our hull."

"We're trying to get through," said Calder. "He's not answering . . . may have blacked out."

"Can't you knock out his computer controls from here?"

"We've tried. It doesn't respond to our commands."

There it is, Parker forced his body forward from his seat. *Got to*

reach the connectors. But the tumbling sub threw him back. He pushed the limits of his body to grab at the plugs.

“Cary, boost out—boost out! Pull the connectors now!” Calder’s voice echoed in Parker’s subconscious. “You’re close to crashing into the *Neptune*. Pull the connectors, Cary.”

“Three hundred yards at 50 fathoms,” Dupont reported. “Two fifty at forty fathoms. He’s coming up faster.”

“Cary . . .”

Parker neared total unconsciousness. Confused and distracted, his head swam with an agitation that bordered on derangement as outside forces pushed the limits of his body.

“Two hundred yards at twenty fathoms,” he heard the report in the fog of his mind.

“One hundred fifty, ten fathoms. Seventy-five yards at . . .”

The crew looked across the sea as *Shelty* shot out of the water, thirty feet into the air and flew—gyrating out of control—straight for the hull of the *Neptune*.

“Cary!” Andy yelled into his mike.

“Eeeeyaaahhh!” Parker screamed in frustration and, with all his might fought the gravitational wave—boosted out from the inertial pull—and threw his entire body over the opened console. His eyes focused for one last instant as both hands moved out in unison to grab at the connectors, and seized hold of the fifty-pin ribboned control cable, the power plug, and anything else he could grasp at once. With all his might he ripped at the pinned and soldered wires and cables, and the gravitational pull of the spinning sub threw the weight of his body back against the seat as his fists tore at the console’s guts.

Electrical sparks jumped across the inside of the console and arced from one broken solder point to another. In an instant the thrusters and cycloidals shut down.

Parker’s cabin went black and filled with acrid smoke.

Shelty flipped twice in midair, 20 feet from *Neptune's* starboard side, then dropped to the sea like a lead weight and sank alongside the research vessel.

An emergency battery kicked in and a small light illuminated the cabin. An onboard mini-computer powered up, sensed the breakdown, and jettisoned all ballast.

Coughing from smoke inhalation, Parker spontaneously collapsed into unconsciousness as his sub gently floated back toward the surface.

"Get him the hell outta there!" Calder ordered over the PA to the deck crew. "Now!" He turned to the intercom, "John, hold her steady."

"Steady as a rock," Holt confirmed. And the muscled, six-three, two hundred thirty pound ship's captain made certain the *Neptune* wasn't going anywhere.

Suited divers were already in the water and in the 15-foot RIB, alongside the sub. On *Neptune's* fantail, the bosun and his crew made preparations to lift the *Shelty* out.

"Get that cable on the retrieval hook," the head diver instructed. Three others bibbed and harnessed rubber bumpers around its perimeter. The head diver balanced himself on top of the bumpers, leaned against the sail, and opened the hatch.

"Hold her down for me. She's bucking like a bronco."

The divers ringed themselves around the bumpers and provided weight to steady the sub. Without the gyros, it continued to bob moderately in the sea as small wavelets broke against its hull.

The hatch was opened and smoke drifted out the top of the sail. The head diver peered inside with a flashlight.

"Dr. Parker, we'll get you outta there. Hold on, sir."

He did not respond.

"Dr. Parker? You okay?" The diver turned back to the others. "Give me the under-arm tether and the small oxygen bottle and mask. Lend me a hand. He's out cold."

The diver straddled the top of the sail and leaned down into

the cabin. He strapped the oxygen mask around Parker's face. Then the divers worked feverishly to remove him from the sub. Within ten minutes he was brought into the inflatable and transferred aboard the *Neptune*—revived, but hacking from smoke inhalation and exhaustion.

Holt then adjusted the cycloidal engines, revolved *Neptune's Knot* in place, and positioned the stern to pull *Shelty* from the water. Once on board, damage to the sub, not evident underwater, was quite visible. The severe impact had bent the port and starboard thrusters and ailerons. It would require more than a week to repair.

From a private cabin and, with Parker's permission, Calder placed a shipboard call to Colonel Bramson.

"We have to postpone and maybe even scrub the mission," suggested Calder.

"What're you talking about?" said Bramson, irritated that Parker had not personally called. "Where's Dr. Parker?"

"You might say he's recovering from a near-death experience, Colonel." Calder had no patience for Bramson's gruff attitude, but quickly explained what happened during sea trials.

"We'll never get the damaged *Shelty* ready in time—even with our two backups. The subs aren't ready for deep waters yet. Too many bugs in the software or hardware," he concluded.

"Look, I apologize for coming on too strong. But we've got to reach the *Titanic* soon. I can put all necessary resources behind you. Get you anything you need to effect full repairs, and guarantee working equipment. Just name it, Mr. Calder."

Shit, Calder thought. *This guy doesn't give up*. There was a long silence as the two waited each other out. Andy gave in first.

"I'll . . . I'll check it out with Dr. Parker and the crew," he said, thinking what might be necessary to maintain the schedule. Only days remained before they would load up and head for Newfoundland Ridge and the Somh Abyssal Plain.

"The early prognosis is not good, Colonel. It's possible no amount of money or resources can put Humpty back together—at least not in time to serve your needs."

"These are the nation's needs," Bramson said stoically, "not mine. Let me know A.S.A.P." And the line clicked off.

Back on shore, a private call was placed to Dallas. A button was pushed, the line secured, and the receiver lifted.

"Monsieur Taylor?"

"Oui."

"I believe we have taken Dr. Parker out of the loop, as you say."

"How so, Henri?"

"The program disruption worked. Parker's staff is debating whether it was a defect in the software or the hardware. They're not certain which. Cary is under medical care, and one of the submersibles is out of commission. . . damaged beyond immediate repair. They'll never get it working promptly enough to defeat our plans. You'll have the *Great Omar* shortly."

"Did you remove the electronic device?"

"Just an hour ago."

"Anyone suspect foul play?"

"Not a soul, Monsieur Taylor. They're including me in on everything."

"Excellent work, Monsieur Dupont. Keep me informed."

The line clicked off.

GILBERT, KENTUCKY

THE gray Taurus slowed on the rural highway as it approached Gilbert Ordnance Depot's North Gate. On the right of the guard shack, two entrance lanes converged into one, and a single lane

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 315.

treaty isn't passed as written, it could begin a backlash and thrust toward international monitoring, the likes of which you've never seen."

"Gentlemen," Dr. Senanayake interrupted laughing, "let's not have to move this argument into the streets."

Levard and Parker's voices had carried throughout the room. Chagrined, they excused themselves and moved their debate to a window table. Parker glanced around and, out of the corner of an eye, saw quick movement from someone attempting to conceal himself near a column. Thinking it his imagination, he returned to their conversation.

Ambient late afternoon light bathed the enormous fireplace and the salon's burgundy walls. Its glow cast a mellow disposition over their conversation. From across the salon, the terrorist watched and planned his next move.

GILBERT, KENTUCKY

IT was difficult to remain in their small-town motel room for an entire day without appearing too standoffish. Yet, the terrorists would be conspicuous if they wandered around too much. By early afternoon Rahman and Al-Salih decided to visit the local pharmacy for "ol' fashioned rootbeer floats in frozen glasses."

Al-Mamun remained behind. Maid-service was canceled, with the excuse that "Mr. Amir" was not feeling well and needed to rest undisturbed. He used the occasion to attach delayed timing devices, det cords, and pressure-release boobytraps to C4 and Semtex explosives. Then he wired self-adhesive ribbon-charges to fuses for last-minute attachment.

A light knock at the door was followed by a key in the lock. Subhi jumped from his chair and looked through a slit in the curtains, relieved to see his comrades. Careful not to open the door

too wide, Rahman glanced at the explosives on the table.

"How is it, my cousin?"

"I have used time wisely. We are ready for tonight."

"Not bad, these rootbeer floats," Rahman said to Subhi, handing him a capped styrofoam cup and plastic spoon. Subhi gladly accepted the drink.

"Are the guns clean?"

"No my cousin. We can do that now."

He pulled out a modified Ruger Mark II, with a small lawn mower muffler attached to the end of its muzzle as a suppressor, and two Walther P38's—older but effective weapons issued to the ALFAHAD, three years before, from PLO munition stores. Then, the XE-47's were brought from under a bed, and the terrorists settled in quietly to prepare for their evening.

Dusk gave way to country-road darkness. At 9:00 p.m. sharp, the lights to the old service station and bait shop clicked off, and Sanders came out the front door. He turned the deadbolt key and closed a metal hasp over its staple, just as a road-beaten '82 Ford LTD skidded to a stop in the gravel—its loud muffler hanging by a wire, and an exhaust cloud gushing out the rear.

"Hey, Bobby Joe," the driver called out, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Hey, Bubba," Sanders greeted his cousin as he placed a padlock on the door. "Hustle it up."

"Let me park this piece a shit. The Depot ain't going no place." He reversed gear and backed the LTD around the side, next to Sanders' old Chevy panel truck.

"Come on. We're runnin' late." Sanders spit a wad of chew on the ground, opened the driver's door, and jumped into his van.

"Dropped my cigs. Give me a minute." His cousin searched the ground in the dark.

Sanders heard a muffled ping outside and turned to the passenger window. "Get your butt in gear, Bubba. Ain't got no time

to waste.” He pulled the door closed and shoved his key into the slot. His eyes adjusted to the dark, and through the LTD’s windows he noticed a figure bent over toward the ground on the other side. Then the LTD’s car door slammed shut.

Bobby Joe sensed something was different in his van. He held his breath for a moment and felt an electrically charged silence in the air. The hair raised on the back of his neck. Someone was in there with him. He instinctively grabbed for the door handle as the passenger side opened.

“You scared the shit outa’ me, cuz. What took you so long?” Sanders turned to Bubba...and froze in fear.

Al-Salih, dressed in Bubba’s reversed-bill baseball cap and flannel shirt, shoved a .22 caliber Ruger at Sanders’ right temple. From the back, Al-Mamun wrapped an arm around Sanders’ chest and placed a sharp dagger at his neck. And a voice came from farther back in the van.

“You don’t want to make us angry, Mr. Sanders.”

“What’d you do to Bubba? And how’d you know my name?”

The panel truck squeaked and shook lightly as Rahman moved to the front brandishing a P38.

“My apologies about your cousin,” he said, without a British accent. “I would feel terrible if one of my cousins were shot in cold blood. But there are more important matters we must take care of—with your help, of course.”

Afraid to look around, Sanders’ mind raced to search for recognition. *Who are these people?*

“If you go about your cleaning business tonight, no harm will come,” said Rahman. The terrorists pulled back their weapons.

Then it hit him, “You’re the horse fellers, ain’t ya?”

“You’re running late, remember?”

“That’s it . . . the horse fellers. I told my wife you ain’t up to no good. I knew it. I . . .” The cold, suppressed gun rose to his temple once more.

“Mr. Sanders . . . drive.”

Bobby Joe broke out in a sweat and his hands shook as he

reached for the ignition. "Please don't shoot. I got five kids ta feed. I ain't gonna tell no one."

"We know that, Mr. Sanders. Just calm yourself and drive to your regular entrance. We know you enter the Ordnance Depot by the North Gate. We followed you last night. No change. Understood?"

"Yes sir, no change. Yes sir."

"Think of your children, Mr. Sanders. And calm down."

"You ain't gonna do nothing to my children are you? 'Cause if you are, you kin just shoot me right here."

"Of course not. Your family is safe—as long as you remain calm and do what we ask."

Just as Sanders had bragged—and Rahman had hoped—the North Gate guards waved them through without a second glance. Their panel truck headed down a heavily wooded road, toward the base interior and the administrative and scientific buildings.

"I hold a site map of the Center," Al-Salih informed Sanders. He unfolded the map and brought out a penlight to check directions. "Do not attempt to deceive us. We know where everything is located."

Sanders shook his head. Somehow he would have to notify authorities.

"What're you fellas after? Their ain't nothing in here you cain't get somewhere else."

"Drive us to Building D." He pointed to the Chemical Formulations building on the site-map, located near an old weapons testing bunker.

The panel truck approached a housing section for military personnel. TV screens flickered through the windows of the one and two-bedroom government apartments as they drove by. Suddenly, a Military Police jeep pulled out and crossed in front of them. Sanders slammed on the brakes.

"Sorry Bobby Joe . . . didn't see ya," one of the MP's yelled out. "Hey Bubba," he waved and drove past.

Sanders' heart raced.

Salih shoved his gun into Sanders' ribs. "Be more careful." He looked back at his map and continued to hold the gun on Sanders. "Lake Wildwood should be coming up on the right. We must turn left on Avionics Avenue...in about two kilometers." He looked at Sanders, "That should be about one and two-tenths miles on your speedometer. Am I correct?"

Sanders nodded sadly. "There's the lake," he confirmed.

The interior highway split just as Salih had predicted, and they headed south. Within a mile the wooded area opened up into a maze of two and three-story buildings and a series of long quonset huts spread out over the equivalent of a square mile. Roads and parking lots for over six thousand civilian and military employees filled the space in between.

"Turn right at Stinger Road and follow it to the cul-de-sac."

"I know the way," Sanders said in disgust.

Gilbert Ordnance Depot—G.O.D., as the locals referred to it—was a catch-all name for the Army-Navy weapons support center. Well paid electronics and weapons engineers designed and tested prototypes for microwave components, acoustic sensors, expendable ordnance and explosives, small arms, and electronic components and modules for jet aircraft and tanks. And the little-known outpost in Northern Kentucky had the highest pay ratio of any center of its type, particularly following Desert Storm.

Sanders, among the lowest paid civilians in Gilbert Village, might have had reason to feel jealous or envious of those who worked full time. But, proud of the work G.O.D. provided in the interest of national security, he took pride in being accepted as part of the team.

The enclosed van turned into the cul-de-sac and drove to the circle at the end. Building D was mostly dark inside, with only two windows on the third floor indicating someone might be working late. As with all facilities on the premises, this structure's entire perimeter was brightly lit for security.

"Is there a back door?"

"Yes, sir," Sanders answered, careful not to offend them.

Rahman signaled to pull behind. Sanders dutifully followed directions. A military jeep and a late-model Saturn took up two parking spaces just behind the rear entrance.

"Open the building door," Rahman ordered Sanders.

Al-Salih, with baseball cap and flannel shirt, grabbed a bucket from the back of the truck and followed—his Ruger Mark II hidden under the shirt.

As they approached the door, Al-Salih realized they needed a magnetic card to enter. He looked at Sanders fidgeting around in his pants pocket.

"Pass card's in my wallet. Musta' fallen out at the shop."

"Mr. Sanders, we can shoot you here and blast the door out ourselves. Which would you prefer?"

Sanders reached deeper into his pocket and laughed nervously, "Well, whatdaya'know. Musta' been mistaken. Here 'tis."

He pointed the card at the reader, but his hands shook so much that he missed the groove. Al-Salih grabbed the card and made a quick pass of it. The door clicked. He pulled it open and signaled the others. Rahman and Al-Mamun grabbed their equipment and left the panel truck for the relative security of Building D.

"Now, Mr. Sanders," said Rahman, his voice in a whisper, "let us remind you we have orthographic projections of this building. We can waste precious moments getting our bearings from the maps, or you can help us save time—and your life—by making yourself more valuable."

"You said you ain't gonna hurt me."

"If you cooperate," he reassured. "Now, in what room did you last see that unusual whistle to activate the new explosives?"

Sanders thought hard. He had only seen it once, several weeks before, and was uncertain on which floor it had been.

"I . . . I think it was the third floor . . . no," he quickly changed his mind, remembering that Dr. Morrison's Saturn suggested he

might still be working upstairs as he so often did. The triggering device had been on the first level.

"It should be this way." He moved down the hallway and pulled out his magnetic cardkey. The others followed.

They went through a series of corridors, Sanders taking his time to think it out carefully before making each turn, hoping someone from Security would run into them, yet wishing no harm to any unsuspecting person who might happen along.

Then he led them to a single, nondescript door—no printed title, no numbers—just the words *PRIVATE - Level One Access Only*. And a cardkey slot and palm print reader for additional security.

Rahman noticed the door was of hardened steel. He pulled out a pocket knife and shoved it through the outer, lime-painted drywall, twisted it until it stopped, then cut away a piece. Behind the drywall, the area was reinforced with concrete blocks and, he suspected, steel beams to protect the building from any accidental explosive force. He looked at his partners.

"This is the room," he smiled knowingly.

"There's just one problem," said Sanders.

Rahman waited for him to continue.

"I'm the only one the door will let pass. Each person who enters must have a cardkey and put his hand in this here gadget. If you ain't cleared by security, an alarm goes off when you pass through the 'lectric eye on the other side. And I 'spect you didn't get Bubba's cardkey outta his pants pocket when you killed him." Sanders smiled for the first time. "And I know ya ain't got no security clearance with your palm prints."

The three terrorists spoke angrily in Arabic. Rahman was most upset at their operatives in Ft. Wayne who had not warned them of this technicality. But Al-Salih calmed him down and reminded him they had a diversionary tactic to draw the attention of the post's security. At that point Rahman's demeanor cooled and he looked at the custodian.

"Mr. Sanders, open the door . . . please."

Sanders was worried now. He thought they recognized the futility of their plans. Now he could only do as they asked, to protect himself and his family. He ran the cardkey through the reader, but the green light did not flash. He tried it once more. Still the door remained silent, with no progressive light for the next phase in the security check.

Rahman looked at Sanders like he were a child, grabbed the card, and arrogantly turned it around in front of Sanders' face. Sanders was so distracted he had slid the card through backwards.

Sheepishly he ran it through once more. A green light flashed and a digitized voice came from a small speaker, "Place your left hand on the glass, palm down, in the slot to the right." Sanders followed directions, and the men watched as a light passed under his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Sanders. Have a pleasant evening."

Then, a click and a buzz sounded, and Sanders pulled the door. Al-Mamun held it open as Sanders stood back and the others gazed inside. Rahman looked across to a table with several pieces of electronic equipment in various stages of disarray. Wires, RCA-jacks, and connectors hung almost to the floor.

Next to an oscilloscope lay the experimental triggering device. And at the opposite end of the room was a vault, labeled:

DANGER! EXPLOSIVES!
Do Not Enter Without Protective Gear.

Suddenly, a buzzer sounded. "Mr. Sanders," said the digitized voice, "you have ten seconds to enter and close the door, before lockout."

Rahman and the others were startled by the announcement as they first glanced down the hallway and looked for someone coming in.

"Now who's the fool?" Sanders looked at the terrorists and smiled. "Sorry, fellers." And he jumped through the door, pulling it closed behind him. The buzzer stopped and the door latched

tightly as the lock engaged.

In a panic Sanders looked around the room for a telephone. “I know a phone’s in here someplace. Where are ya’, damn it?”

Scientific clutter signified ordered chaos and filled all table tops, desks, and many parts of the floor—a practice Sanders always resented when cleaning rooms, because he never knew which areas were safe to wipe, dust or mop.

Sanders spotted the phone, buried on a desk, and raced to pick it up. He dialed for the operator.

“This is the Gilbert Ordnance Depot night desk . . . ”

“Hello, this is Bobby Joe Sanders in Building D . . . ”

“If you know the extension number for the department you desire, please push the four digit number, now . . . ”

“Hello, this is an emergency . . . ”

“If you don’t know the number . . . ”

“It’s a fuckin’ recording . . . ” he screamed out to the ceiling.

“ . . . please hold and the night operator will assist you.”

WCWO radio came on the line with their local country music station interlude.

“My God, what am I gonna do,” he cried, “Please someone answer.” He pleaded over and over while the music played.

“This is the Gilbert Ordnance Depot night desk, the operator is busy. Please hold for assistance.”

Bobby Joe Sanders looked around the room. There were no windows. Only a hinged and vented wall, with selectively placed heat and smoke sensors up near the sixteen-foot ceiling, to vent explosive residue to the outside in case of emergency. No third floor had been built over this section of the building.

“Gilbert night desk,” said the operator. But Sanders thought it was a recording. “Gilbert night desk, may I help you?” In his panic, Sanders looked for a way to escape, as the operator disconnected. Sanders listened in again and heard a dial tone.

“Oh fuck!” he cried out and threw the phone across the room.

In the corridor, the terrorists had moved to the opposite end and Rahman counted down, with two remote controls in his hands. “Khamsa, arbaha, talaata . . .”

“What the hell’s going on here,” a security officer turned the corner at the other end of the hallway and reached for his radio. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

But bullets from Al-Salih’s Walther P38 answered his questions as they raced to their target. The security officer dropped in an instant. His radio fell and slid across the linoleum floor as blood trickled out holes in his forehead.

Rahman picked up the countdown, “Talaata, itneen, wasHid...” and he pushed the two remote radio controls.

For a split second, nothing happened. Then, at the North Gate, two and a half miles away, the 15,000 gallon welded steel tank, recently refilled with an eighty percent load of propane gas, lifted off its pad with four highly charged Semtex explosives set above the two concrete risers.

The tank split and erupted into a ball of flame that turned night into day as it rose in a mushroom shape, two hundred feet into the air, spread across the entrance gate, took out the guard-shack, and headed for the base apartments down the road.

Nearly in unison and almost imperceptibly—due to the force of the propane tank blast—the secured door in Building D imploded into the experimental lab. The terrorists waited for smoke to clear before entering the room, their XE-47’s at the ready.

Instantly, sirens and alarms sounded across the military depot, and base security went into action toward the fireball at the North Gate. Though a second alarm rang from Building D’s short-circuited door, no one in security noticed two alarms registering at the same moment. The blast at the North Gate gave precedence to all fire-fighting equipment, and security personnel on duty were too curious to check out anything beyond the catastrophic explosion.

“Jesus, will ya’ look at that,” an MP said to his partner as their jeep headed north on Chaparral Road.

“The north side propane tank just blew,” someone reported in by radio. “A guard must’ve lit up at the shack, and it was leakin’.”

“Get the tankers over here pronto,” another voice commanded. “The North Gate’s history and the fire’s moving down through the woods to the apartments.”

“Can’t get near it,” someone else yelled over the frequency.

“Call the Gilbert volunteers. We’re gonna need all the help and engines we can muster.”

“Evacuate them families outta there now!” Two-way radios crackled with chatter from all directions.

The fire station sounded its alarm, and volunteers raced in from their homes in town, their loose-wired blue lights flashing on car roofs or dashboards.

On the third floor of Building D, Dr. Raymond Morrison had been at his computer, having just configured and entered the final algebraic equations for a new remote laser sensing system. Designed for use aboard satellites, the software application and sensing device would locate and chart SSBN’s—decommissioned nuclear powered ballistic-missile submarines—that the Soviets “dumped” into deep waters under Arctic ice, to avoid the expense of nuclear salvage operations.

At the moment of the propane explosion, Dr. Morrison had been drawn to his third floor window. A smaller, secondary shake, unlike the explosive sound-wave, hit the building within milliseconds of the primary explosion. Morrison might not have given it a second thought had he not witnessed the emergency smoke vents fly open in the nearby lab wall below. Something was dreadfully wrong. He needed to investigate.

Quickly, the terrorists moved inside the room. Al-Mamun grabbed Sanders, who had been knocked to the floor by the force of the explosion. Rahman seized the new whistle-shaped triggering

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 347.

Mr. Silberman....A neighbor from down the road.”

Jack Silberman slammed on the brakes and raced from his car as Grimes came out front. “We heard the sirens and saw your lights. What the hell happened, Lieutenant?”

“Wish we knew. Do you know where Dr. Parker is?”

“He’s in France, at a conference. We’ve got their girls for the night . . . went ice skating with our kids.”

“Thank God.” he paused, “Is Vicky Parker with you?”

“No. She was spending tonight home with . . . ”

“Did you see anyone on the road?”

“No one.”

Lieutenant Grimes grabbed the portable phone. They moved back into the house. Silberman followed.

“Watch your step, Mr. Silberman . . . evidence . . . ”

The lieutenant punched in some numbers, and tapped his fingers on his holster as he waited for the connection.

“FBI? I need Missing Persons.” Turning to Silberman, he said, “You’d better get back and watch those kids. We’ll post security outside your home. I think we have something bigger than our force can handle.”

MONACO

06:45 Greenwich

WITH the entire principality less than two square miles, the limo’s drive across town was brief. Parker’s chauffeur had cut over to Rue Grimaldi, drove past the Palace and Louis II Stadium, then down Avenue des Lignes. In the early morning traffic, it took less than five minutes to reach the Heliport.

The chauffeur popped the trunk, pulled Parker’s garment bag and briefcase, and came around to the door. Not accustomed to such service, Parker was already out. He reached for his bag and briefcase and glanced through the sun-glintoned windshield of a

Peugeot that pulled up ten yards behind.

Both occupants turned their heads away. But he recognized the face of the driver as the man he had seen while having coffee. And the passenger was the bearded man observing him at the Negresco Hotel, earlier in the week.

Parker took his bags and climbed back into the limo.

"Monsieur?" the chauffeur inquired. "Qu'est qu'il y a?"

"Nothing's the matter. Just give me a minute, s'il vous plaît."

"Certainement." Parker closed the door and the chauffeur wondered what his passenger was doing behind the smoked glass windows. Above the street, well-placed security cameras, directly linked to Monaco Police headquarters, saw no unusual activity.

Inside the limo, Parker looked back at the Peugeot. It was clearly the same men. He unlocked the bag and pulled out his gun and three clips. Not ready for another confrontation, Parker wasn't about to let anyone sneak up on him, this time. He removed his tuxedo coat, pulled a holster over his left shoulder and, after checking the clip, tucked the 9mm pistol inside. He put his coat on, shoved the extra clips into his pocket, climbed out of the limo, and turned to the chauffeur with his back to the Peugeot.

"Avez-vous un radio?"

"Oui."

"Appelez un agent," Parker whispered.

"Call the police?" the chauffeur repeated in English to be certain he was serious.

"Now, s'il vous plaît," he quietly begged. "We may have trouble any minute. Uh . . ." He switched back to French, "Urgence."

"Emergency?" the chauffeur confirmed.

"Oui. I'll notify security inside." Parker slightly opened his coat to reveal his holster. "Maintenant. Call now."

He walked through the terminal doors. The limo driver looked behind him then dashed to his two-way radio. Parker looked back through the plate-glass windows and saw the Peugeot was empty.

The limo was still parked in front. He hoped the driver had reached the police, but he could not know a Ruger Mark II—flush to the head—with a rubber baby's nipple over the muzzle, had already silenced the chauffeur before he had a chance to switch to the emergency channel. It happened so quickly, observers in the city-wide camera surveillance room never picked it up.

Inside, the terminal was a flurry of activity with travelers making connections from Nice to Paris and beyond. Others were arriving for short day trips to Cannes, Toulon, and Saint Tropez.

Where the hell is airport security! Parker glanced at his watch. It was 6:55 a.m.

He spotted the Heli Aero Monaco counter and pulled out his tickets. Four passengers were ahead of him. He casually surveyed the terminal for security, and to spot his new set of groupies.

Damn it!

Parker glanced out at the crew on the landing platforms. The deck-operator, sitting in his small cab at the far corner of the pad, controlled the cantilevered landing decks. They had just rolled out on giant steel tracks that balanced and distributed the heavy load, suspended over the water beyond the pilings.

Two conventional twelve-passenger helicopters rested on the upper level—their gimbaled rotor blades hanging limp—after being transported out over the Mediterranean to make room for the day's incoming flights. A third copter—a corporate executive craft—had hovered until the decks were locked into place, and prepared to land on the lower terminal deck.

Parker became impatient when the line had not moved. He pocketed his tickets, bypassed those in front, and walked around the counter.

“Excusez-moi, Mademoiselle. There is an emergency. Je suis en difficulté.”

“You are in trouble, Monsieur?”

“Oui. Can you summon the police?”

“What is the matter?”

“I need to speak with security. It’s extremely urgent.” Parker chose not to display his holstered pistol. He turned and spotted the bearded terrorist coming out of a gift shop. The other was nowhere to be seen.

The attendant looked carefully at Parker, determined he was serious, and picked up a phone. She turned from the counter to prevent alarming customers.

Within thirty seconds two gendarmes approached the counter. The attendant pointed to Parker.

“Monsieur?”

“Parlez-vous anglais? Je parle Français, un peu.”

“Oui, I speak English,” said one. The other shrugged.

“I’m Dr. Cary Parker, here on business with the International Maritime Organization. Two men may make an attempt on my life. Others could be hurt in the process.”

“Monsieur, where are these men?”

Parker specified the direction of the bearded terrorist, but he had disappeared. “Uh . . . there are two . . . one with a beard, wearing baggy pants. The other I can’t describe. Except their features are Arabic. One was just . . .”

Shots came from across the concourse.

The gendarme collapsed to the floor in his own blood, while bullets raced past Parker’s head and exploded into an electronic flight schedule sign. Parker and the other officer ducked behind the counter, pulling the two screaming attendants down with them. Others screamed in horror.

“Merde alors!” The officer looked at his dead partner and called for assistance on his radio. He looked to Parker for some type of explanation.

“Terrorists.” An international word everyone understood.

“Combien?”

“Deux hommes,” Parker held up two fingers and continued, “You remain here . . . restez ici. I’ll draw them off. It’s me they want.” Parker pointed to himself, since the Frenchman did not

comprehend everything he said. "Lls me veulent."

One of the attendants interpreted for him.

"Non, non," the gendarme grabbed Parker's arm to prevent him from getting shot. And he made another quick call to the station.

Bursts of shots tore at the counter. Screams echoed across the building as travelers ran for cover and others dropped to the floor.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" a woman standing in line panicked, and ran directly into the line of fire.

Parker kept low as he peered around the counter. He reached for his pistol and steeled himself.

For a moment there was silence. Then shots glanced off the terrazzo floor.

A terrorist raced toward Parker and shot several rounds. Parker jumped out from the counter, sidestepped a pile of luggage, then sprinted across the concourse to another desk.

"Get down, now!" Parker screamed as he passed by travelers frozen in terror. "Abas, maintenant. C'est dangereux!"

He pushed women and children down to the floor. "Get down. Abas."

Both ruthless men headed in his direction as the travelers scattered. He turned, dropped to his knees, and shot back at the men. Fire was returned as he bounded behind the counter.

Parker spotted a boarding gate and darted for the exit. He turned at the doorway, dropped, fired at the terrorists, then reached for the door. Bullets disintegrated its glass, and he raced through the portal frame and sprinted out onto the lower landing deck.

Hearing the gunshots, ground crew frantically attempted to wave off the executive helicopter that landed on an inland pad. But the pilot had killed the engines and removed his headset—his passengers not yet aware of danger outside the cabin.

Parker jogged across the pad looking for cover.

"Shit." He had lost count of his bullets. "This is worse than counting blackjack cards."

He pulled the clip and tucked it in a coat pocket, per chance a bullet or two might still be inside. Then he jammed a spare magazine home.

Both terrorists followed Parker into the glaring morning sun, their XE-47's aimed out over the decking. Parker heard the 'crack thump' sounds of supersonic bullets zipping over his head and snap-rolled for cover behind an electric cart.

More automatic weapon bursts raked the area. Bullets tore into the cart's frame and blew its tires. Padded seat debris flew into the air and rained down.

Parker lay prostrate, lengthwise from the wheels, in case bullets came under the carriage. "Bramson," he called out to himself, "if I get out of this alive . . ."

Across the deck, anxious passengers didn't wait for the steps to be put in place. Terrified, they jumped to the platform, raced behind the terrorists, and into the terminal.

The gunmen were unconcerned. They were under orders not to let Parker escape.

Parker studied the area around him.

If I get to the upper deck, I can dive the water and disappear among the rocks—if there's room between the rocks for diving. Parker hoped that would leave the terrorists hanging out to dry atop the decking, when the local SWAT Team arrived.

He looked up over the cantilevered landing pads, suspended above the sea, but could not estimate distance. Quickly he pulled off his shoes and tossed them toward the terrorists.

"Wish I'd get through an attack without losing my shoes," he grumbled to himself.

Thinking his shoes to be grenades, with bright sun in their eyes, the distraction was enough to throw off the gunmen's aim as Parker bounded to the upper-level steps. He dropped behind the stairs and sent several rounds of fire at the terrorists. With no cover, they plunged to the concrete.

Parker dashed up the steps, raced ten paces, and hid beside a

food-service cart. He calculated the distance behind him.

Thirty yards to the sea.

The two gunmen crossed over each of the pads, as sirens wailed in the distance. Parker stretched out prone on the concrete and peered around the corner of the food cart. He watched the men cautiously move toward the stairs. Then a fusillade of bullets whizzed past him, toward the ocean.

Caught on the outside edge of the upper pads, the deck-controller was trapped in his glassed-in cab with nowhere to run. A stray bullet crashed through the side window, into his neck, and he collapsed unconscious over the control panel. His limp arm forced back the safety-button cover, and the weight of his body disengaged it. Simultaneously, his hand hit the Retract button.

Immediately, a back-up warning buzzer echoed across the bay. Underneath the Heliport, the immense electric motors and gears went into action.

Parker felt the deck jerk slightly and knew he was in trouble. For a moment, the gunmen stood frozen in place, not realizing what happened—as the entire upper section of pads retreated from the sea, toward the terrorists.

Parker knew the more the deck pulled back, the less depth he'd have to dive—to avoid the rocks.

He looked at the controller's cab at water's edge. Then, the two small helicopters at the opposite end.

Not a bit of cover.

"Damn! What's taking the police so long?"

Unyielding, tons of concrete and steel crawled on the tracks as the upper deck approached the terminal—and drew inexorably toward the abandoned helicopter. Police sirens mixed with the warning buzzer, and the sounds became more ominous.

The French gendarme emerged with stealth, through the terminal's side door, looking for an opportunity to bag a gunman. From behind the food-cart, Parker watched the officer move to the

executive helicopter, his nine-round MAS pistol in hand.

The terrorists sprinted up the steps to the moving deck, bullets blasting toward Parker. He fired back but, without the right angle, was nearly exposed to a volley of direct hits.

Across the deck, the gendarme used the three-foot-high concrete pads like in a field trench—moving along its edge for cover—popping up to fire as he caught sight of the two men, careful not to get caught in the base of the retreating deck.

Firing off three rounds, the officer hit one of the terrorists in the head and chest, dropping him instantly. The man's gun flew across the deck toward the water.

"Yes!" Parker whooped out loud, seeing the man crumple and twist with the impact of the bullets.

The remaining gunman angrily turned and, from the hip, sprayed his XE-47 like a fire hose aimed across the edge of the decking. Plate glass windows shattered in the terminal and the officer went down with a scream—wounded in the chest, soon to be crushed by the retracting deck.

Parker took advantage of the moment, stepped out from the side of the cart, took careful aim at the back of the terrorist's head, and pulled the trigger three times.

It just clicked, and the terrorist turned around—Parker's arm still holding the empty Browning Hi-Power at eye-level.

"Shit!" Parker threw his gun down and turned pale as a ghost.

The bearded man laughed hysterically as he stepped forward and brought his sub-machine gun to Parker's chest.

"Dr. Parker," he laughed. "The mighty American who would stop the ALFAHAD . . ." His voice became menacing. "I am Sayyid al-Hakim," he beat his chest once with his left fist as he held his sub-machine gun with his right, "You are now food for the Ligurian Bass."

He pulled his trigger hard.

And nothing happened.

“No!” screamed the terrorist—his gun seized up from heat stoppage. He pulled the trigger repeatedly—still nothing. Then Parker jumped forward, grabbed the hot barrel, and pulled al-Hakim to meet a solid knee to the groin. The terrorist released the gun in pain and, with a loud grunt Parker slammed the butt of the XE-47 across al-Hakim’s head.

The terrorist first grabbed his crotch, then his face, and slumped screaming to the pad. Parker turned for the other terrorist’s gun. But al-Hakim, realizing he had a job to complete, lunged at Parker’s legs and brought him down. Both men rolled breathlessly across the concrete. Parker placed a hard right across the man’s chin.

Sayyid fell off Parker, rolled to an upright position and dashed for his dead partner’s XE-47. Parker struggled to right himself, dived after al-Hakim, and kicked the gun into the water as they both slammed into the upper deck’s protective railing.

Parker rammed his fist into al-Hakim’s stomach, brought his knee to the man’s head as he doubled over, and the terrorist staggered backward.

Parker grabbed the terrorist’s shirt, pulled him forward, and hit him with an uppercut to the chin. The gunman’s teeth slammed together in a sickening crunch. Then Parker threw him down the steps to the lower level, jumped on top of him—and beat him mercilessly.

But Sayyid al-Hakim’s desert-borne stamina helped him recover. With brute force, he knocked Parker back with his feet. Cary went flying toward the edge of the safety railing and the terrorist followed.

Parker gasped in pain as al-Hakim’s left foot slammed into his thigh. But he grabbed the gunman’s leg, twisted it hard to the right and brought him down over the greased duo-steel tracks.

Al-Hakim felt the vibration of the massive decking as it moved toward him. Parker gasped for air and glanced at the moving slab and wheels.

Immediately the terrorist grabbed the ends of Parker’s bow tie

and pulled with all his might. He forced Parker over on his back and, with a knee in his stomach, continued to choke Parker as he lay across the rails. From the corner of his eye, Parker saw the upper deck closing in—ready to crush anyone in its path.

At the opposite end, the upper decking had pushed the large helicopter toward the terminal. A fuel tank explosion appeared inevitable. From the terminal, a pilot raced out and jumped inside, while another man ran to pull the wounded officer from the path of the retracting deck.

The helicopter's turbines began to whine, and the terrorist was distracted. In a last ditch effort, Parker gasped for air and rammed his fist into al-Hakim's throat. Caught off guard, the man fell back grabbing his neck—choking and struggling to breathe.

Parker willed himself up from the tracks, grabbed the terrorist with his left fist, and with one last blast of energy, brought his right elbow around to the face. Al-Hakim's head snapped back as he fell across the cold steel rails and under the apron guard.

The train-wheeled truck caught the gunman's shirt sleeve as it rolled forward, and Parker watched helplessly as the man's arm was dragged under the wheel by the mechanism. The terrorist let out a blood-curdling scream as it tugged the remainder of his body completely under the deck and sliced him in half.

"Jesus, God Almighty!" Parker yelled to the heavens, wondering if these pursuits would ever end. He sunk to the steps for rest, then observed they were still moving.

Relentlessly, the upper deck pushed back toward its nighttime parking space. Winded beyond any endurance trial he had ever experienced, Parker gasped for air and turned to the helicopter.

The giant blades slowly rotated, then pitched and bit at the air as they gathered speed. But just as the pilot got lift, the right ski caught on the undercarriage of the runaway deck.

The pilot fought to maintain control, unable to unhook the

ski. He hovered slightly, set down the skis, then edged back in an attempt to break loose. But his rotor blades came dangerously close to the building.

Parker looked toward the control cab at the end of the upper deck. He grabbed hold of a handrail, forced himself to rise, climbed the steps, and tripped and fell to his knees at the top. Then, in a hobbled sprint, he moved across the concrete to the small cab.

He opened the door, edged himself inside, and lifted the dead controller from the panel.

Everything was printed in French, but he forced himself to concentrate and read the markings over the buttons. There were more than he thought—given specific adjustments needed for stormy weather landings and those that allowed the computer program to adjust for pitch and roll of the sea.

He looked back at the copter—its blades within a foot of the terminal. Then he checked the control panel and spotted a red button marked **ARRETEZ**.

“What have I got to lose?” He slammed his fist down on top of the button and heard the machinery shut down. At the same moment there was a noticeable pull as the giant cantilevered slab came to a stop.

Realizing the helicopter was still in trouble, Parker checked the control panel once more.

“Start . . . go. What the hell is the word I’m looking for?” He fidgeted nervously, much too tired and with little energy left to think straight.

He spotted another button marked **AVANCER**.

“Advance . . . that’s it!”

He hit the switch and the machinery took hold—moving the upper pads back toward the water.

Parker looked out over the decking. The entire Heliport now swarmed with police and a military SWAT Team—UZI’s at the ready as they raced across both levels.

Parker watched the helicopter as it was pulled away from the

building—its ski still caught. Then the pilot pushed down on his collective pitch stick, retarded the throttle, and set the craft gently down on the lower deck. The cantilevered section pulled itself away from the ski, and there was a noticeable jerk in the fuselage as it was released.

Parker whistled, “What a pro,” and stepped out of the tiny cab. Uniformed officers of all ranks rushed up the steps, over the edges of the slab, and across the deck to see who he was—their guns ready for any perpetrator.

“Here we go again . . .” he mumbled to himself.

Parker leaned against the outside wall of the cab for support, raised his hands high into the air, and slid down to the concrete in complete exhaustion. Slowly, he looked up at the soldiers. “Your timing is uncanny.” He smiled sarcastically.

The soldiers looked at each other and shrugged.

HOTEL HERMITAGE, MONACO

09:30 Greenwich

WEAKENED from lack of sleep, his energy sapped and nerves raw, Parker canceled his flight to Newfoundland and was driven to Hotel Hermitage, Beaumarchais Square, to recuperate from trauma of the attack. Visibly shaken and his tuxedo ripped, blood stained, and in complete disarray, the hotel management rushed him to an inside corridor room, away from the circling traffic, where he might sleep in peace.

He tried to calm himself before placing a call stateside. But it was to no avail. The gun-barrel burn across his left hand was now blistered. A medic had treated and lightly bandaged the burn, but it throbbed as he picked up the phone’s receiver. He punched in the call numbers for the secured line and waited several rings, knowing it was only 3:30 in the morning on the east coast.

“Colonel Bramson here.”

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 315.

"How long a delay?" said Ragem.

"The storm should blow itself out by tomorrow. If we depart late this afternoon, we will clear the worst part of it."

Ragem was displeased. "We will not delay our departure because of a storm."

You don't understand," Tarik said cautiously, "this is no minor weather disturbance. Ships twice the size of the *A'isha* are remaining in port to protect passengers and cargo."

Ragem stared directly into the eyes of the captain, "We *will* leave by twelve hundred hours. Do you understand?"

Tarik glared at Ragem, "All reports say shipping lanes in the North Atlantic are too dangerous. And they're still reporting sightings of icebergs. If we leave earlier than seventeen hundred hours, we could jeopardize our plans."

"Do I make myself clear?" Ragem said in a guttural tone.

Tarik resolved to comply. But he would enter this discussion in his logbook. He knew he was smarter than Ragem, and would lay back on the speed of the ship to delay arrival at the coordinates for the *Titanic*.

"Quite clear, Mr. Ragem."

THE NORTH ATLANTIC

"HOW many more hours of this damned storm?" the barrel-chested John Holt yelled in exasperation, to no one in particular, as he piloted *Neptune's Knot* through the thrashing North Atlantic disturbance. An immense uprising swell kept anyone on the bridge from answering. Holt's dark chiseled face was taut from the strain of piloting through what he had called a suicidal mission.

Yet, if anyone was trusted with the helm, it was Holt. As Parker's chief navigator for the past ten years, he was held in high esteem by the crew.

Six years after graduation, with a Master's Degree in Political

Science from Howard University, Holt had traded the politics of Washington for adventure on the high seas. He had found several Washington politicians and their handlers to be “. . . insidious, self-serving phonies with little interest in assisting constituents.”

Calder always said it didn't take much to set Holt off when politics came up. With See-Life's team for nearly fourteen years, Holt had told Parker, “It's safer in the pit of an underwater volcano than in a room of congressional staffers. I'd rely on my instincts in a ketch in the middle of a typhoon, before I'd trust those bastards.”

Though he had seen too many instances of under-the-table vote buying with Mafia-controlled unions and crime-syndicate bosses, to want to remain in politics, he felt he might have to eat his words, after this storm . . . that is, if they ever made it through.

Holt's rock-hard muscles throbbed with pain as he held tight to the helm and steered a sinuous course. He looked for lulls and windows—to avoid broadsides that had ambushed their ship from every angle for more than twelve hours.

Neptune's Knot moved in lateral motions, back and forth, in and out of the few breaks and troughs that came between hits. Windshield wipers only pointed up the futility of the moment, with their inability to clear the glass for more than a micro-second.

“Can't see a damned thing,” Holt yelled over the storm.

Gale force Arctic winds ripped across the Atlantic Ocean, and tore at the research vessel. And the *Neptune* pitched and rolled in the high seas and cold, pelting rain that bombarded the ship.

“Big one off the bows!” Parker called out. “Wedge in between something and hold on tight.”

“Brace yourselves!” Holt ordered.

The wave struck directly at the bows and rolled up over the bridge, as tons of seawater covered the ship and darkened its interior. The vessel pitched forward with the downside of a swell, and Holt turned his head quickly left and right to check for potential

broadships—his bronze eyes glowing in the dimmed light of the bridge.

With their Omega life vests donned for the duration of the storm, the entire crew was alert to the danger as wave after wave assailed their ship. Then, two hundred yards of roiling sea surged toward the *Neptune* from its portside, as white foam devoured the dark green sea ahead.

Holt spun the wheel around and guided his ship head-to.

The *Neptune* rose almost vertically as it maneuvered into a potentially backbreaking heading—straight into the wall of water. The bows hit the crest.

Then, water exploded to port and starboard as it cut across the razor's edge, putting a chink into the wave's armor as *Neptune's* full weight carried it out and over the top at full throttle toward another open cavity below.

"Ready to reverse engines," Parker warned. "Ready . . ."

The white foam crashed against the hull with a vengeance and sped along its perimeter in a maddening race to the stern.

"Reverse engines," Parker commanded. "Hold on! Here we go!"

Holt reversed engines over the cavity to slow forward momentum, then spun the wheel hard to starboard in an attempt to ride the trough and come headlong into the next wave at full throttle.

He jammed the throttle forward to gain speed, but the wave crossed underneath, lifting the stern completely out of the water.

The cycloidal engines raced out of control at full speed—pushing only at wet air, until the stern crashed down once more. *Neptune* grabbed at the water and jerked forward in an attempt to meet the wave head-on. But it was too late.

"Beam-to! Starboard!" Calder cried out.

"Hold on. Get a good grip," yelled Holt. His hands turned pale as his grasp tightened on the wheel.

A wall of water, the size of a three story building, hit them broadside and sent everyone flying. The wave grabbed at *Neptune's* surface and exploded like a supernova up and over the ship in an attempt to pass straight through steel. Pushed to a forty-five degree

angle, as it fought the laws of physics to survive, the *Neptune's* hawseholes shot water out the sides like fire-hydrants gone amok.

"What's the wind measuring?" asked Parker.

Calder held on tight as he glanced at the Alden radio facsimile, "Fifty-two knots."

The vessel rolled heavily to port, and Calder looked at the machine once more. "Gusting to sixty-three."

"Damn, that's force-ten. What's the Doppler showing?"

Calder checked the screen, "The bad news is we've got at least three hours of this shit left."

"And there's good news?" Parker looked back to the sea, as he held onto the portside window railing.

"Yeah, we should be sitting on top of our old friend by the time the storm dies." Calder forced a smile.

Parker looked out the window, due north. The *Titanic* would be there, as she had been for decades. *No storm could break her up*, he thought. *Just time. . . . And scavengers*. He glanced over at Henri Dupont, but let the thought drop as the ship rose high once more.

The cold, gusty winds had continued from the previous night. The northerly disturbance collided with *Neptune's Knot* ten hours after the ship left St. John's, Newfoundland on a southeast bearing. The weather, caused by a shift of the polar high-pressure zone, had progressively worsened by the hour. Two enormous fronts intersected on top of the ship's position—approaching the edge of Grand Banks—as they followed their heading deeper into the North Atlantic.

Despite a clear morning, no amount of warmth from the sun could have prevented the frigid Arctic winds from rushing south and merging with the warmer elements to form an unstable air mass. By noon, dense, dark nimbo-stratus clouds had quickly materialized overhead. Sheets of rain merged with the green water and the northerly blast to make any sailor caught in the storm

think twice about his profession.

"If we weren't so far north of the Equator," said Holt, "I'd swear we were in the middle of a cyclone." He looked at Smithsonian's Chief Archivist, Harold Chapman, who was turning shades of color—mostly pale white. Dupont remained quiet as he grasped the charts table for support.

"We haven't hit winds this bad since the Azores," Calder shouted.

"I'm not worried about the winds," said Parker, as the vessel was slammed from another direction and jarred off course. "It's the wave action that bothers me. And any growlers still lurking out there."

The farther north they traveled, the more likely surviving icebergs could become a threat. And breaking wave forces exerted pressures of over a ton per square foot as they repeatedly punished the *Neptune*. Bergs or waves. Either way, Parker knew it could have calamitous results.

"The waves are wreaking havoc on our *Shelties*."

"Yeah," Calder said above the din, "but we have them tied down better than a specialist in S n' M."

"I worry about their electronics getting slapped around." Parker's voice was hoarse from yelling for so many hours. He stared out over the bridge.

Wave patterns were no longer predictable. The aberrant sea created whitecaps that stretched to the horizon, while the surging ocean undulated like an enormous writhing snake. Bizarre, uncharted boundaries randomly appeared and disappeared, as the helmsman battled to claim sailable territory and the sea offered up a severe pounding.

Holt reversed the propulsion system to back off from an oncoming wave. As the ship plummeted to the low point of a gap between the surging waves, he corrected his position to bring *Neptune's Knot* within range of the *Titanic's* coordinates.

"Bearing one-six-one," Holt blared out. "Can't say how long

that'll hold," he added sarcastically.

Immense patches of foam blew across the water in thick, meringue-like streaks. Holt continued to make small course corrections to buy any smooths he could find between troughs.

Though just past 1300, the day was as dark as the abyss below.

"Wish we'd fabricated sub enclosures," Parker said. "All we need is a deep depression trough and one mammoth wave could knock those babies apart. Especially one carrying a berg." He was visibly concerned.

"Holy Mother of . . ." Calder couldn't finish his sentence as he glanced out the starboard side. The ledge of a swell picked up their stout vessel like a piece of floating bark, and prepared to drop it vertically like a centrifugal ride in a theme park. Only this ride had no waiting line.

"Jesus . . ." Chapman cried.

"Looks as though you got your trough, Cary," yelled Holt.

There was a time, in Parker's youth, when he and his friends would load up pockets of quarters and ride the old wooden roller coaster at Santa Monica's Pacific Ocean Park. They'd shoot through space for hours, without getting off, by shoving their two-bits in the operator's hand, while screaming and laughing, "We're goin' around, again!"

The old dinosaur of a ride would swing them out over the ocean and rip down through the twists, turns, and bone-jarring dips. And the speeding cars shook their insides like an egg beater whipping up an old fashioned earthquake. Since then, Parker's secret thrills had come from finding the most unmerciful coasters in the world—and researching them, as he put it, ". . . for the sake of science."

But science had its limits, as veteran sea legs fought for balance, and an oncoming wave became a backwash on the edge of the giant trough. It opened up suddenly, like a chasm to hell.

Holt held the wheel fast as the ship was tossed high on the lip

of the void. *Neptune* floated in space for an eternity, then quickly raced downward as though some unseen hand had pushed its dead-weight from a skyscraper.

"Hold on!" Parker yelled, as the ship's bows aimed straight downward and surfed in a seemingly never-ending ride to the bottom.

Everyone grappled for something firm to hold them up, as the boat's floor gave way to open space and stomachs moved into throats. For an instant, the crew felt like astronauts in a zero gravity cabin.

Dupont fell against the chart table, hit the back of his head coming down off the edge, and papers went flying. Holt and Calder slammed against the ship's wheel and were pulled to the floor by the momentum of their fall. Everyone else, including Parker, went straight to the floor and uncontrollably slid to the low point.

Then, as suddenly as the vessel had reached the bottom, the bow of the ship dug into the base of the depression, and the opposite side of the monstrous swell surged over the top mast and swallowed the ship.

Chapman screamed in panic and closed his eyes.

The ship's expansion joints creaked loudly as they flexed under high pressure, accommodating the extreme shifts in the arc that the *Neptune* took on between edges of the depression. The vessel's lights blinked off a moment before the emergency lights flashed on, casting an eerie green glow from the swamping sea water as it cascaded down, rushed across the decks like a foaming rabid dog, and fell past the hull on its way to nowhere.

The crew slid in the opposite direction and *Neptune's Knot* abruptly rose to meet the darkened sky as the swell sank from its own weight and moved on.

There was no chance to secure the ship's wheel as it spun wildly on its own. With every ounce of strength Holt had left to battle the forces of nature, he struggled to pick himself up off the floor of the bridge.

"Someone grab the wheel," he shouted wearily.

The ship had turned to port, on its own, parallel with the next swell—an oncoming wave that would severely broadside it if they couldn't come around quickly enough. Parker, Holt and Calder scrambled from their awkward positions to regain steerage.

The swell amplified as it headed toward the *Neptune*, and the three men raced to set the wheel for the ship's course at head-to.

Holt gunned the propulsion system, and momentum carried the vessel up and over the swell just before it could form a tight ridge and break overhead.

The entire crew whooped and laughed off their nervousness, having survived another assault.

"Get the license of that locomotive," Calder shouted, and everyone laughed at the less than graceful positions they had assumed.

"Good as any roller coaster," said one of the crew.

"Cedar Point's *Raptor* has it beat!" kidded Parker. But he turned to glare at Dupont as if to say, *You son-of-a-bitch. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be out here.*

Dupont ignored the obvious, maintaining balance as he grabbed papers off the floor.

"Hazard a guess on the height of the last one . . . trough to ridge?" Parker glanced at Calder.

"Like I had time to triangulate it . . ." Calder forced a laugh.

"Just a guess?"

"Eighty feet or more, I'd say. Towered at least twenty feet higher than the bridge."

"Eight stories," Parker whistled over the clamor. "Let's hope we don't beat the *Ramapo's* record of twelve."

"Keep your eyes open for the next one," warned Holt. "At the rate we're going we could break any record."

Parker nudged Calder. "After that last ride, we should take another look at our babies."

He turned to help a very seasick Chapman, still struggling to get up from the floor. "Better find a softer place to lie down."

Chapman rushed across the bridge for another disposable bag. And Parker wondered if the once smug archivist was still glad he had come along.

"Let's check the rope safety system, while we're out there."

Calder agreed reluctantly and pulled two still-wet anti-exposure suits off the wall. The two suited up.

"Maintain bearings straight into the winds where you can, John." The *Shelties* were more protected when the waves broke over the bow.

"I'm having a hell of a time maintaining steerage as it is." Blasts of sea and wind bashed against the forecastle and windows of the bridge and made it difficult to be heard.

"Henri . . . relieve John at the helm in five minutes. Get Marshall up here to relieve you in twenty."

Dupont begrudgingly moved next to Holt to assist.

"Hold your speed to one knot while we're out there," said Parker. "Seems worse than it was an hour ago. What's the barograph recording?"

"The glass has dropped another four millibars," said Dupont, "and she isn't bottoming out."

"Crap."

"For God's sake watch it out there," warned Holt.

Parker and Calder cinched up their life vests and hooked up the safety harnesses. As they had done just two hours before, they prepared to inspect the tie-downs on the *Shelties* and the storm roping system on deck.

Calder grabbed two emergency survival kit fanny-packs, and handed one to Parker.

"Take your radios," said Dupont, holding out two. "In case of emergency."

"Thanks," said Calder, taken back by the seemingly unselfish act. He placed his radio in its waterproof pocket. Parker could not look Dupont in the eyes at this gesture of goodwill. It seemed out of character. But he took the radio, slid it into a long pocket and stood at the threshold.

“We’ll check in every ten minutes,” Parker said.

“Turn on your locator beacons,” Holt reminded them. “Just in case . . .”

They were grateful to Parker for investing in a directional-loop receiver system and individual mini-locator beacons small enough to fit on every life vest. In a man-overboard or worse-case setting, if the ship went down, anyone wearing an activated beacon could be located from the air or from ships capable of receiving the signals.

Dupont and another crew member opened the hatch against the winds. To prevent it from swinging away from them and exposing the bridge to wave and spray action of the storm, they leaned alongside the metal door and held the latch tightly.

Parker and Calder quickly stepped over the hatch’s threshold to exit the bridge. They were immediately drenched as another wave broke against *Neptune’s Knot* with an explosive force.

Dupont was the only one who heard them both yell “Shit!”

FBI HEADQUARTERS STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND OPERATIONS CENTER

A task force of over two hundred men and women had been assigned to the search for Victoria Parker. Agents for the FBI, and select detectives within numerous local police forces, had spread their search throughout most of New England—heading west through large cities and back-road towns—stretching into Pennsylvania and through the tri-state area of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio. All reports were channeled into SIOC at FBI Headquarters, directly to the desk of Agent Nakamura.

FBI’s “Rapid Start” computer system was fed reams of information from interviews conducted from the Canadian to the Mexican borders. When potential links and discrepancies were compared, it spit out a series of promising leads—automatically ranked for SIOC’s Central Command to assign leg detail. And

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 426.

“Did you see her?” Nakamura asked.

“Yeah. Make contact?”

“She’s in pretty bad shape.”

Nakamura explained what she had learned, then reached for her cellular phone.

“Time to call for backup.”

Archer held the flashlight as Nakamura dialed headquarters to request the H.R.T. She put the phone to her ear and there was no sound. She hit the numbers again and pushed SEND. No response.

“Dammit!” The rainwater had shorted out the phone.

Quickly, they headed up the road to call from her car.

LANGLEY

COLONEL Bramson put down the receiver and the secured line disconnected. He hit the Intercom and entered four digits.

“Imaging. Mitchell here.”

“This is Bramson, in Mid-east. I have a time-critical request. Has NIMA got anything flying over the North Atlantic right now?”

“Surveillance or recon?”

“Prefer the two, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“You need high-res imaging or real-time quick-look TV?”

“How about both? I need to pick up the eyes of a fly on a ship—covering an eight hundred mile range due east of the Grand Banks, heading west off the northwest tip of Africa.”

“The KH-14 can perform high-res thermographic imaging anytime,” said Mitchell, “but we’ll need daylight to pull better real-time recon. That is, if you want to know what’s happening with the fly. And a Landsat can x-ray your objective. You want normal protocol or a direct feed of our TECHINT?”

“We’ll do the interp and analysis of the technical information.

Once you establish target, direct it to me. Then I'll want an encrypted downlink to feed to the *Neptune* for our own interp. Of course, any information you provide will be appreciated."

Normal protocol would have been to pick up any encrypted raw technical data from a satellite, and feed it to the appropriate specialists at CIA for interpretation, collation, analysis, evaluation and, finally, dissemination to appropriate parties from the White House on down. In this case, Bramson reserved the right to reverse the order, with dissemination directly through his office, from his own group of experts.

He gave the imaging specialist last known bearings and coordinates for the reported ship. There was a pause while the IS checked positioning and coordinates for available satellites in that region.

"The closest KH Recon won't be around until morning. Landsat has a satellite coming over the Mid-Atlantic Range in about ten minutes but . . . SPOT, the French sat, has the best photographic resolution and just passed through there a half hour ago. Transmits six thousand lines per picture, but it won't complete another revolution for an hour. Hold on a second . . ."

Bramson tapped his fingers impatiently on his desk as the IS called up more information on the computer.

"Colonel, NRO has its new SS, launched last month, and just launched a powerful black 8X sat two days ago. I'll check availability. They'll eat the other sats for breakfast. And the shuttle *Discovery* is still up for two more days . . . testing JPL's third generation AIS, on board."

Bramson was encouraged. The Airborne Imaging Spectrometer could measure over two hundred bands in the infrared wavelengths alone, not to mention near-infrared and all visible color bands. And the "black" SS and 8X spy satellites were so secret, they were shielded from most other offices at CIA and NRO.

"They can get you the fly's footprints if you want 'em," Mitchell added.

"Forget the fly—give me a ship called the *A'isha*. Merchant freighter, Libyan flag. Covered in canvas to hide their cargo. I want

to know shape, size, and mineral content if you can see through canvas.”

“These days, we can see inside the captain’s cabin and count the crabs on his balls,” Mitchell bragged.

“Just give me results as fast as possible.” Bramson gave Mitchell the *A’isha’s* last reported coordinates and clicked off.

In a series of strategic moves, discrete simultaneous actions took place under an activity code assigned to Project Noble. From the space shuttle, Discovery—orbiting earth at a height of 22,000 miles, and traveling at 17,500 mph—an astronaut aimed the Airborne Imaging Spectrometer at the Atlantic Ocean for an unplanned seek-and-find mission, then fine-tuned the large instrument to the *A’isha’s* coordinates. Capable of detecting and measuring infrared radiation bands at one million million cycles per second, it focused simultaneously on all the mid, medium and long-wave-length IF bands to see what it could pick up.

In three separate orbits, a Landsat satellite, the NRO SS and the new 8X spy satellites focused their powerful equipment and locked on to the Libyan ship, now sailing at flank speed at 45°02'14"N Latitude and 47°20'24'W Longitude, heading west toward the Grand Banks. Imaging the *A’isha* from seven specific visible and invisible wavelengths of light, the Landsat analyzed and identified the metallurgical content of items stored in and out of crates and under canvas coverings and tarps on deck. Aboard the super-secret NRO SS and 8X “black” satellites, two billion dollars in equipment cut through remaining cloud cover with special radar, photographed their target, eavesdropped on communications, and began transmitting extremely high resolution images back to earth.

At Langley, the encrypted data fed from established NRO and CIA downlinks, as the IS monitored the initial information and quickly scanned it for what Colonel Bramson might miss. Then he picked up his phone and hit Intercom.

“Bramson.”

“This is Imaging. Your data is coming through. Ready for me to transfer?”

“Go ahead.”

“Would you prefer my initial analysis, Colonel?”

“Please.”

Mitchell remained on the intercom. On several video consoles hanging from Bramson’s ceiling, pictures of the *A’isha* took form, as several wide-angle shots scanned across the monitors. The IS split the screens between the Discovery’s Airborne Imaging Spectrometer and the three satellite images.

“Fortunately, the night sky doesn’t deter us here,” Mitchell said over the intercom. “Cloud cover is lessening but could make it difficult when we bring up the KH sat in the morning. But most cover has left the scene since the storm pulled out.”

The top picture zoomed in to expose the starboard hull and decking of the vessel. “As you see, Colonel, the *A’isha* is a mercantile freighter. Approximately two hundred fifty feet in length, with a displacement of slightly under, ah . . . ten thousand tons. Take a look at its wake . . . twin screw. And thermographic radiation shows diesel-engines.”

The spectrometer slowly panned across the deck like a camera. “They’ve modified the ship. Take a look at the enlarged, open fantail.”

There was a pause as Bramson watched an image zoom even closer. “Wouldn’t that area typically have a higher gunwale across the stern.”

“Exactly.” Mitchell continued his scan. “Not much activity at this hour. But look at this, Colonel, our first signs of life.”

The colonel found it fascinating that projections of human forms could be seen through walls—in this case steel hulls and bulkheads—by picking up the natural emissions of infrared bands of radiated body heat. It had often occurred to him, if the Germans had perfected thermography, in the days of Hitler, Anne Frank might never have written her diary. And many more Jews would have been murdered under the Third Reich, through the

use of thermographic detection.

It's fortunate they didn't have the technology, he thought.

Bramson watched the glowing bodies on his screen, as green revealed most of a human life form. Blue signified cooler areas of each body. And various levels of yellow, gold, and bright red were the more active head and brain centers.

"We have two people occupied on the bridge, and three still working in a large box-like room near the aft-section of the ship." The IS used his electronic pointer. "Look at the electromagnetic waves of color emanating from there. Must be loaded with heavy electronics. They've got some powerful stuff. Want more definition?"

"Probably mission control for their mini-sub. But we'll let Dr. Parker confirm that. Actually, I'd like a body count, if we can determine total personnel on board."

Mitchell shifted an electronic pointer to different sections of the main deck. "Do you see the six . . . uh, must be armed guards stationed fore and aft?"

"Yes."

"They're packing Mini-UZI's. Makes them stand out. From the looks of things, most everyone else is asleep, except for someone down in the engine room." Mitchell thermographically scanned the various cavities of the ship, counting human life forms.

"If types of quarters are any indication, you've got . . . hard to tell, actually, with the stacked bunks . . . looks like some are sleeping in awfully close quarters. Given all that equipment, and resting bodies in the larger cabins, I'd say there's somewhere around nineteen or twenty staff and crew on board."

"I'd concur with that," said Bramson. "Let's take a broader look at the ship itself. I'd prefer to see what it's carrying beyond passengers and crew."

"The sat images on your bottom screen?"

"Yes?"

He pointed toward the stern. "We're getting high readings indicating large amounts of titanium and some type of modified cubic-zirconia, and . . . a fiberglass mixture of some sort. Possibly

an anechoic blend with a high sound absorption coefficient.”

“Must be their submersibles, with anechoic tiles to negate underwater sonar detection.”

“Can’t confirm, since they’re inoperable, with few electromagnetic waves emitting from them. They’re stored in a stacked position, the smaller of the two on top . . . and the larger . . . in some type of framed container. Probably reinforced steel. And rails lead out to the stern.”

The specialist pointed to another area, amidships. “These must be wooden crates.”

“How can you tell?”

“Not much active infrared radiation. But you can see metal hinges and screws. If we had better resolution . . . wait a second.”

Mitchell tightly focused the imaging from the new sat.

“Look at the 8X image. See those tiny black dots?”

“They’re long nails in slats, at similar points along each case. We’re getting high metallurgic content from their insides.” The specialist paused and adjusted the wavelength readings.

“Damn, they’re packing quite a wallop. That’s not scientific equipment in those crates. It’s ordnance.” He closed in on the crates and refocused the screen. “I’d say they could be semi-automatics . . . machine guns . . . and, Jesus, look down at the bottom. They’ve got hand-held missile launchers in there.”

“These guys are serious fishermen.”

“I hope your research ship . . . what is it, the *Neptune*?”

“*Neptune’s Knot*.”

“Hope it doesn’t get in *Aisha’s* way. Could do some damage.”

Bramson was silent for a moment. “With all this ordnance and the armed guards, they’re up to something else—beyond diving for treasure and protecting their position.”

Mitchell scanned the decking further. “I’ll take another look around and get back to you.”

“Before you do, encrypt what we have, uplink it to our satellite, and send it to the *Neptune*, will you? Code Zebra, Zebra,

Four, Eight, One. Channel five.”

“You got it.”

“I’ll fax a warning that it’s coming.”

Both men clicked off their lines, but the shuttle and satellite feeds remained on Bramson’s consoles. Bramson poured a fresh cup of coffee, went to his computer, and kept one eye on the imaging screens as he prepared a message for the *Neptune*.

Mitchell ordered up more scans of the *A’isha* in various bands of infrared. The clarity of the satellites provided detailed images of items, no bigger than six inches, as they scanned from one end of the ship to the other.

Then, the earth-bound transmissions focused on the forward hold of the ship. And the thermographic images changed from one wave length to another, like an out-of-control mood ring. Mitchell fine-tuned his equipment and searched for clues the ship might yield on additional contents.

The surreal images focused on a group of double-walled canisters located at the rear of the forward hold. The high-resolution imaging came through chillingly clear.

Bramson looked back at his screen. Five canisters appeared as black images, similar in shape to large metal milk cans from a dairy. But Bramson’s attention was drawn more to the brightly-glowing red, gold, and yellow-to-pure-white halo-effect that radiated from each of the containers. Eight other canisters, stored nearby, radiated less in cooler blue-greens, with splotches of red and gold meshing about. They almost seemed alive.

In two different rooms at CIA—Imaging and Mideast office—Mitchell’s and Bramson’s blood ran cold.

THE NEPTUNE

HOLT wanted to get enough sleep in preparation for the morning

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 522.

incessant difficulties with communications. It appears the *A'isha* has jammed transmissions. Transponders ineffective. Over.”

“What channels have you used?”

“Tried them all. But four is our primary channel.”

“Captain Holt. Hold for further orders. Over.”

“Roger, *Standley*.”

“Captain,” *Neptune’s* navigator turned to Holt, “that ship’s got some fire power. I served three years on her sister-ship, the *Biddle*, before they rotated me out. They can fire Mark 46 torpedoes right off the side. And she’s loaded with SAMs, Mk 141 Harpoon launchers, an Mk 42 5-incher, and two twenty millimeter Phalanx Mk 15 multibarrels. The *Standley* can knock the shit outta the *A'isha*!”

“I’m not sure that’s their mission,” said Holt. “But if they don’t, I will.”

“*Neptune*, this is *Standley*. Over.”

“Go ahead *Standley*.”

“Maintain status quo. Keep channel seven open for future directions. Copy?”

“Roger that Captain. Just get here as quickly as possible. Over.”

Parker tried to free the jammed cable from the stern’s thruster by reversing his motors a little at a time. Nothing worked.

“Wish the Navy hadn’t sliced cable and rope cutters from our budget,” he said out of frustration. If sharp blades had been attached to his thruster props and prop bearings, he might not have been caught in this dilemma.

Openly exposed to the Labradorian Current rushing over and through the *Titanic’s* hull, the floating cable tugged on the wounded *Shelty* and caused it to whip up and down on the edge of the rotted deck. Parker was equally concerned with the whipping motion that could break off his stern prop, and with the possibility of the deck collapsing over him.

The radio's hissing sounded like TV snow after late-night station sign off. With each attempt to reach the *Neptune*, he was greeted with ear-splitting screeches. Cary turned down the volume and hoped he could break through to Holt. It appeared he was completely cut off from topside. At wit's end, Parker sat back in his contoured seat and composed himself.

An odd sound penetrated his cabin between the disturbances. "I must be hallucinating."

The sound came, again. It emanated from his overhead speaker—like a low pitched voice or moan—mixed with the static.

"Jesus," Parker sat straight up and adjusted the volume. The quick movement of his body weight caused the *Titanic's* decks to shift underneath.

"Andy is that you? This is Cary. Can you hear me? Andy, do you read?"

There was no response. Parker listened again. Nothing more. He thought his imagination was playing tricks, attached to a creaking cenotaph at two-and-a-half miles down.

Cary sat back, disappointed. Then a voice came over the radio.

"What a hangover . . . shit, my head hurts."

"Andy. Is that you."

"Is it me what?" Calder answered slowly. "That you, Cary?"

"Listen, Andy." Parker had a renewed urgency in his voice. "Keep your channel open. Are you okay? You've got to give me a hand. Can you handle your sub?"

"Which one . . . I see two consoles."

"Clear your head partner. We're both in deep shit. I'm caught on a cable at the end of the bow section. And its ready to plunge to the floor with me attached. Dupont escaped with the *Omar*, and the *A'isha's* emissary is due here to take us both out . . . forever."

"Mind if I take a raincheck?"

"Talk sense for God's sake. We're in trouble pal."

"Cary, I don't mean to complain, but I can hardly hear you. My head's split open, and blood's all over my cabin."

"Understand, partner. But start your motors. You've got to get over here. We both need to get topside."

Between the recurring noise, Parker heard activity from Calder's sub.

"What's going on, Andy? You all right?"

"I'm returning this damned piece of equipment to its nest. Let's screw it in next time. Okay?"

There was an interminable pause. Parker heard Calder cuss up a storm under his breath. Then, the muffled sound of electric thrusters pushing water.

"Where am I situated?" asked Calder. "I'm really disoriented. Electronic's are still going nuts."

"You're about ninety yards out, directly south of the bow, near the old fallen davit's location. Bear slightly northeast at zero-zero-two. If your computer works, set your DR for forty-one forty-three fifty-four North by forty-nine fifty-six fifty-one West. Throttle slow ahead. You should DR right to me. Got that?"

Calder slowly repeated and entered the coordinates, then looked out his forward viewport. "Flash your lights."

Parker responded.

"All right," said Calder. "I'll be right there."

He eased into the throttle, and *Shelty Two* moved toward Parker at less than a knot. Calder felt lightheaded but waved it off.

As he waited, Parker explained what happened with Dupont. Amazed, but not surprised at the news, Calder had always found it difficult to put complete trust in Dupont. But he blamed it on resentment or jealousy on his own part.

"Your cabin lights are headed straight for me Andy. You're doing fine."

"The power's erratic." There was a long pause. "Come to think of it, so am I. We both keep fading in and out."

Parker observed Calder had recovered his sense of humor. "What do you expect after being knocked out?"

"Got a bump on my head the size of Mount Shasta."

"Cut all unnecessary power. Batteries are drained from sitting

out there with your lights on. The caliginous batteries should recover now that your computer's on again."

Calder was close to blacking out, but dismissed the feeling. He pulled up his systems control module on the computer screen and adjusted the power conservation icon to its lowest setting. The screen dimmed with his lights, and the motors slowed slightly as *Shelty Two* crossed the gently sloping submarine canyon.

"That seemed to help," reported Calder, as his sub reacted more consistently than before. "Sonar's picking you up near the decking. Flash your lights once more so I can double-check range and positioning." Parker responded.

"Yep. I've got you, my pretty," Calder chortled.

"Just get me out of here, before the wicked witch of the Mid-East returns."

Calder's coordinates placed him within ten yards of the *Titanic's* collapsed decking. He cut his thrusters to bare minimum and edged toward Parker's sub.

"Coming aft to check your prop."

"Don't get hung up in this crap."

"Hold on for backwash. You might get whipped around a bit."

Calder turned his lights low.

The wind pushed against Calder from the north, as he painstakingly skirted around Parker's sub. Careful not to get too close, he avoided other floating and hanging cables snaking in the water, aft of the old compass platform.

"Got a cobra pit back here."

Calder maneuvered between the open, sloping sections of Number 3 funnel casing, and closed in on the tail prop. But a wave of dizziness hit him. He was losing consciousness, and he forced himself to take a deep breath.

His sub hit the edge of B-deck.

"Dammit."

The deck creaked loudly, and a piece of debris hit Parker's sub.

"Sorry. Started to black out."

"Take your time to reacclimate," said Parker. "But not too long."

What do you see back there?”

“The angle of the decks won’t let me in close. I’ll have to lie in a prone position over your stern to get manipulators to the cable. It’ll probably kick up dust.”

“Careful, my friend.”

Calder adjusted his thrusters and mini-jets, and *Shelty Two* found a face-down position above the decking, immediately over the entangled thruster. Calder’s head throbbed as his sub assumed an angle nearly horizontal to the sea floor. He forced his attention on the task as waves of nausea overtook him.

Organic dust surrounded the *Shelties*, but enough had already blown away to make the cloud less opaque.

“Come on, baby,” he coaxed. Calder aimed the robotic fingers of his right prehensile, grabbed for the floating end of the cable, and missed.

“Damn thing twists like a belly dancer.” He reached the large strand and clamped the fingers tightly, five inches from the end. “This’s worse than tying underwater knots at SEALS bootcamp.”

Calder changed emphasis to the left prehensile, to pull the cable back.

“How’re we doing, Andy?”

“Two feet of this stuff ran through, and a blade’s caught a crimp in the wire.” He pulled with his left prehensile and lifted and pushed with the right.

“Crap. I’m in motion. Didn’t set for drift . . .”

Suddenly, the current pushed Calder into Parker.

“Hold on Cary.” In his rush, he hadn’t instructed his computer to compensate for the current’s force. The two subs collided, and both *Shelties* pulled on the cable.

Tension created a force not exerted on the decaying hull since the last salvors had robbed the grave. The deck’s superstructure creaked severely as the heavy weight of rotting steel plates slid away from the ship, collapsing downward as they moved.

“Were going for a ride!” Calder yelled.

With Calder’s prehensiles still grasping the cable, both *Shelties*

were propelled downward with the slippage. The force pulled the two subs together, and they struck with an intensity that signaled impending disaster. The split-second incident evolved into slow motion for them as they spent an eternity waiting for implosion. But the vessels held.

“Damn close,” exclaimed Calder as the creaking subsided.

“Let go of the cable, Andy.”

“The deck’s weight on your thruster will tear it off,” argued Calder. “I can hold this up and keep the weight off until we find a solution.”

“If you insist, but I hate to rush you. A glimmer of light’s coming from the south, out at the stern section.”

“Can’t worry about that. Got to get you untangled.”

Before Calder could increase his thrusters, the weight on the cable tore a section of the funnel casing from the ship. It thundered to the next level, carrying the still-attached subs.

Again, the subs collided, but the ship’s plates stopped short of falling to the next level as other cables held the casing, and the submersibles came to rest on top of the saloon deck.

“Yes!” said Calder. “The rotted cable tore off at the other end.”

Intensity and amplification of the catastrophic sounds increased with the high pressure and echoed across the abyssal plain. Out at the debris field, just north of the collapsed stern, the moving lights paused, turned in their direction, then picked up speed.

“Give me a minute to pull this sucker out of here.”

“No time,” said Parker. “Let it go and get the hell out before the *Yoritomo* arrives.”

“No way. We’re in this together.”

Parker increased his left and right thrusters for balance and throttled the cycloidals for a tighter hover. He waited to hit the stern thruster as soon as Calder gave the signal.

Calder used the force of the manipulators to pull his sub in.

“The *Yoritomo*’s getting closer, Andy. How’re we doing?”

Calder concentrated on the prehensiles. “Except for Toad’s wild

ride, I've still got both ends of the strand."

Ever so gently, Calder moved his right hand slightly up and to the left.

"Got to get this crimp past your blade. It's shorter on the right end."

Calder jerked up on the right end of the twisted cable to unhook it. As quickly as it released, he flinched his virtual-gloves to the left, and the prehensile, with cable, followed.

"She's out."

"How's it look?"

"Bent a little toward topside, but clean as a filleted mackerel."

"Clear the stern. I'm turning on aft thruster." Parker punched up his side lift props and gained more float. Then he switched on the motor for the stern prop. A loud hum followed, and his console light flashed a cautious yellow.

"The prop's jammed," said Calder.

"Knock the shaft. I'll move out to give more clearance."

Calder pulled behind Parker and grabbed the stern prop. He jiggled it back and forth then pushed the point of the blade to set it firmly in place.

"Try it now."

Parker re-started the aft motor, and the blade turned.

"Looks good."

"All right. Cut lights, drop weights and head for topside."

Calder turned off his lights. "What're you going to do?"

"Distract the incoming sub while you get a head start. They know I've got the jewelry and won't be concerned with you."

"Hell you say. I'm not leaving you with those bastards."

Parker knew Andy was stubborn. "Okay . . . get down to the bilge keel and use terrain masking to blend in with the hull. Maintain radio silence, but leave your channel open for my call."

"Be careful, for crying out loud." Calder reversed cycloidals and drifted out with the current, away from the sheared-off bow. He countered his direction to slightly north-by-north-west, cautiously moved in under cover of the bilge keel, and tucked his sub

next to the silent and shadowless vestige of a giant rusting boiler.

Without lights, Parker moved up over the slumped roof of the first-class lounge, cleared a window casing in the gymnasium's wall where the roofing had collapsed, and floated down behind the bulkhead—his sub rising just enough to peer to the south. He cut power to bare minimum and waited for the *Yoritomo's* approach.

From his vantage point he watched the ghostly shadow of a manta-like vessel traverse the sloping plateau as it neared the bow.

They're still searching for Andy, believing him out of commission, thought Parker. *Maybe they'll think he drifted south with the current.*

Parker glanced at his sonar screen. It detected a weak disturbance to the southwest. The *Yoritomo* was true to form. Were it not for the running lights so brazenly displayed, he would not have recognized it on sonar and might have thought it to be a slight magnetic anomaly. Few would have paid attention.

Damn, they're confident.

The *Yoritomo* approached the coordinates where Calder had been stranded, circled the area, then hovered for a time. Slowly, it turned toward the *Titanic's* bow section. Then, as if a space ship had darted across the sky, *Yoritomo* instantly traversed the distance between the old davit and where Parker had been entangled in the cable. And its running lights went out.

Thanks to Henri, they know exactly where to look, Parker thought. He glanced at his sonar screen and realized the magnetic anomaly had become stronger.

"Fascinating," he whispered to himself. *It's got tremendous capacity to sneak up on its prey from a distance. But up close, beam-to, it can still give itself away if you know what to look for.*

Parker watched from his darkened cabin as the pitch-black *Yoritomo* stalked back and forth, aft of the bow section, obviously searching for the *Shelties*. He studied the design, thinking all along it reminded him of something else. Then it hit him. *George Pal's alien ships from Mars—his H.G. Well's film, War of the Worlds. That's what it resembles. A cross between the butterfly-shape of the manta*

ray and the center-rise, cartilaged, cow-nose ray.

Parker's sonar picked up less electromagnetic visibility feedback from the *Yoritomo* when it aimed its nose toward him, at twelve o'clock, or receded from him with its tail.

Her EMV is at maximum when it banks, increases speed, or flies by with its beam facing me. But her stealth features function well, Parker ruminated.

The rubbery anechoic tiles, affixed to the *Yoritomo's* hull, absorbed most of the signals from Parker's sonar, converted the sonar frequency energy into heat, and minimized reflected echoes. Parker switched on his thermal imaging device attached to the video camera, looked at his monitor, and smiled.

"I'll be damned," he whispered to himself. "Gotcha' you son-of-a-bitch." The TID sensors picked up heat given off by the *Yoritomo's* anechoic tiles. The infrared heat generated by converted radio waves from *Shelty One*—fed back to him as video images—now made the *Yoritomo* glow in the dark on his screen. As long as Parker's sonar and thermal imaging device functioned minimally, there were few deep-water canyons or tributaries where the sub could escape, without being detected.

"Andy," he quietly spoke into his mike in as low a tone as possible. "Switch on TID. Keep RF operational and open at three hundred megahertz. Copy?"

"Copy," came back a whispered reply from below.

"Hopefully, they won't notice. Wait'll your monitor shows this baby heating up."

Parker watched the experimental sub disappear from view as it descended toward the ocean floor. "Maintain radio silence from here. Be on guard."

"Copy," the reply hissed in a brief bout with static.

Calder watched his video monitor from inside the keel section. When the *Yoritomo* passed in front of the camera, the TID uncloaked the visiting sub's shape. Calder held his breath as he viewed it on his screen.

Yoritomo passed by the gaping hole, cut between the ocean floor and the torn steel plating, then stopped, hovered, and reversed thrusters. As it backed up, it turned slowly to look head-on into the blown-out bilge section of the ship.

In the relatively safe darkness of the abyss, Calder realized the two subs were face to face and wondered if the *Yoritomo* had its own TID focused on him. With their running lights laid in three strips along the raised canopy, he could partially see through their viewports.

The TID's image reminded him of the F-117 Stealth Fighter, its angular fuselage tucked between highly swept wings. This was not a mini-sub by *Shelty* standards. With a wing span of nineteen feet and an overall length of nearly fourteen, nose to tail, Calder felt safe from direct attack inside the keel.

He zoomed the video camera in for a close up. On the monitor, two men carried on a discussion in the side-by-side cockpit. Both were Japanese. Not a surprise to Calder, since Arab terrorists weren't known for developing superior technology for the high seas.

Then, Calder watched both men put on sunglasses. Without warning, the equivalent of two-million candlepower nearly blinded him—as though daylight had cut through from above. The brightness was overwhelming.

Discovered, he fed his brightest lights back to the *Yoritomo* in a feeble attempt to piss them off. Still feeling relatively safe beside the giant boiler, he waited them out and shielded his eyes from the light.

They don't know if I'm the one with the jewels, Calder thought. *I'll lead them on while Cary gets topside.*

The *Yoritomo* turned to starboard, ascended above the *Titanic's* bilge opening, and flew over the steel plating that projected from the gaping hole. As quickly as they had taken position above, Calder heard the whining of a tube door open. A prehensile arm hydraulically telescoped from the sub's bow. It locked into place, and a

bright red laser beam shot out from the robotic arm and cut across the plating. Cold sea water boiled at the point the hot light met the metal.

Calder knew three options faced him. The first was the possibility the steel plating would be cut, then dropped inward to crush him in his place. But that would cause implosion and be dangerous for both sides. The second was to remove the heavy plating to gain access to the jewels they thought he had. His third option was to break for open water.

Not wanting to get caught or give away Parker's position, Calder picked the third. He reset the battery icon to full power.

Parker had waited for a return visit from the *Yoritomo*. When nothing happened, he ascended from the carcass of the *Titanic's* gym. Just then, the entire aft portside lit up like the rising sun.

What the hell'd they do . . . steal Fenway Park's lights? He darted back into place, and prepared for another visit from the enemy. But the bright lights broadcast toward the southwest end of the bow. A bizarre—almost supernatural—shadow of the formidable ship's hull danced in the water behind him.

Then, Parker noticed a combination of rust and bubbles rising through the reflected light from beneath. And he knew Calder was in trouble.

Before the terrorists cut through the plates, *Shelty Two* burst out under the overhanging steel and headed from the ship.

"Don't fail me now," Calder said to himself. He pushed full throttle and headed north, his keel flying just feet above the sloping terrain.

Hearing Calder's remark on the open channel, but not yet aware of Calder's escape, Parker moved *Shelty One* to the gym's portside bulkhead and climbed out over the A-deck roof. He watched the *Yoritomo* pull in its laser torch, turn, and immediately give chase across the ocean floor.

Parker hit full throttle and followed, maintaining enough

distance to allow time to plan an assist. The TID imaging camera was more effective than sonar for tracking their location.

The *Yoritomo* used its Doppler for pursuit as it locked on to *Shelty Two's* every move.

Calder quickly turned to port or reversed direction in attempts to shake them off. But the Japanese submersible came about as quickly as he altered course.

"Hope they don't have ordnance," he said out loud.

Parker heard Calder and hoped he might catch the *Yoritomo* by surprise.

Calder shot across the abyssal floor, adjusted his diving planes, and plunged 300 feet below the sea bottom—where an elongated three mile earthen gash ran parallel with the continental shelf. He hoped to take cover in the dark recesses of the small ocean trough, but the *Yoritomo* crew left on their bright lights.

The oblong depression lit up in fast receding sections of terraces and outcroppings, as dark shadows melted into the mud, and pelagic marine sediments were quickly left behind.

Shelty Two held to the lower edges of outcroppings in the depths of the V-shaped trough. Calder hoped the larger sub would catch on a ridge too large for its wing span. But the *Yoritomo* tracked its prey with the diligence of a hawk and, with its sophisticated bottom-and-sidescan sonar, escaped the trough's jagged edges.

The canyon sloped upward and fed into a chain of volcanic sea knolls, as Calder burst into the open—the *Yoritomo* still in pursuit.

Calder banked steeply around a small sea knoll, overcompensated, and nearly ate mud until he corrected his position. By then the *Yoritomo* had closed the range and flown to his port side.

Calder decelerated, banked sixty degrees to starboard, and placed *Shelty Two* behind the terrorist's 3/9 line. As he flew just above, the *Yoritomo's* bow lifted straight up at a ninety-degree cut through the water, in front of him, then rolled a three-sixty over in a dive to his tail.

They were so close, Calder swore he saw both faces laughing as they shot past him.

Instantly, he executed a one-eighty to the rear. The *Yoritomo* followed as both subs sprinted, at thirty-six knots, past the rising series of knolls. Anticipating the other's moves, they darted in and out between the faults, folds and mantles of sediment that covered the perimeter of the extinct volcanoes.

Then Calder disappeared.

The *Yoritomo* continued its hunt, racing between the small seamounts, searching for any signs of the *Shelty*.

Suddenly, Parker's vessel hovered directly ahead. Startled, the *Yoritomo* cut straight up to avoid a crash, banked sharply to starboard, and came around to greet him from behind. Parker hit the transverse propulsors. His sub rotated in place to face them head on.

Thinking him to be Calder, they focused attention on *Shelty One* and ignored a blip on their sonar . . . where Calder had reappeared behind them.

The *Yoritomo* increased throttle as it approached Parker. He backed up to keep the focus off Calder.

Closing on *Yoritomo's* stern, Calder moved to its starboard thruster. He grabbed the prop shaft with the manipulators and held on tightly—throwing the tension adjustment on automatic.

The *Yoritomo's* crew felt a jolt and glanced out the canopy. Fearful the shaft would break off from parasitic drag, the *Yoritomo's* crew slowed to a crawl.

"Grab the other elbow, Cary."

Parker moved in and latched onto the portside shaft. It was an odd sight—both *Shelties* dragging alongside the large stealth submersible. The *Yoritomo* crew no longer laughed.

"Throttle up, Andy. Ten knots, in twos, on go. Over."

"Aye, Aye, sir. Happy to be aboard sir."

"Go!"

Both *Shelties* slowly pushed their throttles, two knots at a time, until each console read "10." The three subs picked up momentum and moved in unison as they approached the northern edges of the Sohm Abyssal Plain.

"Twenty knots, and ascend to sixty yards on go, my friend."

"Twenty knots and ascend to sixty it is, sir. Happy to comply, sir."

"Go!"

They picked up speed, rose two hundred feet above the floor, and tugged the \$23-million manta ray along with their *Shelties*. The terrain climbed as they advanced on the outer tip of the Newfoundland Ridge, near the Laurentian Cone seamount.

The two *Yoritomo* crew members looked back at their unwanted guests. They were animated in their reactions and busy pushing buttons on the control panel.

The electronic gears of a small tube door were heard opening at *Yoritomo's* bow. Calder recognized the sound that preceded the laser cutting torch.

They watched the hydraulic arm extend from the tube and lock in place. And with the aid of gimbaled joints on the welding arm, it twisted in a one-eighty turn on its jointed axis and pointed aft.

Careful not to hit their own sub, a bright red-hot laser shot out at intermittent bursts over the top of the starboard wing and slowly approached Parker's *Shelty*.

"Increase to thirty knots on one, bank seven-five degrees to port on two, and descend to a hundred feet altitude on three," yelled Parker.

"Understood."

"Go one!"

The two *Shelties* boosted their speed to thirty.

"Go two!"

They banked heavily to the left, and G-forces caused the gimbaled laser to whip back toward the *Yoritomo's* bow. The laser cut a swath into its own canopy, nearly slicing through the viewports

before it came to rest up front.

“Go three!”

The *Shelties* dropped to one hundred feet above the floor, their cycloidal jets easily carrying the large submersible down while maintaining their own equilibrium. There was no latitude for watching the expressions of the panicked crew as the *Yoritomo* was pulled toward the ocean bottom at high speed.

“Level with terrain . . .

“Now!” said Parker.

The subs ran parallel with the terrain, as the seamount came into view—and the laser cut its way through the water once more.

“Increase throttle to thirty-five knots . . .

“Now!”

“Uh, mon capitaine, there’s a slight impediment to our course at twelve o’clock? We’re about to become fish bait. Over.”

“Roger that. Trust me on this one.”

The *Shelties* had placed themselves in certain peril as they sped toward the basaltic volcano. The underwater mountain rose over three thousand feet above them, as the sea floor closed in below.

“How’s Situation Awareness, partner?”

“SA’s hot and on target. Ready when you are, but hurry,” Calder said as the *Yoritomo*’s laser approached his robotic arm.

This had to be the one moment where both called upon their ability to optimize Situation Awareness . . . that intangible force that separated them from the ordinary, helped them analyze and assess the encounter—exactly as it should be—then react instantly and with precision to multiple tasks.

“This is it, partner. If it doesn’t work . . . see you in our next life.”

“Shit,” was all Calder could say.

“Counting down from three to one, cut all motors, jerk back on their thrusters while rolling zero-five to starboard, then jettison prehensiles. One move. Understood?”

In the bright light through his sideport, Parker saw a large

PLEASE NOTE:

The following selected chapters from OMAR continue at page 549.

injury. He may not be available. Are you aware of action over *A'isha's* fantail?"

"We're monitoring. The captain has just warned them not to abandon ship. He's told them of our boarding party. Over."

"They may be going in search of the *Yoritomo's* remains," said Parker. He pulled off his ski cap and lifted his sweatshirt over his head. "They won't find anything."

Holt echoed Parker's remarks over the channel.

"They aren't going anywhere," said the voice over the radio. "I assure you."

Suddenly, a flash of light and a trail of smoke left the port-side forward end of *Standley's* aft deckhouse. The air resonated with a powerful whoosh, resembling the sound of a large bottle rocket, as a single Harpoon RGM-84-Delta missile hurled toward the *A'isha* from the SSM Mark 141 launcher.

Parker grabbed Holt's glasses from him, and Holt borrowed a pair from the surface controller. They watched the solid-fuel rocket booster propel the anti-ship missile from its launcher.

At flying speed it jettisoned the booster, and its Teledyne turbojet took over, powering the 488-pound payload across the stern of the *A'isha*. Radar coordinates sent it to within fifty yards off *A'isha's* fantail. And with a resounding explosive force, tons of water were sent one hundred feet into the air, then rained down over the rebel ship and crew.

"Sonofabitch," said Holt.

"Nice shot," said Parker.

"We have more of those suckers if we need them," said the communications specialist from the *Standley*. "Out."

The *Standley's* commander picked up the handset to communicate with the *A'isha*. His rugged face showed more years than he wished to admit. But shocking white hair complimented his blue-gray

eyes, weathered tan, and solid frame, and gave him an air of distinction. He spoke clearly and succinctly into the phone.

"*A'isha*, this is Captain James Robertson of the United States Navy aboard the *U.S.S. Standley*. We are here to enforce United Nations mandate Resolution Number I-M-O-seven, one, zero, two, recommended by the International Maritime Organization and approved by the UN Security Council, effective immediately and retroactive as of seven days ago. I wish to speak with your captain."

There was a long silence.

"*A'isha*, do you read? This is Captain Robertson commanding the *U.S.S. Standley*. You are hereby ordered to stand down on your command, heave-to, and plan for a boarding party from the *Standley* within the next thirty minutes. Do you read, *A'isha*? Over."

The captain turned over the microphone to translators who gave the identical message in Arabic and Japanese. There would be no question of a misunderstanding or false accusations that might lead to an international incident.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Corcoran as he continued to monitor the *A'isha* from mounted, nitrogen-filled binoculars, "there's more scrambling on the aft deck of the *A'isha*. And sir . . . they're pulling canvas on several decks."

He refocused the glasses. "Sir, they're uncovering ordnance."

"On a research vessel," the captain said, not at all surprised. "Fancy that, son. Can you ID?"

"Checking, sir." Lieutenant Corcoran's glasses traversed the length of the ship, pausing occasionally where various crew members stirred.

"Sir, it appears they have old Soviet Strela portable missile launchers at the bow and stern."

The captain looked at his weapons specialist for confirmation. "Strelas."

"Nickname for Soviet SAM's," confirmed the WS, glancing through his own binoculars. "We call 'em Gremlins."

"Of course, a three-stager."

"Infrared heat-seeking guidance, sir, with a four mile range

and an altitude of over three. Designed for surface to air.

Then he added, "Could be rigged to hit a ship."

"They're breaking open crates, amidships," said the lieutenant, "and issuing guns like candy."

"Appear to be Russian Tokarev pistols," said the WS. "Or Chinese knockoffs. Nine millimeters. And there's larger . . . looks like machine guns. Can't make out the model. They're unfolding collapsible butts."

The WS peered through the powerful binoculars. "Might be Czech Skorpion submachine guns, but something's different."

"Different?" the captain glanced at the WS.

"Hard to tell from here, sir." He pulled out a bulletin from a folder. "Could be this new hardened-plastic gun they've produced. We got a warning on them. Tests said they had a cyclic rate of over four thousand rounds per minute."

"Shit," Captain Robertson whispered under his breath. "That can do some damage."

"Damn straight, sir."

Helmsman, ahead one-third."

"Ahead one-third sir."

"And plot me a DR upside their ass."

"Plotting upside, sir."

"Have we a fresh x-ray of that hold full of canisters?" Robertson looked to the CS.

"Sir, can't pull it off our direct-feed satellite with ionics disturbing everything. But what images I've got imply they're still sitting quiet."

"Keep me informed of any changes." He turned to his Lieutenant. "Full alert, son."

"Full alert, sir."

The Navy ship was enroute toward the *A'isha*. Its launch had picked

up Dr. Parker and his partner, once determined Calder was fit to leave sickbay. He would have it no other way.

With permission from United Nations to board any illegal salvage ship, the *U.S.S. Standley* prepared to take action to stop the terrorists. Orders were to secure the deadly canisters; recover the *Great Omar* and any other valuables taken from the *Titanic*; capture and hold the terrorist Ragem and accomplices; and arrest Henri Dupont. The *A'isha* would not be sent to a watery grave unless and until the primary objectives were accomplished, or until it was determined to be in the best interest of world peace to dispatch the *A'isha* and its crew all at once.

"Welcome to the bridge, Dr. Parker. Mr. Calder."

Captain Robertson introduced himself. The three men exchanged greetings as the admiral guided them to the window.

"We're within three minutes of boarding. That is, if there're no incidents beforehand. As you know, we'll take care of those canisters, but we'd prefer you to aid in identifying Dupont and the salvaged items. Particularly that book that seems to have everyone in an uproar."

"Happy to assist Captain," said Parker.

"We'll identify Ragem if he's on board. We have photos."

"Captain, we have a serious problem when we recover the *Omar*."

"What's that?"

"A special freeze-drying lab and an electrolytic bath. We've got to get the *Omar* back to our research ship, freeze-dry the pages to remove the water, then immerse the leather in solution, and pass a controlled low-level electric current through it."

"What's it do?"

"Breaks down compounds into basic elements and leaches salt and other contaminants from the book."

"Won't that damage paper and ink?"

"Actually, between freeze-drying, electrolysis, and a couple of other tricks, the *Omar* can be restored to near original state if we

get to it quickly. We've already got the recovered jewels in a bath."

Robertson considered the request. "We'll assign our Seasprite helicopter to rush it back to your ship Dr. Parker. But what if you don't recover it quickly enough?"

"Any artifact, particularly paper exposed to air for a protracted period, will crumble to dust. Salts permeated over decades at six thousand pounds per square inch pressure are extremely corrosive when combined with oxygen and hydrogen in the air. Together they form hydrochloric acid, sulfides, oxychlorides and other contaminants. They'll destroy it in no time at all."

"You think that Dupont fella was smart enough to bathe it?"

"If anyone knows better, it's him," Calder confirmed. "We're as concerned about pulling it out, though, as we are about the interval between solutions."

"It'd be ironic, after all the years the book survived underwater, if it disintegrated before our eyes, wouldn't it . . ."

"It would be a tragedy," Parker said.

"Just understand our new priorities," said Robertson, "as a result of that volatile contraband the *A'isha's* transporting. Frankly, your book and the new treaty has given us an excuse to board their ship. But we'll be doing everything in our power to secure and stabilize the Pu239 and other agents, first. Then we'll find your artifact."

"Certainly," said Parker. "Wouldn't want it any other way."

A puff of smoke emanated from the *A'isha*, and a delayed report—broadcast across the ocean—signaled a shoulder-fired infrared-homing SAM had just been fired. Its pop-out control canards and tail fins engaged as its momentum picked up, and the conical, multifaceted infrared seeker window locked in on the *U.S.S. Standley*.

The lieutenant interrupted, "Sir, a Strela just launched off *A'isha's* starboard bow."

"Sound general alarm."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Lock in coordinates and knock it down. Then take out their launchers . . . try not to sink her," the captain ordered with a calm demeanor, like flicking an annoying fly off his shoulder.

"Done, sir." The lieutenant turned and repeated the orders. The ship instantly came alive as the loud, intermittent BINGing alert echoed across decks and through corridors.

"A second Strela fired . . ." radar reported.

"You know what to do." The lieutenant responded accordingly.

The captain glanced out over the starboard bow, "Helm, steady course three-two-four."

"Steady course three-two-four, sir."

Within seconds, a Terrier RIM-2 surface-to-air missile launched from the forward deck, ahead of the *Standley's* bridge. It seemed to hang in midair for several moments, as it tracked the Soviet-made rocket, locked on and shot toward its assigned goal. An initial trail of smoke marked its flight. A second Terrier whooshed out from the hull.

The wait seemed interminable. Then the short-range missiles picked off their targets. Two fireballs lit up the afternoon sky, in succession, and reflected off the daytime waters midway between the ships. Everyone on the bridge breathed easier.

Robertson glanced at Parker and winked with self-assurance. "They're a nuisance. But its obvious Ragem is out of his league."

Parker and Calder were relieved.

"Was it just my head wound that made me think I saw the water light up?" said Calder. "Or did you see it too?"

Parker and the Captain looked at each other, then at Calder.

"The water lit up?" said the admiral.

"Like it was on fire . . . but it extinguished itself immediately. At least, that's what I thought I saw."

Parker glanced at the *Standley's* commander. "I watched the midair fireballs. Andy must've seen residual effects from methane that floated up from below."

Parker looked toward the water. "I was afraid of that."

"What?" said the captain.

"If we don't pull out of here within the hour, we could all be sitting on the bottom." Parker turned to the admiral. "Coordinate SAT-NAV with GPS, and clear all shipping lanes and air space from the region. We have a serious emergency developing."

"They'll want more explanation than that."

"It was a pocket of gas that lit up over the water."

"And if that's what I saw," said Calder, "it's a prelude to more pure gas on its way up."

"If the release gets worse, anyone coming into this area could be sucked into a floating time bomb of hydrocarbonic gases." Parker looked the captain straight in the eyes. "Heavy gas escaping and rising into the atmosphere can sink any ship or plane, especially if we get a total blowout below."

"It's extremely unstable down there," Calder interjected.

"Vessels can't float in this gas . . . large or small. And white-hot exhaust from jet engine planes, or even a small plane's electrical instrumentation can ignite the air like napalm."

"Holy shit," the captain whispered under his breath. "Are we talking Bermuda Triangle, here?"

"Exactly the same effect. It's happened in the North Sea, too. Entire oil platforms and their crews have disappeared with no trace, after a blowout. If a massive gas pocket opens up, turbulence from giant globules of methane can swamp this ship."

Robertson and his crew looked skeptically at Parker.

"I don't care how big this sucker is," Parker continued. "Compare it to pouring millions of gallons of chemical surfactant into the ocean. The gas becomes a dispersive, breaks down the molecular structure of the water, and changes it to a flat surface. In a highly gasified sea, any one of our ships could lose gravity and drop to the bottom like dead weight."

"In all my years I've never experienced this."

"It's a relatively new theory, but one that's been tested and documented on the open sea. Survivors are the exception. Have

the crew monitor *Standley's* water line while you're boarding the *A'isha*. If you notice any loss of buoyancy, get the hell out of here. May I call the *Neptune*?"

"Certainly."

Parker ordered Holt to get *Neptune's Knot* out of the immediate vicinity as a precaution. Following that, Robertson ordered all other approaching air and sea traffic to avoid the area.

"Sir, take a look at this," an officer handed binoculars to the admiral.

"What is it?"

"The *A'isha's* hull, sir. She's listing slightly to port. And the last time I looked, her name was sitting higher in the water."

Robertson peered through the glasses. "Hummm," was all he said and handed them back.

"What d'ya think, sir?"

The captain glanced at Parker, who gave a knowing look. "Let me know if it drastically changes."

A series of flashes and reports emanated from outboard of the *Standley's* after deckhouse, as the 20mm Phalanx CIWS Mk 15 multi-barrel guns fired at the *A'isha*. All eyes turned to watch the results.

Within seconds, multiple explosions followed on the terrorist's ship. Through binoculars, the captain and his crew confirmed the portable missile launchers had been taken out. Surviving crew members left their posts and scrambled for safety. Some attempted to extinguish fires.

"Right in the kielbasa," Robertson said as he handed the glasses to Parker.

"You can inflict a little damage when you need to," whistled Calder.

"And with precision," Parker added, as he scanned the approaching target, now burning furiously in several locations on deck. "Check binoculars, fellas, and look at this."

The others aimed their glasses at the *A'isha*.

"The fires are drawing finger-like gas pockets from the water. See the wisps of white flames shooting up from different spots in the water? They're like invisible, ghostly fires you see when an Indy car crashes and burns."

"I'll be damned," whispered Robertson.

"Sir, ETA of two minutes," reported the navigator.

"Any radio contact with the captain yet?"

"Sir, I think we just got the equivalent of 'You fucking son-of-a-bitch' in Arabic."

Robertson looked at a translator. She nodded in agreement.

"Anything else?"

"No sir. They won't return our request to board."

"Give me the phone. We'll give them one more chance with a loud-hailer. Up close and to the point." The CO handed a phone receiver to Robertson and switched to the outside PA system. The captain looked at Parker.

"They can't say we didn't do everything in our power to communicate as peacefully as they'd allow us." He punched the Talk button.

"This is Captain Robertson requesting *A'isha* heave-to and stand by for peaceful boarding. This is your last chance to stand down before we come aboard."

There was no answer. The captain's message was repeated, followed by translations. The loud-hailer echoed between the two ships. Then a burst of gunfire erupted from the *A'isha* and glanced off the *Standley's* hull.

"Bring her alongside our afterdeck," ordered the captain, "so we can reach the *A'isha* from a similar level."

"Done sir."

"Keep both Phalanx guns aimed in her direction, and be on guard for sniping. They're not happy campers now."

"Done and done, sir."

"Every available man armed to the teeth as the boarding party crosses over. All crew and passengers on the *A'isha* are considered armed and dangerous. Understood Lieutenant?"

“Understood sir.”

“Boarding party ready?”

“Ready Captain.”

“Fenders over?”

“Lowering now, sir.”

“Better move the Seasprite into the garage, out of harms way . . . in case they’ve hidden more Strelas.”

“Very well, Captain.” The lieutenant called down to get the helicopter moved into its 01 deck hanger and to delegate other duties.

Robertson pulled a key from his pocket and held it up for Parker and Calder. “Here’s your insurance.”

They looked inquisitively at Robertson. He moved to a locker, inserted the key in a padlock and pulled the hasp. Inside was a cache of military-issue weapons. He pulled out three 92F Berettas, handed Parker and Calder a gun, and kept one for himself. He gave them three clips.

“Either of you fire a gun?” Robertson asked as he closed and locked the cabinet.

“Quite a bit lately,” said Parker. “Not by choice.”

“These are fifteen-rounders.” He looked to Calder.

“In the service,” said Calder. “Somewhere between marksman and sharpshooter.”

“Good. But don’t get too cocky. They’re for protection only. Not authorized for use unless directly threatened or under attack. Understand?”

Parker and Calder gave a “wouldn’t want it any other way” look, and nodded.

“All right. We won’t destroy the ship unless they force our hand. Since you’re here for identification purposes, don’t board the *A’isha* until our men take and secure the ship. Understood?”

“Clear, Captain,” Parker agreed.

“Our sailors will board from ship to ship, unless we’re under too much fire. Hopefully we’ve taken out their heavy weapon capabilities. Otherwise, we’ll scale their side from a launch. Then

our teams will impound the canisters, capture Ragem, and locate the book.”

“What about Dupont?” asked Parker. “Where does he stand in the line of fire?”

“He’s now an accomplice. He’ll be arrested and detained for interrogation. Considering he’s traveled at will in and out of our country, he’ll be treated as a spy. His passport will be confiscated and he’ll have no diplomatic immunity.”

“So he’s in deep shit,” responded Calder.

“That’s an understatement.”

The navigator turned to the captain. “Sir, coming up on the *A’isha*. She’s sitting lower in the water now.”

“Prepare to come alongside.”

“Very well, sir.”

“And, Lieutenant, aim hoses at those fires when we get close enough. Let’s cool that hull down.”

“Done, sir.”

“Captain,” said Parker, “Remember the hydrates and the need to get in and out as quickly as possible.”

“I read you.”

On the afterdeck, four men suited up in Hazmat gear. Sailors helped them step into and seal the awkward clothing around them, checking for tears or leaks in the material and adjusting their breathing apparatus. They looked more like astronauts prepared for a spacewalk, as they readied to cross over and enter the dangerous cargo hold.

Suddenly gunfire erupted from the *A’isha*, and sailors scrambled on all decks. Fire was returned as a battle erupted from the fantail and amidships, on board the terrorist ship, and from responding sailors shooting their Ingram M10’s in quick bursts from the *Standley*.

Robertson surveyed the action with his binoculars. Parker and Calder watched from behind as the captain patiently assessed risks

to ship and crew.

"We're cleaning up down there," the captain confirmed. "Should board any minute."

The firing became sporadic, then died out. Occasionally, a shot from a hidden sniper rang out over the ship's deck.

"Their bridge appears vacant. Anyone left has probably ducked below. Lieutenant, you'd better get Dr. Parker and Mr. Calder down to check it out."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Corcoran immediately grabbed his Ingram M10, turned, and crossed over the bridge's threshold into the late afternoon sun. "This way, gentlemen."

The two scientists followed.

"Careful, fellas," warned Robertson as he closed the door behind them. "They may've boobytrapped the ship, so watch your step. Lieutenant, keep me apprised of what you find... particularly when you locate the canisters. I don't want to bring them on board. But we may have no choice."

"Yes, sir."

By the time the three men reached the outboard of the afterdeck house, several hawsers had been tossed and fastened to the *A'isha*, and armed sailors arranged a makeshift gangway that rose and fell with the sea.

The sailors had to at once cross the gangway, judge the jump-off distance to the *A'isha*, and protect themselves from sniper fire. Smaller swells than usual made the difficult crossing a little easier, as the research ship and the cruiser heaved and pitched against the grain in opposite directions.

Sailors in the boarding party assisted the Hazmat handlers across, as they maneuvered the gangway in their modern coats of armor. Armed guards shielded them from bullets that could tear the suits and render them useless in a hostile radioactive or biological environment.

Shots reverberated through various levels of the *A'isha* as sailors moved from stern to bow in one sweeping motion.

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