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20,000 Kilos Under the Sea

Written by

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* In 2019, Colombia's navy intercepted thirty-three cartel-funded submersible vessels known as "narco subs," an average of almost three a month.
* A Miami taskforce, “Operation Odessa,” identified men planning to buy a Soviet submarine for the Cali cartel. The men, which included a Ukrainian mobster, met with officers at a Russian naval base to prove to the cartel the deal was possible. One of the suspects ran off with $10 million before any deal could be finalized.
* If the sale had been successful, over eighty percent of our oceans are “unmapped, unobserved and unexplored,” according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Part One

TERRA FIRMA

Chapter One - The Shark, a Minnow and a Hawk

Despite nightfall, the predator could easily watch its prey from beneath the surface.

It was even darker twenty meters below, yet it could see its victim as clear as spying a duck paddling on a lake. But this was no duck, and the immense Gulf was no lake.

Like a graceful beast, the predator halted, silent. As with any hunt, it was imperative to preserve the element of surprise.

The predator focused on its feeble prey. As with any hunter-hunted relationship, it wasn’t personal. And only a complete slaughter would be acceptable. No survivable wounds, where it might escape, crying back to its guardians. The target would be completely devoured, with its innards used to nourish, consumed from the bottom of the sea.

The hunter began to ascend, careful to not have its dorsal fin or tail breach the surface –yet. And there it waited, patient.

Unknown to the predator, another set of eyes watched from the skies. The hawk’s view filled an infrared monitor with static, struggling to produce a surveillance image.

“Lookout for a vessel,” a garbled voice called out. “It departed Mariel, north-northeast. Zero-one hundred hours. Over.”

The static cleared to depict an infrared aerial view of the coast. A field of black –then a blip of color. It was a small boat.

“Copy, JIATF Key West,” a voice responded. “Confirmed target: a single vessel, triple engines and low profile. Over.”

“Hold –is that something following its tail?” the first voice asked. “What is that?”

Chapter Two - *El Monstruo*

The silhouette of a thirty-three-foot boat appeared on the horizon. A crescent moon projected a silver thread on the vista, with just the tranquil lapping of waves. Until the serenity was pierced by a boat’s engines, and then the sound of a crying infant.

“Silence that child or it goes below!” the smuggler barked in Spanish to the scrawny eighteen-year-old mother.

The eyes of a dozen Cuban migrants turned to the girl. They were clustered on the boat’s deck in a virtual heap. They only wore rags, gaunt and terrified.

The hands of the young mother, *Mariela,* trembled as she struggled to comfort her bawling three-month-old son. The child inhaled and howled, inconsolable.

The swarthy smuggler stood at the console of the Renegade power boat. He was barefoot and fat and wore a squid-stained *Cristal* beer t-shirt. Beside him hunched the captain, who’d made the run a thousand times. The leathery man had pointed shoulders and knees that quivered with energy.

“Our cargo below is worth more than a kid,” the captain shouted in Spanish. “The baby goes overboard if Rao is not here soon!”

Mariela gasped. She cowered over her child, creating a shield. The refugees around her huddled closer. The smuggler laughed. The captain flicked a cigarette at them.

All heads snapped towards the drone of a vessel. The captain rummaged through his cluttered console to find binoculars. He aimed them to their rear.

“It is a Scarab…” He adjusted his lenses. “Thirty feet long...” He turned to the smuggler, “It is Rao. Finally!”

Everyone onboard squinted to watch. Two hundred yards away, the approaching boat’s lights twinkled through the gloom.

The captain lifted his radio. “Rao! Hurry or we’ll all be dead!”

The Scarab accelerated towards them.

Mariela blinked at the comment, “*…all be dead..?”* What if their lights are seen by authorities? Was there a chance they could be saved? Mariela involuntarily smiled at the fantasy racing through her mind. *Saved…* *Brought to America.* *Proper care for Ernesto…* She then turned to the men at the controls. Fat and skinny and repulsive. They would certainly rather flee, endangering all their lives to save their own.

Mariela looked to her right and left. Jumping overboard with a child would be futile. They were miles from any shore. Her son would certainly drown. Perhaps they had a slightly better chance for survival remaining on the boat. Mariela held her son closer to her throbbing heart.

She glanced at the ten other passengers. They’d been picked up at a port in *Mariel,* forty kilometers west of Havana. Cobbled together by a local gang after they’d each paid their *tarifa de boleto,* passage fees. Mariela knew none of them. They remained in tight cliques, only murmuring to each other. No one spoke to her, and everyone glowered when her son cried. Mariela inhaled, suppressing another surge of tears.

Everyone watched the Scarab slowly accelerate towards them. The deep growl of its engines became more prominent. The migrants looked at each other, unsure what this meant. The smugglers had said something about a *delivery*.

Within the lull of waiting, the refugees traded silent glances. They’d been scolded to not open their mouths. All eyes conveyed the same emotions: fear, despair, curiosity. The three-foot seas sloshed their boat, and the incessant diesel fumes were nauseating.

After a pause, everyone jolted at a deafening crash. It was the Scarab, a hundred yards away. The air filled with an abrupt crunching of steel.

In a flash of confusion, they saw the Scarab’s lights launch as if striking rocks. Before anyone could grasp what they were witnessing, the Scarab exploded into a fireball.

“*Dios Mio!”* the smuggler shouted. “Was it a missile?” He looked up.

The captain tensed, rigid. He then revved the boat’s triple Yamahas.

“*Mira! Allí!”* Elderly migrants pointed behind the boat. *Look! There!* They motioned to a sudden wake following in their trail. Fifty yards away, a wedge-shaped spew of water was approaching fast in the darkness. Froth sprayed off its edges as if it were an immense fin.

The smuggler looked back at whatever they were screaming about. The fin appeared over four meters tall. As the spray grew closer, they could see two glowing orbs, one on each side of the wake.

“*Son esos ojos?”* A woman shouted, horrified. *Are those eyes?*

The captain pushed the throttle forward, summoning every ounce of speed.

“*Monstruo marino!”* another woman screamed, creating a frenzy.

The men and women pointed. The wake was advancing at a greater speed.

The captain glanced at his sonar. A shadow was following them; it was cigar-shaped and advancing like a torpedo.

“That is no whale!” the smuggler shouted. He crouched on the pounding deck.

The refugees huddled in a tighter mass, crying in confusion. An old woman clutched her rosary beads.

The Renegade raced across the surface. But the impending wake was faster, a hundred feet behind them. Then fifty. Then twenty.

The boat crunched from the rear like a giant accordion. The hull splintered and the engines sparked. When the smuggler and captain looked back, it was like stepping into a buzz saw, instantly slaughtering them into a pinwheel of crimson.

The refugees’ faces stung with flying debris. The bow launched up, plunging them into the sea. The vessel shattered down its center, flinging humans to both sides like ragdolls.

In the ink-black chop, the migrants grasped debris. They cried and splashed, shouting to locate loved ones in the darkness. Whatever had raced *through* them was gone, leaving a roiling churn in its wake.

Mariela’s wet clothes weighed her down. With salt burning her eyes, she struggled to hold her son above the waves.

Bobbing heads coughed and cried, unsure what to do. Only mere seconds had passed. Their eyes adjusted to the flicker of light from burning pieces of the hull floating around them. Flames licked over the waves from splattered fuel. Several men helped the older women. One lady cried that she couldn’t swim. Desperate hands clutched each other through a choir of prayers.

“*Esta regresando!”* a woman screamed. *It’s coming back!* She pointed into the blackness.

With her son bawling above her shoulders, Mariela squinted to see the *two eyes* in the darkness –the glowing orbs. Fifty yards away, the creature was turning back.

The men and women shouted in despair. There was nowhere to swim or hide.

The enormous beast stopped turning. It appeared to face them, head-on like a bull. It then lunged forward, waves trailing off its giant dorsal fin.

Mariela embraced her son and closed her eyes. Tempted to peek, she cracked an eye to see the beast racing closer. *Those eyes…* She struggled to pray within the cacophony of screams.

Simultaneous gasps –then silence.

Mariela opened her eyes. The creature had submerged. It was gone.

A blinding light irradiated from the skies as if a switch had been turned on. All heads looks up, squinting at the thunderous gust.

Chapter Three – Intercepted

The hawk swooped down from the heavens. A Coast Guard MH-60 Jayhawk.

The survivors narrowed their eyes at the turbulent drone from the helicopter. Its spotlights revealed the men and women clutching debris among flaming wreckage.

“Heat signatures from… nine survivors,” the pilot’s voice announced to the team. “Holding position for search-rescue.”

From seemingly nowhere, blue and red strobes ignited the scene. A forty-three foot interceptor powerboat came to a splashing halt beside the survivors. Everyone turned to the vessel, crying in panicked confusion.

The Jayhawk had been equipped with a SeaFLIR Multi-Spectral Surveillance System, a maritime imaging system designed to track smugglers, terrorists, or any other threat, night or day, in the roughest seas. Its thermal imaging assisted with long-range vessel detection for multiple maritime mission scenarios.

However –despite its advanced technology– it hadn’t been able to see everything. Even with the pattern of recent occurrences, the exploding vessels hadn’t been anticipated. And refugees weren’t supposed to be there.

The intel had been accurate about the boats. But nothing about their imminent destruction. Was it some sort of new weapon? A turf war among cartels? If so, where had the weapons been deployed? The Jayhawk’s radars hadn’t seen any unauthorized air traffic within fifty miles.

“You heard the man,” Agent Kurtz’s voice crackled from the interceptor. “Nine survivors –get movin’!”

Standing on the bow of the DEA interceptor, Agent Kurtz aimed a Maglite to see the shattered boat, with flames unfurling from a fuel slick.

“Grab these folks before the tanks ignite!” Kurtz shouted. He was mid-fifties with a silver buzz cut. “Ruiz, throw ropes!”

Agent Ruiz, his boyish junior partner, tossed several ropes with life rings attached. A female agent threw life jackets towards the thrashing survivors. A fourth agent, also in black fatigues, automatically aimed his nine-millimeter handgun. When he realized the wretched condition of the men and women, he holstered his firearm.

A trail of flames began to spread on the waves like tentacles. The interceptor’s flashing lights added a beat to the scene –a countdown that time was running out.

Like a well-rehearsed exercise, the agents heaved ropes to grapple the refugees and pull them aboard. The younger helped with the elderly.

“There’s a baby!” Kurtz shouted and pointed, “That young lady there!”

The female agent leaned broadly over the side and stretched her arm. She finally touched the hand of the young mother. Mariela offered her infant to the agent and both were pulled aboard.

“That’s it! *No mas!”* Ruiz shouted to the agent at the controls. “Let’s go!”

Flames on the water climbed higher as shards of wood and Styrofoam fueled the blaze. Thick smoke drifted towards the interceptor. The weary refugees coughed, turning away from the radiant heat.

“Randy: full speed!” Kurtz roared.

The DEA interceptor had been a confiscated drug powerboat, enhanced with triple MerCruiser engines. It spun and launched forward like a rocket. In their wake, the smugglers’ gas tanks exploded with scorching light.

The refugees cringed at the blasts. Watching the ironic beauty of the fire reflecting on the Gulf, they calmed, seated together in the stern. It was an unexpected peace from knowing they’d been saved. They comforted each other, tears replaced with smiles of gratitude.

“Pass these out,” Kurtz opened a large ice chest filled with bottled water. “As much as they can drink.” Agent Ruiz and the others handed them out to the men and women. Plastic bottles crackled and they gulped the water as the vessel raced north at fifty knots.

Kurtz then distributed Mylar blankets. “Make *everyone* use these whether they want to or not.” Though the night was seventy-eight degrees, it was protocol for hypothermic exposures. Considering the condition of the survivors –some of them elderly– they were also soaking wet. The high winds could suck any remaining heat from their bodies.

Ruiz helped the group, explaining everything in Spanish. The survivors obliged, covering themselves in the foil blankets. He explained where they were going, and asked if anyone was injured. A couple cried to declare three of their companions had been killed.

Agent Kurtz rubbed the stubble on his square jaw to assess the ragged group. He squatted on the deck and smiled at Mariela who was cradling her son.

Kurtz had to shout over the engines. “What the hell happened out there? To your boat?”

The men and women blinked, unsure what he was asking.

Ruiz leaned towards the group to interpret, “*Que le paso a tu bote*?”

The men and women uneasily looked at each other, anxiety returning to their eyes. Several hoarse voices exclaimed, “*El monstruo*!”

Two elderly woman added, “*Monstruo de Cojimar!*”

Agent Kurtz frowned at Ruiz, puzzled. “What are they saying?”

Ruiz turned to him. He shifted his jaw to consider his words. “They’re saying it was a…” He paused, “A sea monster.”

Chapter Four - The Winter White House

KEY WEST

“…Which is precisely why we’re putting together this little expedition,” Agent Kurtz announced to the five others. He spread his fingers on one hand and raised his voice, “This was the *fifth* incident in six weeks. What makes this one different? Innocents were killed. It’s our job to do something about that.”

With Agent Ruiz seated at his side, the four others nodded with pensive frowns. They sat around an elaborately-carved antique table with a brass sign on the wall that declared, “Joint Interagency Task Force.”

Kurtz huffed like a frustrated parent. “If we learned anything last night, it’s that we can’t do it by ourselves. Which is why I’ve reached out to civilian experts.” He squinted out the window’s plantation blinds. “If she can find us in our little paradise.”

The quaint Key West neighborhood was a unique mix of Victorian and Bahamian-style homes, with gingerbread lattices and wrap-around porches. The designs, dating back to the 1800s, had been inspired by the settlers’ diverse ports of origin: New England, New Orleans, the Bahamas, and splashed with the pastel pinks and yellows of the Caribbean.

Almost hidden within the Easter egg-colored wonderland was a sign that announced, “Key West Naval Station – Truman Annex.” The former Fort Zachary Taylor army base, built in 1845, was converted into the Fort Zachary Taylor Annex in 1947, and then to the Key West Naval Station. Nuclear submarines had been docked at the base during the Cold War, then decommissioned in the 1970s as the vessels grew too large. A small track of land continued to house military and law enforcement agencies. The excess land was sold to developers to construct homes, with the rule they must conform to the original island architecture.

The Naval station was sometimes called the Truman Annex because President Harry S. Truman considered it his Winter White House in 1946, where he spent 175 days of his presidency. During his island getaways, decisions were considered, bills enacted and State of the Union addresses prepared.

Agent Kurtz loved to joke that America could’ve been a more peaceful and progressive nation if all its presidents were forced to spend time ruling from the rejuvenating island.

     Beyond the annex gate, a curving road lead past the fort’s beach to the federal building that housed the Joint Interagency Task Force. The JIATF’s mission was to provide an operation for the detection and deterrence of drug smuggling operations. It was an alliance of military and law enforcement, including DEA, Coast Guard and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, working under the umbrella of Homeland Security to prohibit the flow of illicit drugs into the United States.

     The agencies required each other to be successful. Aircraft, vessels and weapons were provided by the Navy, Coast Guard and the DEA. Equally important were its analytics and human assets.

     To assist the pursuit, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency assigned two full-time members to the JIATF: Resident Agent in Charge Curtis Kurtz, originally from Key West, and his younger partner Agent Ernesto Ruiz, a transplant from Chicago.

The conference room’s large mahogany table had once served military brass and at least one president, discussing world-altering decisions. For the current crisis, the six men sat behind laptops with a sixty-inch monitor on one wall. The only throwback to the past was cigar smoke, gently swirling under a paddle fan. Smoking had been prohibited in all federal buildings since 1997, but things seemed to progress differently on an island that was only ninety miles from Havana.

Agent Kurtz sat at the head of the table with Ruiz at his side serving as their A.V. expert and note taker. On one side of the table was a tanned, middle-aged agent from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in black khakis. Opposite him sat two mid-thirties Coast Guardsmen who appeared pleasant but solemn in their navy-blue uniforms. At the far end of the table sat a large man who appeared bored. He wore a black t-shirt that strained to cover his immense crossed arms. He had a crew cut and chiseled features that fit his humorless expression.

The youthful Ruiz addressed the men, “We tracked the vessels last night from the port in *Mariel*, just west of Havana.” He spoke with a slight Spanish accent, accentuating the words. He looked up at the monitor as he projected satellite imagery from his system. “Both boats belonged to known narcotic smugglers with ties to the Bogotá cartel.”

“No surviving suspects to interrogate,” Kurtz chimed in as if rehearsed. “And not enough of the boats left to track their origin.”

Ruiz projected an image of the migrants huddled on the bow of the interceptor. “Last night’s load included Cuban nationals. We didn’t know the smugglers were going to add human cargo. They’re are our only surviving witnesses.”

“*Witnesses..?”* The sunbaked ICE officer scoffed. “If you trust third-world laborers who believe in *sea monsters*.” He stressed the term, hoping the others would chuckle along.

“Show some respect, Randy.” Kurtz glowered. “Those poor souls paid five years’ salary to risk their lives to come here to live in your neighborhood.” He raised his brows, poignant. “Not all of them survived.”

Randy looked down at his calloused hands, silenced.

Agent Ruiz spoke with an optimistic tone to get back on course, “I’m not sure about any sea monsters. But what if it was some sort of rare…whale?”

Groans from around the table, from the Coast Guard agents, to the large man with crossed arms.

“You boys have been around.” Kurtz frowned at the cynics, “You remember Grodin, our last analyst. He was traveling thirty knots in a Sea Ray when he hit a manatee last year. It flipped his boat, a total loss. Grodin nearly met his maker.”

The senior Guardsman, Newstreet, gave a warped grin, “You think the smugglers hit manatees last night –twice?”

“No!” Kurtz barked. “Just illustrating we must discount all possibilities.”   
 “2019, Sea of Japan,” Ruiz interjected, reading from his laptop, “Eighty people were seriously injured when a ferry hit a marine animal. Presumed to be a whale.”

Newstreet dipped his head as in *really?* “So we’re running with the whale theory?”

“Just have a goddamn open mind!” Kurtz swooshed his hands in the air. He pointed to each man, “You might know everything about your *own* field. But not everything about everything–”

The rattle of the doorknob paused the debate. Everyone turned to see Lizette, a pleasant Latina analyst peek in.

“Pardon me, agents,” Lizette smiled at Kurtz. “Dr. Arrison has arrived. And she’s brought an assistant.”

“There’s two of them?” Kurtz seemed surprised. He shrugged, “Then round-up another chair and let ‘em in.” He turned to the men. “My esteemed guest should be a breath of fresh air from you dinosaurs. Help us sort through some new possibilities.”

The Coast Guardsmen rolled their eyes. The large aloof man shook his head and lit a fresh Cohiba.

“Be nice.” Kurtz scolded them. He turned to the ICE agent, “Randy: you’re making the coffee for our visitor.”

Chapter Five – A Proposal for the Professor

Kurtz stood to greet his guest. A mid-forties woman entered, conservatively dressed for the tropics in slacks and a linen blouse. He extended his hand with a wide smile, “Ah, perfect timing as we babble about whales and krakens. Appreciate you coming down.”

The blonde woman gave a faint smile, but her brows didn’t soften. Kurtz would describe her as appealing but serious. She was fit like a swimmer, and had a tan as if she worked outdoors.

“Hello Agent.” She maintained a staid expression. “A pleasure to finally meet.”

Kurtz motioned to the men. “Gentlemen, this is Professor Patrice Arrison. She’s with the FSU Coastal and Marine lab. We’re lucky to get her on short notice.”

The men nodded. The Coast Guard officers glanced at their watches.

Kurtz noticed a young man following Arrison who looked like a student. He was early-twenties, with a stylish haircut and a neat beard. His slim jeans and flannel also seemed out of place in the Keys. Kurtz gave a single nod and the man just smiled, appearing timid.

“Sorry for being late.” Dr. Arrison addressed the men, “Not many planes flying from the panhandle to the southern-most point.” She winced at the room’s cigar smoke with an exaggerated cough.

“I apologize, ma’am,” Kurtz fanned smoke towards the door. “Maybe Key West isn’t as caught-up as we should be.”

Realizing the young man was quietly standing there, Dr. Arrison casually introduced him. “This is Chandler, my T.A.”

“T.A.?” Ruiz looked up. “Tech Analyst?”

“No,” Arrison replied. “Teacher’s Aide.”

Kurtz noticed the young man appeared bothered by her description.

Dr. Arrison warmed slightly, placing a hand on Chandler’s shoulder. “In addition to oceanography, he also studied Latin American mythology. That might assist with some of the… *assertions* I read in your witness statements.”

Kurtz offered them seats. Chandler opened a laptop beside Ruiz. Dr. Arrison sat at his side. ICE Agent Randy wheeled in a coffee cart, placing a carafe on the table.

As everyone settled in, Kurtz looked at Chandler. He felt bad for the kid. He seemed submissive to the professor as if he’d been told not to speak.

“I’m Agent Curtis Kurtz, DEA.” Kurtz smiled at Chandler to outline their roles. “I’m rabbi to this young man, Agent Ruiz. We’re all members of the Joint Interagency Task Force.”

Agent Ruiz pleasantly nodded to Chandler and Dr. Arrison.

Kurtz motioned to the ICE agent with a passé mustache. “Randy here is Customs Enforcement. His job’s to stop anyone trying to enter our borders who might do us harm. Illegals with criminal records, traffickers, terrorists trying to enter through Cuba or Mexico. You get the picture.”

Chandler didn’t blink. He looked at Arrison with eyes that asked *are we in the right room?*

Kurtz nodded to the other side of the table, “These two gentlemen are officers Roberts and Newstreet with our esteemed Coast Guard. These guys been around a long time; really know their stuff. They’re our primary supplier of boats and search-rescue choppers.”

The men gave quick smiles, then looked back down at reports.

Kurtz looked at the quiet, chiseled man at the far end. “That gentleman is Mr. Ned Landa. He’s a former Marine, Force Recon. A contract employee, invited today as an armaments expert.”

Arrison tensed as if hesitant of the man’s inclusion.

“So you’re like a dream team of experts,” Chandler asked in a gentle voice.

Dr. Arrison cringed at his words, seeming embarrassed.

“Absolutely.” Kurtz winked at the kid, “We’re the best there is.”

“Hold a second…” Arrison lifted a finger with a fixed jaw. “An *arms expert..*?” She grimaced towards Landa. “I was told this expedition was for potentially-rare marine life.”

The surly Landa derided, “Ma’am, this taskforce isn’t a Green Peace holiday for fish-huggers. Did Kurtz tell you every destroyed vessel belonged to known smugglers–”

“–However, *Ned*…” Kurtz interrupted in a raised voice. “The reason the fine doctor was invited is because we have no incendiary evidence that any weapons destroyed the boats.”

“That’s true,” Agent Ruiz accessed his system. “In every case, we found no accelerant residue.”

The monitor filled with photos of collected boat wreckage. Two-foot shards of wood, fiberglass and frayed life jackets had been placed on a surface and tagged. Some of the debris appeared charred with fire damage.

Dr. Arrison and Chandler leaned forward to study the images.

“In *every* case, we found no incendiary or chemical evidence,” Ruiz continued. “If the boats had been destroyed by any sort of missile, bomb, grenade or bullet, there’d be signs.”

Newstreet asked, “What about shrapnel, pieces of metal..?”

“What if salt water washed away any chemicals?” Roberts offered.

“No,” Ruiz shook his head. “There’d still be traces. And zero metal debris.”

Landa raised his voice, “Narcos once tested cellulose bombs that don’t leave shrapnel.”

Ruiz glared at Landa. “The only reasonable conclusion is the vessels hit *objects*.”

Kurtz cleared his throat so all could hear. When the men looked at him, he turned to Dr. Arrison. “As you can see, these boys are very passionate about their jobs.” His smile faded when he glared at the men, “Which is *precisely* why there’s a need to investigate both sides.”

Ruiz projected a navigational chart of the eastern Gulf. “The only things confirmed are: six high-speed vessels have been destroyed. No evidence of a bomb or weapon hitting any boat.”

“They didn’t strike rocks or a reef.” Roberts analyzed the screen, “They’d be on the charts. We’re very familiar with that circuit.”

“Only one common denominator,” Ruiz aimed a laser pointer at the chart. “*Every* vessel was a suspected narcotics smuggler. They all occurred in this triangle between the U.S., Cuba and the Bahamas.” He highlighted six dots on the map within a triangular area.

Gawking at the screen, Chandler reached for the coffee. His hand knocked the carafe over, drenching the table. “Whoa..!” he cried out, returning the carafe upright. Steaming coffee saturated several of the men’s reports. “My bad..! I’m so…sorry,” he stuttered.

Arrison recoiled, mortified. “What’d you do?” She scolded him like he was a child.

Newstreet cursed under his breath and handed over napkins. Landa openly laughed.

“I apologize,” Arrison formed an ironic smile. “Fortunately, Chandler is much more…book smart.”

Chandler looked at her, instantly hurt. His jaw opened as if about to speak, but said nothing.

Kurtz sensed the unease between the two. “Don’t worry, son.” He helped wipe the table and attempted a chuckle, “Hey, fresh coffee smells better than cigars –am I right?”

Chandler withered in his seat. Dr. Arrison pinched the bridge of her nose.

When the room calmed, Kurtz looked at Chandler. He wanted to show the kid some respect, perhaps involve him as a peer to the others. “So tell me Chandler, how might your… Spanish mythology studies help our predicament?”

Chandler’s eyes widened at the query. He sprang to life, plugging a cord from Ruiz’s laptop into his own. He stammered, eager. “I… really *we*… read the survivor’s account of what they’d witnessed.”

The screen filled with an illustration that appeared to be from a textbook. It was an exaggerated drawing of an enormous shark in a lagoon, jaws gaping, with villagers fleeing.

“Your witnesses said ‘*El Monstruo de Cojimar*.’” Chandler transformed into a capable lecturer. “That’s a legend from Cojimar, Cuba that dates back to 1945. Locals claim it’s a prehistoric-sized shark that terrorizes the area.”

The men studied the image with skeptical brows.

Chandler continued, “There are similar tales between here and South America. *Massacooramaan* is a legend from Guyana. A large water creature that attacks boats, dragging its victims underwater before consuming them.” The image displayed an illustration of a beast toppling a small boat, fishermen screaming.

The agents glowered at each other. Someone mumbled, “*Really..?”*

Chandler didn’t pause, “In Peru, *Yacumama* is an enormous serpent, destroying anything within its path–”

“–What he’s trying to say is…” Arrison disrupted in a raised voice. “Myths are usually rooted in fact. Ancient people saw whales, giant squids and so on, and labeled them as ‘monsters.’” She rotated Chandler’s laptop to type.

Chandler pursed his lips and sat. The spotlight had been yanked away.

Dr. Arrison addressed the room, “Your witnesses described a whale-sized beast with a large tusk like a unicorn. That’s an almost perfect description of a *narwhal*.” She smirked, “The problem is, they’re only found in arctic waters.” The screen displayed a large gray and white whale breaching the surface with a long spear-like horn protruding from its head.

Her grin faded when she turned to Kurtz, “Nothing in your emails mentioned smugglers. Chandler and I flew six hundred miles because rare humpbacks were spotted off Miami Beach. There have been historic migrations of whale sharks, the largest fish in the world, some over forty feet. Both could easily destroy small boats, especially if traveling at high speeds.”

Landa audibly sighed. He gathered his folders as if he’d seen enough.

“Then it’s decided!” Kurtz slapped the table with both palms causing Chandler to flinch. “This will be a balanced pursuit.” He continued with animated hands, “Could be large marine life. Could be a cartel weapon or turf war. We will move ahead to learn more.”

Arrison and Chandler sat erect at his outburst.

Kurtz motioned to Newstreet. “The Coast Guard has graciously offered a vessel for our pursuit. Thank you sirs.” He then pointed to Arrison, “Professor: we require your expertise for any unique marine life we might encounter.” He pointed to the end of the table, “Mr. Landa will be aboard to identify any signs of assault or weaponry. We’ll have two Guardsmen to pilot–”

“–Only *five* people?” Landa bellowed. “And two of them are a professor and a kid? What if *we* are targeted?”

Dr. Arrison stood upright, incensed. “This voyage is quickly changing from your request to the university. I’m not going to be a destroyed in some armed…military vessel!”

Chandler’s eyes widened at the thought.

“Come on now,” Kurtz raised his hands. “There won’t be any attacks. Our radars can see twenty-five nautical miles. We’ll have eyes on *any* vessel that enters the triangle.”

Arrison slowly sat back down.

“If we see anything even *possibly* hostile, we’ll have an interceptor and choppers on ‘em like the cavalry.” Kurtz looked into Arrison’s eyes. “Think about it: hundreds of civilian boats are out there every night without problems. If you don’t encounter any marine life, I’ll take you back out tomorrow during daylight. The boat’s got a sonar fishfinder. I’ll make your trip worthwhile.”

Arrison gazed at the opposite wall, contemplating his words.

“The truth is, Dr. Arrison,” Kurtz’s posture stiffened, his tone more direct. “If you no longer want this rare and unique opportunity, the University of Miami has a wonderful Marine Science professor who’d love to fill in. I called you first because you have an excellent department –and my husband’s son went to FSU.”

Arrison went deadpan at the warning, dumbstruck. Chandler looked at her, awaiting a response. The others watched in silence.

Kurtz cleared his throat and looked at his Tag Heuer. “Our boat departs at 22:00 hours tonight from our Sector Key West Station.” He turned back to Arrison, “We’d love to have you aboard, but we need to know now.”

Chapter Six – Bridge from the Old World

Professor Arrison entered the pink Key West taxi at 8:45 p.m., as planned. She sat in the front passenger’s seat, believing it’d give her some sense of control. Chandler placed their equipment in the trunk and then sat in the back.

During the grinding ride down the motel’s musty elevator, Arrison had hardly spoken. The motel hadn’t helped her disposition, though it was free, direct-billed to Agent Kurtz at the JIATF.

The King Conch motel was not one of the glamorous resorts on the beach, nor a quaint bed-and-breakfast found in historic Old Town. The hotel faced a four-lane US-1 in an area northeast of the city, referred to by locals as New Town. A clustered area with bumper-to-bumper tourists lining up for every fast-food chain, cookie-cutter franchise and an anemic mall anchored by a deserted Sears.

Ironically, less than a mile away was the storybook side of Key West, as seen in people’s imaginations, art and films. Vibrant Victorian homes, lush tropical gardens with vines of pink bougainvillea, and cobblestone roads leading to raw bars on the water.

But it wasn’t going to be one of those kinds of trips. Agent Kurtz’s request through the university had not allowed much time for recreation or deliberation. They offered to pay for a roundtrip flight, two nights at the King Conch, and a meal per diem of forty dollars per day. Certainly no Florida lobster or stone crabs anytime soon.

The truth was –and despite anyone’s assumptions– Professor Arrison didn’t receive many opportunities for travel. People presumed the title “Marine Biologist” meant a jet-setting career exploring the high seas. However, her income and duties with the university didn’t allow for extravagant international travel. And even though her job was in Florida, the university was located nearly an hour inland, and her marine lab was situated on a marshy backwater called Sopchoppy. Not exactly a carefree expert with the Seven Seas as her playground.

So the offer from Agent Kurtz to travel to Key West was interesting, considering the marine opportunities the trip might provide. That was, until Kurtz clarified the more ominous details during their briefing.

Kurtz’s ultimatum left her with two choices: She could decline the opportunity and fly back home to explain to the Vice President of Research how everything fell apart, which had required a substitute professor to cover her duties, and reimbursement to Kurtz for the hotel, flights and food. Or she could enjoy a boat ride off the coast of Key West in hopes of encountering unique marine life –while trying to not get caught in the crossfire of a cartel’s turf war.

“But he did say we could go out again tomorrow…” Arrison mused aloud as the pink cab entered the congested US-1.

“I bet their fishfinder’s better than ours,” Chandler offered from the backseat. “It’s Coast Guard sonar.”

Arrison smiled back at Chandler but didn’t respond. She wasn’t necessarily looking for a conversation. At least the taxi driver wasn’t looking to chat either. The driver was sixtyish with spiked hair, wearing a pro-vegan t-shirt and earbuds, humming to her own tune.

Arrison folded down the visor to look in the mirror. She sighed to realize her tired, forty-three-year-old eyes, jade with silk threads of red. She’d slept only five hours in the past twenty-four. Maybe her sun-streaked hair and moderate tan would offset the absence of any make-up.

In fact, she and Chandler had done little to prepare for this excursion. There was no need for anything but a ponytail for a boat ride in the dark with three grizzled military guys. Arrison wore matching khaki shorts and shirt, with sleeves that folded for any high winds. Chandler hadn’t sculpted his hair as usual, knowing they’d be blasted with twenty-knot gusts. He wore cargo shorts, flip-flops and a faded denim shirt with his sleeves rolled up.

Their cab merged right onto the Palm Avenue Causeway, a bridge that branched off from the mainland. At its peak, Dr. Arrison gazed down to see marinas and docks, still thriving with tourists and fishermen despite being almost 9:00 p.m. This made her feel more confident; it was true that boats traveled every night without any danger.

As the causeway returned to land, the supposed paradise seemed to fade into something else. The lively vacation town was suddenly an industrial area with boat yards, scrubby expanses that looked like former airfields, and signs for military housing.

Chandler told her they were going to Trumbo Point. He was known to methodically research their destinations and recite what he’d learned whether anyone asked him to or not. Chandler had an *eidetic* or “photographic” memory, which could be both a blessing and a curse.

From the back seat, he explained the industrialized area was a manmade addition to Key West, built in 1912 to accommodate a shipping port when the Overseas Railroad still existed, connecting the Keys to the mainland. The area now housed several bases, including the Naval Air Station and the U.S. Coast Guard.

That meant they were getting close, Arrison knew.

The cab turned right on Mustin Street, a narrow, uneven road that ran along the water to her left. Arrison gazed out to see illuminated piers with impressive Coast Guard vessels. *Which vessel is ours?* she wondered.

“Did you know the laundromat next to our hotel is famous for Cuban sandwiches?” Chandler asked from the back. “So I got us…” he rattled paper bags, “a thermos of Cuban coffee and two *medianoche* sandwiches. *Medianoche* means midnight.” He continued to babble,” It’s made with pork, ham, Swiss, pickles–”

“–Chandler,” Arrison interrupted. She turned to face him. “I know you’re nervous.”

“No…” He paused with a childlike expression, “What do you mean?”

“We both know what’s at stake with this entire trip.” She smiled, “I –*really we* –really need this opportunity. It could change…everything.” She looked into his eyes to gauge his understanding, “You know what I’m talking about.”

Chandler quietly nodded.

The cab stopped at a guard gate attached to a white cement wall that stated, “United States Coast Guard – Sector Key West.” A uniformed USCG officer approached their car. Arrison located her identification and took Chandler’s driver’s license, and handed both towards the driver’s window.

The guard took the cards and examined each.

Arrison noticed a small sign on the gate that declared, “Proudly Serving the U.S. Military.” She swallowed, suddenly parched. Arrison wondered if they were being used as a tool for the military, rather than invited for her skills.

“Here you go, Professor,” the guard returned the IDs. “Go through the main building to access the docks to the rear.” He added, “You’re right on time.”

Chapter Seven – Meeting Abraham Lincoln

“If your program loses funding, can’t you just pursue something else?” Chandler asked Arrison as he removed equipment from the taxi’s trunk.

She recoiled at the question, “Of course not.” Before she could launch into a lecture, a young female in a navy-blue uniform approached.

“Welcome, Professor.” The ginger woman smiled with dimples. “I’m Cadet Ireland with the Coast Guard.” She brought a cart for their gear. Chandler loaded two black cases that looked like suitcases, two scuba tanks and mesh bags containing dive masks and fins.

Chandler blushed just being near the cadet, mumbling, “Thanks… I got it…”

Ireland led them through a two-story main building designed without any flair and painted chalky white. Arrison guessed it had been built practical and solid for any storm threats.

With another lull, Chandler’s inquisitive nature emerged. He asked the cadet, “Tell me about this station.”

Ireland narrated as if the data had been part of her training. “We have a 55,000 square mile responsibility, stretching to Cuba and the Bahamas.” She continued as they walked. “Our duties include protecting the maritime border, search-rescue, and assisting law enforcement with anti-narcotics efforts.” She smiled at them, “Like what you two are doing.”

Chandler and the professor traded an uneasy glance.

They exited the rear doors to face the harbor. The marina had wide, paved piers with lights revealing imposing patrol vessels and 150-foot response cutters.

“Which boat’s ours?” Chandler asked.

Ireland grinned at their naiveté. “Only vessels under sixty-five feet are called ‘boats.’” She pointed to various vessels. “We got forty-seven foot Response Boats, and the larger Island-class cutters. They have an operating radius of 1,000 nautical miles. I’m not sure which is yours.”

Ireland halted. “This is far as I go.” She motioned to the center of three piers. “Straight ahead, slip B-11. They’re waiting for you.” She nodded, turned and was gone.

Arrison and Chandler inhaled the salty breeze and pursed their lips. A silent moment acknowledging it was time to proceed.

“I was just saying…” Chandler spoke gently as he pulled the cart. “If your curriculum is no longer funded, maybe you can pursue something… new.”

Arrison’s brows tensed. “I’m not like your friends, changing degrees every other year.”

His face wilted at her harsh tone. “What do you mean–?”

“–I can’t just float around subject to subject,” she sniped. “I’ve devoted over *twenty* years to my profession–” She stopped mid-sentence and took a breath.

Chandler fidgeted with the cart’s handle, unsure how to react.

“I’m sorry.” She paused to capture his glance. “That wasn’t fair for me to say that. I know I’ve been challenging. I’ve just been…emotionally distressed.”

He smiled with a shrug.

She leaned an inch closer, “If we can document *any* new migrations, or any rare species that have drifted this far south…” She looked up, searching for words, “Or just anything…*unique*, it could change everything –for both of us.” She looked into his eyes. “Do you understand?”

Chandler scanned the ground and nodded.

Ned Landa stood with Coast Guard Officers Roberts and Newstreet on the pier. He was dressed for the night in paramilitary black cargos and a new tight t-shirt. He took a last puff of his illicit *Partagas* and flicked the butt into the water.

Though Roberts was a lieutenant, he was the junior officer to Newstreet. Both men wore their blue operational uniforms. Roberts carried twenty extra pounds that gave him a moon face. He motioned his chin towards the building, “Here comes that professor and the kid.”

Newstreet turned. He was the commander and senior officer. He was trim with a face that showed little emotion. “The doctor seems alright,” he shrugged.

Landa chuckled, “Doesn’t her name ‘Arrison’ sound like arrogant?”

Roberts smirked, “Why are they *really* here?”

“Kurtz told me…” Landa glanced over his shoulder, “…she’s here to appease the animal rights wackos. If dead whales wash up with boat injuries, it looks like we’re doing something about it.” He flashed a deceitful grin, “And if anyone *were* to attack us, we have civilians aboard. Bigger penalties for the smugglers.”

Roberts’ eyes bugged, “Let’s hope it is just whales.”

Newstreet tapped his foot on a five-foot rectangular case at Landa’s feet. “I will need to know any heavy arms you’re planning to bring aboard.”

Landa eyed the container, “Kurtz loaned me an FIM-92 Stinger. We don’t care if the cartels are annihilating each other.” He cocked his head, “Just keep it off our shores –you know?”

They turned to see the professor and her assistant approach with gawks of disbelief.

Arrison pointed, “Don’t tell me *that* is our boat…”

“Yes ma’am,” Newstreet turned to his pride and joy. Moored between two imposing cutters was a thirty-two foot aluminum boat. “Our Port Security Boat. Twin outboards, center console. The open-deck should be enough room.”

Arrison froze to assess the boat. It looked like a toy in comparison to the surrounding vessels. It was shaped like an inflatable boat, but was bare aluminum as if someone had forgotten to paint it. There was no cabin for any possible shelter –or bathroom.

“Don’t you worry,” Newstreet motioned to the bow. “We got a .50-caliber gun on the front, along with two M60 machine guns.”

“She’s our sixteenth Port Security Boat, so we call her the *Abraham Lincoln*,” Roberts beamed.

“What happened to the other fifteen?” Chandler mumbled.

“How can we complain?” Landa dipped his head towards Arrison. “We got the tax-payers to fund your little field trip.”

She took a sharp breath, ready to scold the pompous man. Before she could utter a word, Newstreet shouted.

“21:20. Everyone aboard!” Newstreet ordered. “Out to the dark unknown.”

Chapter Eight – Under Way

As the professor seethed, Chandler remained observant. He noticed they didn’t even have a gangplank to board the Abraham Lincoln. Newstreet had to grab a rail to pull the boat close enough to the dock for them all to board.

Ned Landa insisted that he board first, carrying a large metal case. Newstreet helped Arrison aboard, then helped Chandler hand over the professor’s equipment. Roberts was already at the center console. Landa proceeded to the front of the boat alone, which was fine with Arrison since it was the farthest point from her seat in the stern.

Chandler was shown compartments to store their gear which included underwater cameras to capture footage of creatures too large to bring back to the lab. One case contained a Canon Power Shot digital and an SLR, both with underwater housings. The second case held a baton-sized hydrophone for underwater sound recording. They also brought dive gear in the event the professor wanted to go in. Chandler did not necessarily want to dive at night.

Dr. Arrison kept one camera on a strap around her neck. Chandler held onto his phone, which had a decent camera. He shuffled the narrow path to the stern with two paper bags to a seat next to Arrison.

Roberts passed out orange life vests to everyone. The professor and Chandler readily fastened theirs as a matter of course. Ned Landa predictably refused to wear his, babbling how he was an “expert swimmer” with the Marines. Roberts moved to the console to throttle the engines. Two cadets on the dock helped with the ropes. With everyone settled in, the Abraham Lincoln slowly idled west towards open water.

Regardless how many boats Chandler had been on, the scent of diesel made his stomach sour. At least the sea was only a three-foot chop. He purposely hadn’t overeaten; their last meal was at a McDonalds on US-1 three hours earlier. Arrison had chosen the restaurant to “contain expenses.” Chandler ordered a McFish, so it’d seem like a seafood meal in Key West.

Everyone on the Lincoln seemed occupied with their own tasks. Newstreet and Roberts stood at the controls, reviewing coordinates. Landa remained alone on the bow, examining whatever gear he’d brought onboard.

Chandler looked to his left to watch the coast roll by. The shore was filled with marinas and historic structures. It was nearly ten o’clock, so the lights of Old Town’s bars and cafes glimmered. The Half Shell Raw Bar and Turtle Kraals, with their illuminated dockside tables, passed a hundred yards away. Chandler heard faint laughter and hollering from happy crowds. If he concentrated, he wondered if he could hear any music or live bands emanating from the saloons of Duval Street.

Chandler could only dream of such places. As an introvert with a limited social existence, he’d never experienced the “night life’ in a popular city. He’d never even been invited to bar-hop with fellow students. His classes and responsibilities consumed most of his days, combined with an almost paralyzing anxiety of the opposite sex.

Making things seem more lifeless, the Lincoln didn’t play any music, and no one onboard spoke. He looked at Arrison who just smiled and looked out to the horizon. But Chandler knew that smile; she was equally uneasy about the evening.

The Lincoln increased speed between Sunset Key and Mallory Square to head south towards the open Gulf. There was only a mild breeze, and the stars sparkled in the clear sky.

Chandler wondered if it was the cliché *calm* before something else. Perhaps something dreadful. Were there armed criminals targeting boats? Immense whales crushing small vessels?

The undisputed fact was people had lost their lives. *At least these men are armed,* Chandler supposed. From what he could see, they were heading farther away from land, towards an even darker horizon.

With the lull of the engines purring and no one speaking, Chandler pulled a banana from his bag. When Roberts turned to him, he froze.

“Where’d you get that?” Roberts exclaimed.

“My banana..?” Chandler frowned, confused. “Our motel has a breakfast bar thing–”

“–*Never* bring bananas on a boat!” Roberts scolded. “It’s bad luck.”

“I thought that was only for fishing..?”

“No, it’s for sinking too,” Roberts retorted.

In a single move, Dr. Arrison took the banana and threw it overboard. She then stood to approach the controls. Chandler watched his banana drift away.

Dr. Arrison approached Roberts at the center console. She always felt more in control if she understood the logistics and equipment. He turned to her and they each a gave polite nod.

“So you’re a marine biologist?” Roberts gazed ahead.

“Yes,” Arrison had to grasp a rail for balance. “But that title is pretty general.”

“So there are specialties?” He seemed genuinely curious.

“There are titles depending on what we do.” She had to shout over the mounting wind. “An *ichthyologist* studies fish; a *cetologist* studies whales; a microbiologist studies tiny organisms. I guess I know just enough of each discipline to teach at a university level.”

“I get it,” Roberts bumped up the speed. “I specialize in navigation; Newstreet in seizures.” He looked at her, “So what’s your objective tonight?”

Arrison smiled, “My goal is always to study marine life in their natural environment. Not in tanks, aquariums or textbooks. The only reason I accepted Agent Kurtz’s offer.”

She looked out to gain her bearings. The lights of Key West twinkled far in their trail. Their destination ahead appeared pitch-black. She hoped a quarter-moon to the east might help their eyes adjust.

Roberts saw her scanning the horizon. “We’re approaching the triangle, sixteen miles southeast. See..?” He tapped his screen. “Where every vessel has been destroyed.”

Any warmth in her face drained with the reminder of their pursuit.

“Reminds me of the old *Devil’s Triangle,”* Roberts chuckled. “Remember that? Never solved that one!” He laughed and pushed the throttle forward.

“I’ll advise, over.” Newstreet concluded a call on his radio. He turned to approach Ned Landa on the bow. He shuffled on the wavering deck next to Landa who was examining his equipment.

Newstreet looked down at his case. Packed in molded foam was a weapon that looked like an olive-green cannon. “Seems a little extreme for a whale.”

Landa beamed like a child at Christmas. “It’s an FIM-92 Stinger.” He lifted a tube nearly five feet long. “A surface-to-air missile with infrared. It can be fired from vehicles, choppers, and maybe tonight: boats.” He chuckled at his own joke.

Roberts kneeled, curious. “How do you fire it?”

“Shoulder-fired with a range up to 4,800 meters.” Landa lifted a shaft and handgrip. “The launch tube is fitted with a gripstock and antenna that can determine friend or foe.”

Newstreet raised his brows, “How do you fire that without torching my boat?”

“No worries,” Landa showed the base of the projectile. “It’s launched by an ejection system that pushes it a safe distance before solid-fuel engines kick in.”

“Listen…” Newstreet checked over his shoulder, “I just got the call.” He spoke close to Landa’s ear, “The intel is a triple-engine, heading north out of *Manzanillo* right now.”

Landa stiffened, back to business. “I’ll be ready if anyone targets a biology cruise with a teacher and a kid.” He gave a quick wink.

The Abraham Lincoln followed the horizon as the ivory moon slid west at a snail’s pace.

Chandler remained in his seat, holding his phone with both hands. He listened through earbuds and watched other people’s travel videos. Periodically he’d huff and groan when the reception faded. He’d stand and loop his phone in the air in hopes of regaining a signal.

Ned Landa remained up front, turning his head left to right to scan the horizon like a cyborg. Roberts and Newstreet took turns with the controls, alternating chores and smoke breaks.

At nearly one o’clock a.m., Chandler yawned and opened a bag of food. He pulled out a small thermos and offered Arrison a drink.

“*Café Cubano*…” he whispered as he poured her a small Styrofoam cup. He then lifted two sandwiches wrapped in foil. “Cuban sandwich..?”

“Do they have mayonnaise?” Arrison wrinkled her nose. “How long have those been unrefrigerated?”

He shrugged and decided to try his. It tasted fine; maybe the tangy mustard hid any spoiled mayo taste. As he listlessly ate, the only sounds were the drone of the engines and the hypnotic lapping of waves. If he hadn’t been chewing, he believed he might fall asleep. Until he heard Newstreet’s voice.

“We got nada,” Newstreet stated into his radio, “I’ll give it ‘til 03:00. Otherwise return to port. Over.”

“Copy,” a garbled voice responded.

Dr. Arrison approached Newstreet like a diner complaining about overdue food. “Excuse me, have you been using your fishfinder?”

He frowned at her, “If you’re talking about sonar...” He pointed to a monitor, “It’ll pick up large marine life or approaching schools of fish–” His radio crackled.

“–Lincoln, come in.” It was Kurtz’s voice. “Suspect vessel is now southeast, two miles. Twenty-three degrees North, eighty-one degrees West. Over.”

“Copy,” Newstreet reacted fast. “We’ll attempt visual–”

“–*Suspect vessel..?*” Arrison interrupted. “You’ve been tracking a boat this entire time?”

Chandler’s jaw stopped, mid-chew.

“Cut the lights!” Newstreet ignored her. “Southeast, twenty knots.”

“Copy,” Roberts replied. All lights instantly darkened on the boat.

In near complete darkness, Chandler could see the men move in a flurry. Newstreet joined Roberts at the con. Landa lifted binoculars on the bow.

“What’s happening..?” Chandler involuntarily whispered.

Arrison didn’t reply. She also turned her head to each man.

“Vessel approaching south-southeast,” Roberts announced from the glow of his screen.

Arrison and Chandler turned to study the horizon, anxious.

“Yep, got ‘em...” Landa responded from the bow. “I’d say…two miles.”

Everyone looked the direction Landa was aiming his binoculars.

There was a pause in the rolling blackness. A menacing calm as the men seemed to be waiting for something. Arrison and Chandler squinted to see whatever was out there.

Chandler spotted a light shimmering on the horizon. At first it was a faint flicker, but then became distinct. “A boat…” He tapped Arrison, “There!” With the swaying hull, it was hard to keep his eyes on the light.

Everyone was silent as if holding their breath. Nothing but the relentless slosh of water.

A sudden flash made everyone gasp. A plume of orange painted the sky, then a thunderous boom a second after the flash. The boat on the horizon had exploded.

“They’re hit!” Roberts bellowed, “And something’s heading this way!”

Chandler covered his ears. Arrison didn’t blink, riveted with fear.

Chapter Nine – Scaling the Spine

“I got a large reading, closing fast…” Newstreet shouted from his monitor.

“Do we engage?” Roberts exclaimed.

“I see no other vessels..?” Newstreet scanned the area with his binoculars.

“Maybe a long-range weapon?” Landa lifted the stinger from its case.

Roberts dashed to the enormous .50 caliber gun mounted on the bow.

Arrison and Chandler were paralyzed with confusion. They crouched low as if hiding.

Landa adjusted his infrared binoculars. “Impossible…”

“What do you see?” Roberts retorted.

“It’s like a…rogue wave…” Landa continued to focus. “Are those…*eyes?*”

Arrison paused with a frown. She aimed her camera towards the faraway flames. Chandler aimed his phone’s camera. They clicked towards the darkness.

“*Jesus…”* Newstreet’s face glowed from his sonar. “It’s massive –it’s no whale!”

Landa snapped the gripstock onto the stinger and inserted a battery coolant unit, allowing just one shot. He lifted the weapon onto his right shoulder. Roberts was at his side, preparing the .50 caliber.

“I haven’t given orders to fire!” Newstreet shouted.

Arrison could see a spew of water in the distance. She blinked faster, aiming her camera at whatever was racing towards them. “Is that spray coming off an enormous fin?”

“A fifteen-foot fin..?” Chandler’s voice trembled. They jolted as Roberts fired the .50 caliber. Newstreet joined them on the bow with a handheld M60 machine gun. They fired into the water towards the approaching enigma.

Landa struggled to aim his weapon in the chop. White spray was visible in the blackness. The *eyes* and enormous fin became more distinct as it raced within fifty yards.

With an earsplitting blast, Landa fired the stinger. The missile launched forward, hurling him ten feet backwards onto the deck.

Arrison watched the rocket miss its target. It detonated underwater with a muted thump and a blinding flash in the clear sea. Within that light, she saw the silhouette of something massive. “*Dear God–”*

The Lincoln’s bow shattered upwards. Both officers were thrashed as if struck by a locomotive. The crumpling metal was deafening. Arrison clutched Chandler’s shirt.

The remaining hull capsized. Arrison was heaved overboard. The sensation was like being launched from an enormous seesaw into darkness. “*Chandler..!”* she shrieked.

She splashed into the water. It was colder than she’d imagined, like a million stinging needles. As she descended, her obscured vision recognized portions of the hull sinking. Her lungs burned; she hadn’t taken a breath when they were hit. She needed to swim towards the nebulous surface, but with the churn she didn’t know which way was up. She kicked towards an orange glow.

Arrison breached the surface and drew in a long breath. Radiant embers rained down like a snow of sparks. Choking smoke filled the air and flaming wreckage bobbed on the surface.

She called out, “Chandler..!” Waves slapped her face, burning her eyes. She spun, clutching her life vest and treading water. “*Chandler..!*” Her voice became hoarse.

A faint, fretful voice responded, “Where are you..?” It was Chandler.

“I’m here!” She splashed towards his voice. The swells seemed four to five feet. “I’m coming…” A strong current pulled her away from the flaming debris –which meant less light.

As she crested a wave, she could see Chandler’s head and orange vest bobbing in a trough between swells. “It’s me!” She shouted, “Are you okay?”

Though coughing, he beamed at the sight of her. He reached for her with both arms. They embraced for what seemed an eternity; a grip of survival instinct and an unsaid affection.

Chandler pulled back with red eyes, “Are they all dead?”

She didn’t answer. She turned to see the wreckage farther away. “The current’s too strong. Look for anything we can grab.”

In the rolling darkness, they couldn’t see any debris to swim towards.

“Whatever did this…” There was a fracture in his voice, “What if it’s under us right now?”

Arrison looked down into the black water. She hadn’t considered any ongoing threat other than drowning. But she didn’t need to panic the boy. “Kurtz will send help…”

Under her feet she did feel a churning undercurrent. Her imagination raced with possibilities. *Too large to be a shark or a whale… Maybe a school of humpbacks..?*

It was difficult seeing over swells that seemed infinite and darker than before. As they labored to stay afloat, they were surrounded by the unsettling lull of lapping waves.

A faraway voice called out from the dark, “*I found your whale*…”

They perked up and turned in search of the voice.

Arrison called out, “Who is it?” Her voice seemed lost in the expanse.

The voice shouted again, closer. “I’m up here…”

“It’s Landa’s voice!” Chandler exclaimed. With renewed strength, they splashed towards his voice. Arrison kicked harder, pulling Chandler by his hand.

She saw a figure in the gloom ahead –but it seemed to be *above* the water.

Like a mirage, Ned Landa appeared forty feet away in the darkness. It was him, with his broad shoulders and black t-shirt. Through salty tears, it looked like he was crouching above the sea.

As they swam within twenty feet, Arrison saw waves breaking against a surface below Landa’s feet. He then stood like a beacon, either magically on the water or on an unseen deck.

Arrison and Chandler swam to him. Landa leaned to help them out of the water. He pulled Arrison by her hands, up a black slope until she was out. He then gripped one of Chandler’s arms and lifted him in a single move and dropped him next to Arrison.

They both panted, hands on their knees, to catch their breaths.

“I was flung overboard.” Landa huffed, “The two officers are dead.”

Arrison nodded, solemn. She didn’t like the man, but he had just saved them.

Chandler looked at the black surface they were standing on. He stomped with his bare foot. “Is it metal..? A platform?”

Arrison looked down. The ground felt solid like concrete. “A jetty wouldn’t be this far out...”She followed it with her eyes to see it fade into the darkness. It looked like a narrow path about eight feet wide. Waves gently sloshed against inclines on both sides. She stepped forward to see the path stretch well beyond a hundred feet.

“A buoy platform?” Chandler guessed, studying their surroundings.

“It’s too long.” Landa replied. “And too big for a shipping container.”

As Arrison cautiously walked, she looked up to distinguish a tower at least twenty feet tall protruding from the deck. It looked like a steel triangle with sharp, angular edges. She gasped, “Is that the *fin* we saw?”

Landa’s eyes ricocheted in thought –to the deck, to the fin, back to the deck.

At the base of the tower, Arrison saw glowing circles on each side, three feet in diameter. “Are those…portholes?”

“They look like eyes,” Chandler mused.

“Oh no.” Landa became rigid. “It’s a narco sub.”

Chandler frowned, “What’s a *narco*–”

Their world turned black before anyone could utter another word.

Dark figures pulled hoods over their heads from behind. Before the three could resist, they were shot with 50,000-volt electroshock weapons. With three sizzling bursts, the intruders dropped like marionettes.

Part Two

THE NAUMTSEV

Chapter Ten – Captives

A silent abyss of complete darkness. Then blurred, nauseating streams of light.

Muted voices drifted in and out. Echoes in melodious Spanish shifted into a harsh Slavic language. Then an abrupt silence as if something had been slammed shut.

Nothing made sense like a hallucinogenic nightmare.

With a sharp gasp, Dr. Arrison’s eyes sprung open. She shouted, “Where am I?”

She sat upright, clammy and breathless. Her fingers constricted to grasp the floor, but it was cold steel. The space was dark and the air smelled like burned motor oil.

As her eyes adjusted, the confining space looked like a ten-by-six-foot cell. There was no light except what seeped through a vent on the door. She looked down to realize a body was on the floor beside her. “*Chandler!”* she shrieked.

She seized him by his shoulders. “Are you okay..?” Frantic, Arrison checked for a pulse and lifted his lids. His eyes rolled to her. She smiled with glossy eyes. “It’s me…”

Chandler labored to sit up. He touched his forehead as if in agony and squinted at the gritty bulkheads. The walls were steel with large rivets and rust stains. In a raspy voice he asked, “Where are we?”

A voice behind them replied, “We’re in a sub.”

They turned to see Ned Landa seated in the shadows. He was hunched on a bench and breathing heavily.

“A sub?” Chandler gently stood.

“Yes,” Landa barked. “A submarine.” He covered his face with both hands.

Arrison moved closer to him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Landa snapped. “I’m not good in…tight spaces.”

“You’re claustrophobic?” Chandler gaped, naïve. “Aren’t you a Marine–”

“–It’ll pass,” Landa interrupted. He lowered his hands to see them standing over him. He took a breath to explain, “We’re in a sub. The white whale of the DEA; a narco sub.”

Landa saw their bewildered faces. “Drug dealers, or Narco-traffickers, have tested using submarines for smuggling. They’re usually homemade pieces of crap that are barely seaworthy.” He looked at them, “The ultimate fear is they get their hands on a Soviet sub.”

Arrison mocked with a chuckle, “You think this is a *Russian* sub?”

Instead of responding, he pointed to a stained sign by a pipe. Arrison and Chandler leaned closer to read it. It was written entirely in Russian script.

Dr. Arrison’s face went blank, stunned. She closed her eyes to recall her dream. “I heard voices… But they were Spanish…” She turned to Landa, “Maybe Cuba’s attacking?”

Chandler shook his head, “I heard Spanish too –but I think it was *Colombian*, not Cuban.”

Arrison balked, “How could you possibly know that?”   
 He dipped his head, confident. “Remember Lina Gomez from reef lab? She was from Bogotá. I heard a voice say ‘*que pena.’* That’s how Colombians say ‘I’m sorry’ instead of ‘*lo siento*.’”

Arrison frowned to consider the inference. “So, who’s *apologizing* to us?”

Chandler patted his pockets, “My wallet’s gone –and my phone!” He looked at Arrison, “Our cameras!”

Arrison’s hands sprung to her waist. A pouch where she’d kept her wallet, phone and identification was gone. “Where’s our belongings?”

“They took all our stuff,” Landa replied without moving.

Arrison glared, “These people *robbed* us?”

“So we can’t communicate with anyone.” Landa rubbed his temples. “My guess, they’re running our backgrounds right now.”

Chandler exhaled under his breath, “So we have nothing…”

Dr. Arrison slouched against the wall with fears greater than a missing wallet. Who were their captors? And more significantly, what were they going to do to them?

In the pause, she realized there was a mechanized vibration from the floor. But was that proof it was a submarine? She’d done research on barges and cargo ships with the same feel.

Arrison studied what little she could see. The cell was tarnished, but it seemed clean. There was no disturbing evidence of any prior prisoners.

*Or are we hostages?* She quivered at the notion. Were there modern pirates in the area, similar to Somalia, who kidnap and demand enormous ransoms? She then questioned the discouraging reality, *would the university even pay for us?*

She looked at the men, “Do you remember being thrown in here? Or see any of them?”

Chandler wearily shook his head.

“No,” Landa replied. “I suspect we were drugged as well.”

There was a clank at the door like a lock was turning. They tensed to watch it creak open to reveal the silhouettes of two men. They were dressed in black and aiming pistols.

“Face the wall,” a guard shouted with a thick Spanish accent.

Landa studied their guns. “Latinos aiming Russian Makarovs.” He sneered, “That proves that.”

The larger guard forcibly kicked Landa off his bench.

Arrison and Chandler froze. Though Landa was strong, he scowled at the men from the floor, electing not to strike back.

The guards had them stand with their noses to the wall. The guards, who appeared Hispanic, said little. They handled Landa with force, and were more humane to Arrison and Chandler. They bound their wrists behind their backs with cable zip-ties.

Blocking the light, a third figure appeared in the doorway. The three turned to see a man. Though difficult to see, he was tall and trim.

“Who are you?” Landa shouted, brazen.

The man spoke with a serene Russian accent. “I am *Nikto*. I am captain of–”

“–You’re a murderer!” Landa exclaimed.

Nikto paused as if assessing him. “I am not a killer of innocents. I target my former employers, and anyone who commits *acts of war*.” He enunciated the words.

“What *act of war*?” Landa taunted. A guard jerked him back by his wrists.

Without responding, Nikto shouted to the guards in flawless Spanish, “*Tráelos conmigo*.”

The guards shoved the three to exit the chamber.

Chapter Eleven – Eternal Guests

Ned Landa reluctantly followed this Captain *Nikto* into a dim corridor.

He had to duck his head under the door’s threshold to follow the man. The hallway was poorly lit and narrower than the inside of a subway car. There were horizontal pipes a foot in diameter and a steel-grated deck. The walls were gray and government-issue beige. It looked like an abandoned power plant.

Landa was first in line, walking five feet behind Captain Nikto. Chandler was behind him, with Arrison to the rear as if shielding Chandler between them. The guards loomed close behind.

He was concealing his anxiety, not from their predicament, but from the enclosed space. He monitored his breathing, *inhale… slow, and out…* The air was stale with a faint scent of diesel. Though perspiring, Landa tried to remain tall and vigilant.

He realized they were walking at a slight incline as if going downhill. This supported his submarine theory. If this were a ship, they’d be sinking. In fact, the passageways had handrails, but they couldn’t use them with their hands bound. He glanced back at Arrison to see how she was coping. She was quiet, but her eyes darted with anxiety. Landa whispered, “Stay close–”

“–Face forward!” a guard shouted with a thick accent.

Landa turned back to Nikto who was stepping through a partition at another doorway. The entryways had rounded corners and locking doors to seal the compartments from each other. Bulkheads every thirty feet would make it difficult to run from these captors –nor was there anywhere to go.

Despite advertising he was an expert at military equipment, Landa’s career had never included working on a submarine. However, he had studied the U.S. versions, and he’d toured a nuclear sub, the USS Farragut, at Fort Lauderdale’s Port Everglades. This vessel’s corridors appeared the same, except for sporadic warning signs in Russian.

Nikto turned the hatch wheel on a door. “Follow me.” He pointed down. “Mind your step.”

Dr. Arrison entered the room behind Landa. She immediately noticed it had a higher ceiling. The space was larger, twenty feet wide by twenty-five feet long. She guessed the walls were the same steel bulkheads, but they’d been covered with scarlet drapes. The ceiling-to-floor fabric looked like velvet curtains for windows that weren’t there. Gold-framed oil paintings and antique maps adorned the walls between the drapes.

Arrison stepped beside Chandler and Landa. The two guards entered behind them and sealed the door. All three uneasily looked around, studying their surroundings.

In front of them was a long, ornate dining table positioned on a Persian rug. Above it hung a small crystal chandelier, gently swaying at a forward angle. The whole room looked like someone’s incongruous attempt to make a drab, industrial room homey by filling it with items from an estate sale.

Captain Nikto walked to the far end of the table and turned. For the first time, they could see him; he was late forties with a neat beard and silver at his temples. He wore black fatigues and a turtleneck, the same uniform as the guards. Though he was striking, he was pale as if he hadn’t seen the sun in months.

“This is the *wardroom*.” Nikto spoke with his Russian inflection, “The officers’ mess hall.”

Arrison noticed Nikto glancing up to a specific painting to his left. Above an antique fireplace mantle was the portrait of a beautiful Asian woman with a faint smile. The painting appeared contemporary, unlike the other antiques. She was curious of the connection.

Nikto shouted to the guards in Spanish, “*Corta tus enlaces. Déjalos aquí*.”

The guards lifted long blades from their sheaths. Arrison and Chandler tensed, but realized the men had been ordered to cut their binds. With single swipes, they severed the cables behind each of their backs.

“I apologize for the binds.” Nikto spoke with an aristocratic flair. “I must recall my… *terrestrial* manners.”

Nikto sat at the head of the table and narrowed his eyes at Landa. “It was an *act of war* because you attacked my vessel. Our receivers identified your missile locked on *me.*” He raised his voice, “Your officers fired heavy weapons –at me. *Acts-of-war*.” He stressed the words and waved his hand, “Take a seat.”

Arrison, Chandler and Landa glanced at each other, hesitant. The guards stepped forward from the shadows, so the three promptly took seats at the table. Landa sat directly across from Nikto as if to stare him in the eye. Arrison and Chandler took seats on each side.

Nikto pulled a silver cigarette case from a pocket. He tapped out a cigarette and lit it. After a pensive inhale, he spoke. “The injured refugees were a truly regretful mistake. They were not supposed to be onboard.” With solemn eyes, he looked at Arrison, “Did any… perish?”

“Yes,” Landa shouted. “You *murdered* three innocent migrants.” His voice was indignant. “One couple, married sixty years and their granddaughter.”

Silence. Nikto’s face went blank. He glanced up at the swaying chandelier. “That will never happen again.” His eyes became glassy with emotion. “Which is why you are here now, very much alive.”

“*Where* are we?” Chandler asked with the purity of a child.

Nikto turned to him and smiled at his poise. “You are aboard my vessel, the *Naumtsev*–”

“–A Soviet Akula-class submarine,” Landa interrupted. “The quietest in the fleet.” He crossed his immense arms. “So, Captain *Nikto*, did the cartels abduct you? Or just old-fashioned greed to sell out your country?”

Nikto flashed a lethal smile. “Mr. Ned Landa...” He peered into his eyes. “You are a former engineer-mechanic for the Marines. And now a self-proclaimed armaments expert.”

“Once a Marine, always a Marine,” Landa snapped.

Nikto frowned. “Not when you are dishonorably discharged for dereliction of duty.” He continued without flinching. “You are divorced with two outstanding IRS liens. You are nothing more than a hired contractor, hustling to sell your opinions.”

Landa fumed. His face turned red.

“Conversely, I am *elated* to have a marine professor aboard my vessel.” Nikto smiled at Arrison. “Dr. Patrice Elaine Arrison. You are even more striking than your faculty photograph.”

Her mouth fell open, lost for a response.

Nikto continued, “I am *sickened* to see your funding cut by your university due to dwindling respect for marine studies. My partner was also a scientist.”

They watched him look again at the painting of the Asian woman.

“She modified this vessel for research…” He gave an expressive pause, “After I brokered its sale to my previous employers.”

“Cartels don’t do research,” Landa growled. “They were your previous employers. Did you steal this sub –and now attacking the hand that fed you? Committing international crimes–”

“–I am free of any land-based society,” Nikto’s shout reverberated within the room. “I do not obey its rules, and I ask you never to invoke them in my presence again.”

Chandler’s gentle voice emerged from the clamor, “What about…us?”

Nikto turned to him. His face softened at his innocence. “Mr. Chandler Arrison. A university senior and Student Chapter President of the High-Functioning Autism Society. You have done good things. You, *sir,* are a true leader.”

Chandler blossomed at the unexpected compliment. Arrison also smiled.

Nikto nodded towards Dr. Arrison, “If you are anything like your mother here, I will show you things your eyes cannot *imagine*…” He soaked the word with mystery.

Chandler smiled at his mother.

“Read between the lines, folks.” Landa severed their moment. “He’s saying we’re prisoners.”

Confused, Chandler and Arrison turned to the captain.

Nikto gave an elegant shrug. “You have my word as a gentlemen I will never harm you.” His eyes hardened, “But I cannot have anyone betray my existence.”

Before anyone could interject, Nikto leaned to Arrison with a hypnotic gaze, “What if I show you what lies six hundred meters beneath *Guanahacabibes*?” The strange word rolled fluently off his tongue.

Chandler’s eyes widened. He turned to his mother.

She gasped for words. “Two thousand feet below…” Her eyes fluttered around the room. “The *Guanahacabibes* peninsula..? That’s been shielded by Cuba for over sixty years…”

Nikto uncurled a roguish grin, “I assure you the Naumtsev is not limited by imaginary borders.”

Chapter Twelve – Witness from the Clouds

KEY WEST

“Officers Roberts and Newstreet were *very* dearfriends.” DEA Agent Kurtz tried not to crumble behind his lectern. He paused to gather his emotions.

“Hell,” he continued with glassy eyes. “Newstreet’s boy Jackie feeds our cat when Lyle and I travel.” He thumbed over his shoulder, “Roberts’ wife Becca caters our holiday dinner-dance every year.” He sniffled, “They will be sorely, *sorely* missed.”

The room was hushed. There were more eyes on him than before in the JIATF conference room. His taskforce had expanded with additional officers from multiple agencies and local law enforcement.

Kurtz blotted his eyes with his thick forearm. “Unlike our deceased Guardsmen, we have not recovered the bodies of contractor Ned Landa, Professor Arrison or her son Chandler.” He shook his head and exhaled, “And he’s just a kid...”

Kurtz had been tirelessly working. Thirty minutes earlier, he’d had to provide a status to the press. Rather than a full-blown press conference, it was to a reporter he’d known for years from the island’s only newspaper, the *Key West Citizen*.

“Immediately after we received the Lincoln’s mayday, the Coast Guard appointed a mission coordinator to run search-rescue. Right now we got an MH-60 Jayhawk, MH-65 Dolphin and a forty-five-foot response boat searching.” Kurtz spoke to the female reporter from the front steps of the Truman Annex. “It’s the coordinator’s job to keep tabs on the missing persons’ odds of survival.”

The Latina reporter frowned from her old-school notepad, “How do calculate odds?”

“I’m not a techy, Tania, but it’s software called a survivability model. We plug in various factors such as water and air temp, the person’s approximate height and weight, garments they wore, etcetera. The program tells us how long the person is likely to stay alive.”

“They’re still flying out there now?”

He nodded, “To maximize our probability of success, our choppers are flying V-shapes over a large circular area. A radius of 149 square miles so far.”

Kurtz sighed and rubbed his weary eyes. The churn was catching up to him. “Sadly, it’s the coordinator’s job to decide when to give up. We give it an extra day before an official suspension, so we can do our best to notify next of kin.” He shrugged, “We have no info on any other family members for the professor and her son.”

In the annex conference room, extra chairs had been arranged to accommodate five additional people, invited by the taskforce, including Navy, Border Patrol and local Monroe Sheriffs.

Seated in the front next to Agent Ruiz was a quiet, female Navy officer. She was mid-thirties and appeared pleasant but bookish, with short hair and thick glasses. She meekly raised a hand.

“Has the vessel been recovered yet?” the woman asked.

Kurtz shook his head. “It was 11,000 pounds of aluminum. Straight down. That area in the Gulf’s too deep for any salvage hunts on my budget.”

Agent Ruiz clicked a key on his laptop, “This is the Lincoln’s last broadcast.” The wall monitor displayed an audio waveform.

A garbled, panicked voice sounded, “*It’s massive –it’s no whale!*”

Ruiz played the recording twice. The roomful of officers gazed at each other, wordless.

“I’d like you all to meet Officer Engel.” Kurtz motioned to the quiet female Navy officer. “She’s a Navy Intel Officer who’s *way* smarter than me. We’re lucky to pry her away from her desk in D.C. Welcome Officer Engel.”

“Thank you…” She nodded to the men and women. Kurtz bestowed his podium to Engel, and Ruiz attached monitor controls to her laptop.

Engel straightened her glasses. “As Agent Kurtz said, I’m a Navy Intelligence Officer, rated IS –Intelligence Specialist– and my job’s to collect and interpret data.” Her soft voice seemed unaccustomed to presenting to larger groups. “We conduct search, analyze photographs, prepare charts and maps to help explain strategic situations.” Her voice trailed as she shuffled her notes.

Engel looked up and paused, realizing the room of eyes upon her. “In my role, I’m rarely invited to the field. This is a first for me. My husband and I were at Disney when I received your call, only a forty-five minute flight… So, here I am…” She rolled her shoulders.

The screen filled with a file photo of the Abraham Lincoln. “Regrettably, with the destruction of your Port Security Boat, all cameras were lost. Any video went down with the ship. The waterproof cases you recovered contained cameras that hadn’t been used.”

Ruiz and Kurtz pursed their lips at the luckless facts.

“But the young man, Chandler Arrison, brought his cellphone,” Engel continued.

“You recovered his phone?” Ruiz blurted, excited, “How?”

“No.” Engel paused at his outburst. “But he evidently used it frequently on the boat.” She cocked her head with drama. “It seems his phone automatically uploaded images to his cloud account before the accident.”

Ruiz blinked to process, “Photos might be sitting in his account? But he’s not here to access them..?”

Engel lifted a finger to indicate she wasn’t finished. “Our analysts in D.C. have contacts with the Bureau who work closely with cell carriers. To get an order to access the images, we don’t need a full warrant as long as the data’s ‘relevant to an ongoing criminal investigation,’” Engel used air quotes. “I was able to demonstrate your attacked boats and deceased officers met the standard.”

Her audience sat erect, instantly more engaged.  
 “My analysts were able to retrieve these photographs.” The screen filled with images that appeared black and useless. Engel scrolled through them to enlarge a particular photo. Two tiny blurred white spots came into view.

“It appears to be an object in the foreground with a discernible wake.” Engel brightened and highlighted the image. A stream of gray looked like foam from a triangular object. “Note the two spots that could be mistaken as eyes.”

The officers squinted to see what she was referring to.

Engel superimposed a digital outline over the image. “We enhanced the exposure to reveal this.” She pointed to the screen, “An approaching dark shape similar to a whale –but much larger. If you notice in the foreground, it appears to have a sharp, bayonet-like nose.”

Kurtz gasped, “Jesus Christ, it’s a–”

“–Narco sub,” Ruiz finished his sentence.

The room muttered with skepticism.

“That was my first guess.” Engel typed and the screen filled with file images of narco subs. “The only drug-related submersibles seized to date have been home-grown. Built by inexperienced craftsmen hired by the cartels.”

One image showed a small submarine in a murky river that looked like it’d been spray painted camouflage. “These were seized off the coast of Colombia.” Engel showed another slide of Colombian police opening a hatch on the deck of a vessel smaller than a school bus. “They’re typically fiberglass, barely seaworthy, under forty feet in length.”

Engel projected highlighted dots on the recovered image: three points in the foreground and two on the horizon. She turned to her rapt audience. “Based on the field of view and reference points, our analysts calculate this object’s length at over 350 feet.”

Kurtz and Ruiz winced as if she’d misspoken.

“The largest whales are a hundred feet, and the U.S. doesn’t have any missing submarines.” Engel added somberly, “But a Soviet Akula-class sub is 375 feet long, with stealth equal to ours.”

“Are you serious..?” a female deputy laughed.

“It’s possible,” An ICE officer scowled at her, “A Russian sub was sited off Virginia in 2018.”

“A Yasen-class Russian sub was tracked off the east coast in 2020,” a DEA agent added.

As the room debated, Kurtz’s voice resounded, “Commies aren’t attacking us, folks.” He stood to reclaim the room. “This thing targeted five drug traffickers. This is a turf war –in our backyard.”

“This is a *national security* matter,” the ICE officer snapped.

“It’s DEA if it’s from Colombia,” Kurtz sharpened his eyes. “Especially if we’re speculating a cartel acquired a real sub. Cartels do only one thing: traffic narcotics.” He looked at the quiet Engel, “I’m guessing there are very few ports to hide one of these things.”

“Yes… Correct,” Engel stammered. “Only certain seaports would be deep enough to accommodate an Akula-class.”

“Ernesto,” Kurtz turned to Ruiz, on a roll. “Is Raul still taking your calls at the Bogotá embassy?”

“So far…” Ruiz bobbed his head.

Kurtz looked at his audience, “How could someone buy and hide a 375-foot steel monster?” He thumbed to his junior partner. “Agent Ruiz has contacts with the Colombian National Police. If a cartel achieved the improbable, there will be a *shitload* of witnesses.”

As the room paused to grasp their proposition, Kurtz added, “I can’t keep this from the press too long –a school will be looking for their professor.”

Chapter Thirteen - *Glaza Na Mir*

THE CARIBBEAN SEA

Professor Arrison opened the steel door. She looked like a new person, rested and refreshed. Her green eyes were clear, and her long blonde hair was still damp from a shower.

“I trust your quarters are suitable?” Captain Nikto asked from the threshold with hands behind his back.

She gave guarded smile, “I don’t feel like I’m on a submarine.”

“That is my goal. This is my home.” Nikto replied.

When a crewman had been ordered to take Arrison and Chandler “to their quarters,” she presumed it’d be another cell. To her surprise, her cabinwas over ten by ten feet with a plush single bed. She guessed it was originally designed as an officer’s quarters. The floor was covered with faux wood planking and an Oriental rug. The walls were burgundy, with framed art and shelves adorned with nautical trinkets such as a compass and antique books. Installed in the corner was an acrylic mini-shower, reminiscent to those found in cruise ship cabins.

And the water was magnificently scalding. She washed away untold hours –or days– of grime, salt and stress. Laid out on her bed was fresh clothing: black slacks and a turtleneck, the evident uniform of the crew. Not her first choice of style, but Arrison was in no position to complain.

She was further comforted knowing Chandler had been given a cabin next to hers that was similarly appointed. She didn’t know or care where Landa had been taken.

As the hot water ran over her scalp, Arrison finally had the peace to close her eyes and reflect. There was a looming distress that hadn’t been clarified: “what” exactly was Nikto going to do with them? Was Ned Landa correct, they were essentially prisoners? Like the cliché goes, if Nikto wanted them dead, he could’ve done so. But he had literarily saved them from the sea.

Arrison wondered if there was some maritime law that would require Nikto to release them at the next port. Or were they hostages to leverage something out of the U.S. government?

Or –Arrison opened her eyes– what if Nikto really could show her undersea discoveries like *Guanahacabibes,* like he had promised?

She tried to envision the possibility. *That could change everything…* she imagined. The impact alone on her profession; it would save her career and resolve thousands of years of conjecture.

Her shower and pipedreams were cut short by Nikto’s knock on her cabin door.

Arrison felt uneasy standing alone with the captain. The officers’ quarters were on the second deck, near the center of the vessel, according to Nikto. He explained halls on a submarine were called passageways. In the housing area, they appeared less mechanical than the other areas. The passageway that connected their quarters was decorated to appear more elegant, painted bronze with stainless fixtures and handrails.

Arrison crossed her arms, slightly chilled. “Where’s Chandler and Landa?”

Nikto smiled, “Your son wished to see our control room. That is where we pilot the Naumtsev.” He pointed to the ceiling. “It is directly above us near the heart of the vessel.”

Arrison looked up, hesitant. “I don’t want him in anyone’s way…” She didn’t like the idea of Chandler away from her side, especially within the mazelike bowels of a potentially-hostile vessel.

“Not at all.” Nikto paused with pensive eyes. “Your son is naturally curious. He is gifted. You should be proud.”

Arrison’s posture softened. She wasn’t accustomed to hearing such praises from strangers. “And where’s Ned Landa?”

Nikto gave a tight smile. “Mr. Landa is… resting in his quarters.”

Ned Landa beat on his cell door with both fists.

“Let me the hell outta’ here!” His shouts echoed within the small chamber. He’d been returned to his original holding cell, with the same single vent for light and small bench. He decided to sit in the center of the room, close his eyes and practice deep breathing.

At the very least, he’d been allowed a three-minute shower in the crew berthing area on the third deck. He’d take any triumph he could get from these criminals.

An hour earlier, a guard had directed Landa along a humid passageway filled with pipes and ducts. They reached a companionway, which Landa knew was an opening in the deck with a ladder leading down to the next level.

*How many decks, passageways and ladders does this thing have?* Landa mused. It was futile trying to memorize his way around. He was told the crew berthing area was below the wardroom –and undoubtedly smaller and more confining.

The crew berthing was congested with rows of triple-stacked bunks. The area smelled like sweat, and the lights were dim as if to emulate night. Landa heard men snoring, and he received confused glares from men lying in their bunks or playing cards. The men appeared either curious or annoyed that a stranger was in their space.

Next to a metal commode was the shower. It was a stainless-steel casket that looked like an old-school phone booth. In a thick accent, the guard told him he had one minute of water –he could then lather for a minute– and then one minute to rinse. *Three minute! No mas!*

Landa was concerned about the claustrophobic stall, but he closed his eyes and inhaled. *Only three minutes…* He silently counted down to help pass the time. The water was icy, but the wash was invigorating.

Crewmen loomed outside the shower, muttering derisive comments in Spanish and Russian. The guard tossed Landa a small towel that felt like burlap, and he was given a black uniform. Landa guessed from the men’s faces they were upset how an American outsider was stealing their precious bath time.

Since he was now outfitted like the crew, Landa presumed he’d be forced to do some hard labor to prove his worth. Instead, the guard led him straight back to the holding chamber.

Landa groaned in the gloom of his cell. He didn’t know if it was night or day. At least he was alive, and this *Nikto* had no interest in torture or physical threats –yet.

As he’d been trained to do with strategic tasks, Landa tried to analyze their predicament with logic. A drug cartel somehow obtained a Russian submarine. While they were carrying out their nefarious plans, they stumbled across three outsiders and chose to bring them onboard. From a tactical standpoint, Landa understood why Nikto said he couldn’t release them back into the world. It would give away his presence. No criminal would do that.

Logical or not, this didn’t help his dilemma. He huffed, *we’re stuck forever on an enemy nuclear–*” His chest tightened at the sudden realization: if this was an Akula, it was a *nuclear* submarine –with nuclear weapons.

Landa stood upright, eyes flickering to recall his maritime warfare training. *The Akula would have at least eight torpedo tubes to handle RPK-2 nuclear-armed missiles...* His breathing hastened. Weapons could include twenty ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads.

Ned Landa was trained to never display anxiety or fear in front of others –but he could alone in a dark cell. *We’re trapped in a steel nuclear coffin that could annihilate half the planet*.

The fear of drug dealers suddenly seemed insignificant. And what were these *narco-terrorists* now doing to the kid and Professor Arrison, the only female onboard?

Dr. Arrison’s jaw dropped as they entered the cavernous room.

“This is my *grand parlor*,” Captain Nikto waved his hand theatrically across the room.

Arrison looked to her right. The room was at least forty feet long and thirty feet wide, tapered to span the base of the forward hull. It looked like a larger version of the extravagant wardroom. She looked up; the ceiling’s painted pipes and vents looked like brass steampunk.

“These furnishings have been in my family for *five* generations...” Nikto smiled.

Arrison observed neoclassical furniture, velvet couches, with Victorian armchairs in the corners. The floor was covered with red Persian rugs. She inhaled to smell a faint aroma of smoldering incense.

Nikto looked up at wood paneling and crown moldings. “Colombian craftsmen required *six* months to outfit this room.” He illustrated with his hands, “They had to disassemble the fixtures –bring them onboard one item at a time– then reassemble them here.” He smiled with a pride in his eyes.

Arrison had never been lost for words, but this room appeared completely incongruous with what she’d envisioned for a cold-war military vessel. The room had a slight creak as if the paneling had been attached to uneven bulkheads. It sounded like she was on a wooden schooner.

“This is where I come to meditate, study my journals…” Nikto paced with hands behind his back. “And play my Steinway. The crew enjoys it over the intercom.”

To her left, she tapped an ivory key on a grand piano that appeared priceless. Along a draped wall, she was drawn to a particular oil painting. In earth tones, it depicted a beach with rough waves and a sailboat.

“You have a good eye…” Nikto approached with a humble grin. “Yes, that is a Van Gogh. ‘*View of the Sea at Scheveningen*.’ Stolen in 2002 by my previous employers.” He nodded over her shoulder. “There is a Monet on that bulkhead.”

“Stolen by *previous employers*..?” Arrison asked, dubious.

He shrugged, “Men who believed they could have everything they desire. They were wrong.”

Arrison realized the glint in his eye came from light at the far end of the parlor. She walked to her right to see the source of the pulsating aqua light.

“*My god*…” she exhaled to behold eight-foot circular windows, one on each side of the parlor. She sprung towards the glass, eager to experience the view. Her face glowed from the undulating radiance.

In the crystal-clear water, she saw a sprawling reef pass thirty feet below. She looked up with a wide smile to see sunlight from the distant surface. A school of yellowtails swirled by with light glistening off their scales.

“These are my *Iris windows*,” Nikto approached over her shoulder. “My…*Glaza na mir,”* he elegantly pronounced in Russian. “My ‘eyes onto the world’.”

Arrison had her nose to the glass like a wide-eyed child at an aquarium. “I didn’t think submarines had windows this large...”

“My Irises are one of a kind. Developed by my former partner.” Nikto knocked on the curved glass. “The sphere is the strongest shape to endure extreme pressures. Eighteen centimeters thick of polymethyl methacylate. Its strength-to-weight ratio is equivalent to carbon steel.”

Arrison flinched as a large stingray skimmed the window with its gray wings and white belly.

Nikto added casually, “The Irises can close for combat.”

Arrison instantly wilted. *For* c*ombat..?* An abrupt reminder of their predicament. She turned to face him with any pleasure drained from her face.

“What are your intentions with us?”

Nikto shifted his jaw to consider a reply, but they were interrupted by a female voice.

“–How many of them are dining? Two or three?” the girl asked with a Spanish accent.

Arrison turned to see a stunning Latina with long black hair. She appeared about twenty years old with large brown eyes. Though she wore a turtleneck and slacks on her slim form, she didn’t seem like one of the crew.

Nikto locked as if her intrusion hadn’t been anticipated. “Dr. Arrison, this is my ward, *Pilar*.”

The young lady gave a faint smile. Her eyes fleetingly scanned Arrison as though she hadn’t seen another female –or visitor– in some time.

He replied to Pilar in abrupt Spanish. Arrison tried to understand the words.

Pilar gave a meek nod and exited.

Arrison decided to ask, “What’d you tell her?”

“I said, ‘Two for dinner. Dr. Arrison and her son. I am not certain of the third.’”

Arrison paused with a nod. “She’s beautiful. Is she related?”

“No…” With a side glance, he selected his words, “She is the daughter of my… prior employer in Bogotá.” He looked at her, “He understood she is in a safer world here.”

Arrison frowned at the curious response. *This is a safer world?*

Chapter Fourteen – The Chamber of Babel

A tall, gangly officer was dispatched to escort Chandler to the Naumtsev’s control room.

“You call me *Pavlo*,” the man offered in a thick Russian accent.

Chandler just nodded, bashful. Interaction with strangers was not his forte. The pale man seemed pleasant, but had a humorless face with a wispy attempt at a goatee.

“Follow me,” Pavlo said as he led Chandler along a passage. The man had to hunch to step through entryways.

Chandler guessed he and Pavlo were about the same age. He tried to envision the different world and upbringing the man must’ve experienced. Chandler realized his studies never included that part of the world or anything political. This made him more curious.

“Where are you from?” Chandler asked in a monotone.

“*Vladivostok*,” Pavlo uttered.

Chandler didn’t understand the word. So he tried, “What’s your job on the Naumtsev?”

“Sometimes navigation. Sometimes helmsman or copilot.” Pavlo seemed to warm slightly, “We are not many, so must do many jobs.”

They approached a companionway and Pavlo led him up a ladder to the first level.

“This is the Operations Compartment,” Pavlo muttered, helping Chandler up. “Here in the control room is where we operate the Naumtsev.”

Chandler scanned the room, disenchanted. It was nothing like his cabin or the wardroom. The walls were steel panels that were either beige or mint-green. The fifteen-by-ten-foot area was cluttered with controls, some even on the ceiling. The walls were filled with innumerable dials, knobs and switches. Though the room was dim, Chandler had to squint from the fluorescent light revealing a haze of cigarette smoke.

He had never seen a place that still allowed smoking. Seven crewmen chattered with a dissonance of Spanish and Russian voices. They sat behind laptops and monitors that appeared a decade old. The men were either pale or olive, making it easy to determine who was speaking which language. They glanced at Chandler, but kept busy with their tasks, garishly blowing smoke towards the ceiling.

With a thick accent, Pavlo described the room in detail. The bulkhead to their right was for navigational equipment and GPS receivers. On the forward portside corner, there were chairs for the ship's control station. The seats were for a *helmsman* and *planesman*, who used steering wheel-type controls to adjust the rudder and diving planes.

“That is the EOT,” Pavlo pointed to a round dial at the helm. “It stands for…” He squinted to recall the term, “Engine Order Telegraph on U.S. ships. If the captain orders the helm to accelerate, the EOT communicates with the engineering crew, who throttle the turbines for the propellers.” He pointed up, “Sometimes you hear three bells.”

Pavlo described the opposite wall as the weapons control with less elaboration. Chandler hesitated at the sobering reality the vessel was armed. He saw a large red switch and he wondered if the “fire” control was big and red like in the movies.

In the center if the room were two periscopes that pulled down from the ceiling. Chandler looked up, trying to imagine their current view. Hundreds of miles at sea? Or near a coast –if so, friend or enemy?

His eyes were drawn to a panel filled with red and green lights like a Christmas tree.

“Hull Opening Indicator Panel.” Pavlo pointed to the lights, “Every hatch, vent or exhaust has a red light if open. The Naumtsev is not safe to dive until all lights are green.”

A smaller man with round glasses swiftly approached. “Hello,” he smiled with crooked teeth. He was bald and his glasses made him appear goggle-eyed.

Pavlo introduced the man, “This is *Dmitri*.”

Before Chandler could react, Pavlo switched to rapid Russian to speak to the man. Chandler felt temporarily excluded, so he just nodded his head.

To appear harmless to the American boy, Dmitri smiled as Pavlo spoke to him.

“Captain Nikto said to show this boy around,” Pavlo said in Russian. “But he asks *many* questions.”

Dmitri chuckled. “Nikto said we can answer all their questions –they are never leaving!”

Chandler looked back and forth between the men, puzzled at their exchange.

After Pavlo turned to exit, Dmitri smiled at Chandler. “Welcome to the Naumtsev,” he spoke with decent English. “You call me Dmitri. I came with Nikto from *Severodvinsk*.” He motioned for Chandler to follow him to seats behind a communication station.

“Do you guys only speak Russian here?” Chandler asked.

“Half the crew is Spanish. Men who came from Colombia,” Dmitri pointed to a clique of men. “The rest Russia or Ukraine. To avoid confusion we try to use English for navigation, just like pilots and air controllers. We might reply ‘aye’ to the captain instead of *da* or *si*.”

Chandler skimmed the overwhelming controls, “What’s your job?”

Dmitri bobbed his head to consider an accurate answer. “Sonar…and I am the… data… communication expert–”

“–Are you a hacker?” Chandler blurted, shameless.

Rather than being offended by some crude stereotype, Dmitri smirked. “I am the *best..*.” He checked over his shoulder, “You recall the 2016 American election?” He winked.

Chandler expelled a sharp laugh –then stopped, unsure if he was joking.

Ned Landa’s solitary confinement was disrupted by the squeal of his cell door. He opened his eyes to see the figure of Captain Nikto, alone with no guards.

“Greetings Mr. Landa,” Nikto gave a scant smile. “Would you care for improved accommodations?”

Landa stood with tight fists. He seethed, “I want off this coffin before someone’s navy –*or cartel*– sinks it.”

“Fair enough,” Nikto remained serene. “If you are indeed a mechanical expert, I need your assistance. If you succeed, you may disembark at the next port.”

Landa was thrown by the offer. He squinted, “What do you need..?”

Chandler became much more comfortable in the control room. Since he didn’t smoke, Dmitri offered him fruity Colombian bubble gum called *Bon Bon Bum*. He was seated with a set of headphones around his neck at an array of monitors next to Dmitri.

“If there’s no Wi-Fi down here, how do you communicate?” Chandler fidgeted with the headphones.

Dmitri spoke with a cigarette dangling from his lips. “On land, Wi-Fi is transmitted using radio waves. But they do not work through salt water.”

Chandler frowned with a nod, “Submarines are cut off from communication using ordinary radio frequencies.”

“*Da…*” Dmitri raised a brow, impressed. “We can surface and raise an antenna above sea level, but that would disclose our location.” He tapped a monitor. “That is why I use communication buoys I call *C-Buoys*.”

Chandler’s eyes flickered, intrigued. “How’s that work?”

“Okay,” Dmitri spread his hands to illustrate. “If Captain Nikto asks me to search for any reports of our vessel, I launch a C-Buoy. They are round, about the size of your American basketball.” He reached for a switch. “With this control, I launch the C-Buoy from the forward hull. It ascends, tethered to the ship with a thin fiber optic cable.”

With a mind that functioned visually, Chandler liked to imagine things as if they were occurring before his eyes. He could see a small orb ejected from the Naumtsev’s hull like a cannonball. It would swiftly rise, trailing a long string like a child’s balloon. Ultimately, it’d breach the surface, bobbing along on the whitecaps.

“It has a small antenna,” Dimitri pantomimed with his little finger. “I can create a secure link with the *iridium satellite constellation,*” he struggled with the pronunciation. “That is a series of satellites used for data coverage, cellphones and so on.” He looked at Chandler. “After a data dump of information to the ship, the buoy is scuttled.”

“*Scuttled*?” Chandler shrugged.

“The buoy self-destructs. From the base, barbs spring up like scorpion tail.” Dmitri snapped his hands shut like a Venus flytrap. “The ball breaks and the C-Buoy sinks.” He swiped his hands together, “No evidence.”

Chandler frowned at the ruined vision of a ball merrily drifting upon the water.

Something caught Dmitri’s eye. His face tensed and he leaned towards his monitor. The screen filled with unintelligible Russian code.

“What is that?” Chandler squinted. “Data from above–”

“–*Zatknis*!” Dmitri exclaimed. He shoved a finger in his face to shush him.

Chandler froze. He watched the strange code roll across Dmitri’s screen, reflecting in the man’s round glasses. The man anxiously blinked as he read.

Dmitri tapped his earpiece and uttered, *“Kapitan, u menya yest' byulleten'.*”

With no knowledge of Russian, Chandler’s mind raced through a spectrum of possibilities based on Dmitri’s tone and posture. None of which were positive.

Chapter Fifteen – Enter the Cyclops

Dmitri’s words blared over the grand parlor’s speakers in Russian, “Captain, I have a bulletin.”

Nikto was standing beside Ned Landa at a large Iris window. They had just arrived from Landa’s cell.

“This is Nikto, what is it?” the captain replied in Russian.

Oblivious to the foreign words, Landa was riveted to his spectacular view of a passing reef.

Dmitri spoke fast, “I tested a vulnerability in the DEA’s VPN server–”

“–Just tell me the message,” Nikto retorted, stepping away from Landa.

“The U.S. claims it was a capital offense to kill servicemen.”

Nikto tensed his brows to understand the context.

“The Coast Guard vessel. Their two officers are dead.” Dmitri continued in Russian, “Our three guests are also presumed dead.”

Nikto squeezed his eyes closed. With Landa occupied at the window, Nikto struggled to conceal a wave of emotion. He ran his fingers over his beard.

“A capital offense means punishment by death,” Dmitri added solemnly.

Nikto smoothed his sweater and took a breath. “It is of no consequence. We will not be returning to the United States anytime soon.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Landa’s voice boomed. Though he was irritated with the captain’s ongoing discussion in Russian, he was referring to something outside.

Nikto realized he was pointing out the window. He returned to Landa’s side to look out.

In their translucent view, the vessel was now stationary above a reef, thirty feet below. Landa pointed to the remains of a demolished boat resting on the seafloor between two coral beds.

“We are temporarily anchored,” Nikto stated with a shrug.

Landa huffed, “I’m talking about that boat –what’s going on out there?” The sunken vessel appeared to be a thirty-foot Avanti power boat that had been shattered in two. It looked like a recent incident based on the clean condition of its hull.

“We will check the vessel for…anything worthwhile,” Nikto dismissed with his hands.

Before Landa could respond, he froze at what he saw. Coming into view was a black minisub, slowly maneuvering from under the Naumtsev. It was tubular, approximately fifteen feet long. On its front was a large, single dome window.

“That is the Cyclops,” Nikto stated. “A prototype minisubmersible, created for me in China.”

Astonished, Landa watched the small sub progress towards a gaping hole in the Avanti’s hull.

“It was designed using the same schematics as the sub that explored the Titanic,” Nikto smiled with pride. “The hull is carbon fiber. It can accommodate four men and dive 3,000 meters with a 1,000-kilo payload. Its observation dome is made of borosilicate glass.”

To Landa, it looked like a high-tech version of minisubs he’d seen in deep-sea exploration journals. He turned to Nikto, more subdued. “Whose boat was that?”

“It was an enemy vessel,” Nikto replied without further explanation. “As you can see, one arm is in need of repair.”

Landa looked out to see the Cyclops had two robotic arms under its observation dome. But only one folded out, as the other arm hung limp.

“It’s left grappling arm is inoperative,” Nikto said. “Entirely useless.”

Landa pressed his face to the glass, attempting to focus. His view of the boat’s hull was obscured by swaying ribbons of seaweed. As the Cyclops hovered closer to the boat, it forced the seaweed aside.

He gasped at what he saw –spilling from the hull were countless small white bricks. The Cyclops extended its right arm and the single claw began to collect the bricks, dropping them into a net under its dome. The sub looked like some giant crustacean feeding from the seafloor.

Landa felt a tingle at the base of his skull realizing what he was witnessing.

“My crew is small, less than fifty men, with limited disciplines,” Nikto said. “No one trained in robotic or hydraulic repairs.” Nikto looked at Landa, “Can you repair the arm?”

Landa turned with a vacant expression. Lost for words, he mumbled, “I’ve repaired… pneumatic cylinders... That seems comparable.”

Nikto stood erect. “If you repair the Cyclops’ arm, you may depart the next time we surface.”

Landa took a last glance at the sub collecting the white bricks. “I’ll do it.” He turned back to Nikto, “I want outof here. Sooner the better.”

Dmitri wiped his face with his hand. He seemed exasperated by Chandler’s infinite queries.

“How far can the Naumtsev’s fuel last?” Chandler asked as if it were a test.

Dmitri took off his glasses and huffed. “With enriched uranium, we can circumnavigate the globe many times without refueling.”

“How?” Chandler challenged.

Dmitri responded with lively hands. “Fission in a reactor generates heat. That produces steam. That turns a turbine for electricity.” He took a breath, “The Naumtsev is self-sufficient, up to… thirty years.”

Chandler paused to process the information. “What about oxygen and water?”

Dmitri lit a new cigarette. “We do not need to come up for air unless venting for emergency. Machines called scrubbers remove carbon dioxide from the air. Oxygen generators extract oxygen from seawater and distillation makes clean water from seawater. ” He blew smoke at the ceiling, “Air is always breathable, and clean water forever–”

He was mercifully interrupted by whispers from the control crew. Dmitri and Chandler looked over to see the men murmur in Spanish that someone was entering. “*Tranquilo… Ella está entrando!*”

Puzzled, Chandler turned. He gawked at the unexpected vision of a young female. As if his senses had abruptly slowed, he saw dark hair floating around an angelic face. Though petite in her uniform, she had curves that entirely conflicted with the unsightly male crew.

“She is Pilar…” Dmitri uttered under his breath.

She walked straight to Dmitri and spoke English with a Spanish accent, “Nikto says the guests should rest in the parlor before dinner.” She gave an obvious glance towards Chandler.

He locked onto her large mocha eyes. He felt a surge down his spine like a static shock.

Pilar also paused, but with furled brows at the ogling stranger.

A few crewman began whistling, with lewd catcalls in Spanish.

Pilar glared at them and scolded in rapid Spanish, *“Haz tu trabajo o le diré a Nikto que te corte en cebo de tiburón!”*

The men instantly turned back to their systems, silenced.

Chandler was captivated by this spirited lady. He whispered to Dmitri, “What’d she just say to them?”

Standing three feet away, Pilar replied, “I told them to do their jobs or I’ll have Nikto cut them into bait for the sharks.”

Chandler’s face beamed. He’d never been mesmerized before.

Pilar flashed a coy smirk in Chandler’s general direction and exited the room.

Chapter Sixteen – The Dinner Bell Chimes

Dr. Arrison and Chandler stood alone in the grand parlor. Gazing out an Iris window, they shared a rare moment of silence, from either the hypnotic shimmer of the water, or contemplating the day’s events.

Earlier, they’d been told they should “retire” to their quarters to “refresh” for dinner. Such a formal request seemed odd from a group of supposed narcotic smugglers.

Arrison climbed up –and Chandler climbed down– companionways to meet in the middle on the second deck. A genial Colombian crewman led them to their quarters.

To Arrison, the man seemed like a pleasant escort, versus a guard sent to force them to their cells. Despite Landa’s assertions, it didn’t feel like they were being treated as prisoners.

Chandler quietly relayed everything he’d learned in the control room. Arrison patiently absorbed every word, finding it truly fascinating.

“Oxygen and water forever?” she marveled. “The fuel can travel the globe?”

Arrison told him about the astounding views from the eight-foot windows in the parlor.

Each of them returned to their quarters to prepare for dinner. They were told they could enjoy the parlor in the interim.

After they’d changed into fresh clothes –more of the same uniforms– they met outside her cabin. Arrison had memorized the path to the parlor: one flight of steps down, and then forward towards the front of the vessel.

Chandler’s reaction to the parlor was equal to hers. With an eager grin, he observed every fixture. He especially liked an antique chess set and a large globe with gold inlay –then he saw the Iris windows.

He sprinted to a window, but rather than enjoying the view, he looked up to inspect the brass molding around the glass. In awe, he recited under his breath, “Spheres and ellipsoids are able to withstand the highest external pressure…”

Side by side they gazed into the world of her beloved profession. After following spiraling schools of fish, it was time to deliberate.

Arrison glanced over her shoulder, then asked in a low voice, “If Nikto’s telling the truth about *Guanahacabibes*, do you realize what that implies?”

Chandler bit his lip, skeptical. “I’ve read all the myths…” He looked at her, “But there’s been no corroborating evidence.”

“Because no one’s ever had *access*,” she countered. “They’re not just myths; they’re actual theories.” She looked out into the sea, conflicted. “What if this is our only chance to see it?”

“Do you trust him?” Chandler frowned. “Mr. Landa says Nikto’s a thug and we’re prisoners. But the captain *claims* we can leave anytime–”

They paused to see Ned Landa enter the room. He shouted, “A room this size in the forward bow?” He scanned the walls, “They had to gut crew berthing. Nice priorities…”

Arrison knew Landa was brash, but he seemed larger than her memories from the night before. He was cleaned-up and wearing a uniform, but with short sleeves that were snug on his biceps.

She pointed outside and spoke to Chandler as if they’d been studying the view. “See that bright green flower design? That’s ridged cactus coral.”

Chandler nodded, “That means we’re still in the Caribbean.”

Landa approached their window. He looked down to see a reef forty feet below.

“Look at that goliath grouper,” Chandler inhaled sharply. “It’s the size of Volkswagen!” The enormous, serene fish had a thick girth with brown and tan patterns.

Landa stepped between them to interject. “I know marine life...” He pointed out, mocking, “That grouper, I’d cut into chunks and then fry it up, served with malt vinegar.” He pointed to the right, “See that school of yellow tail? It’d make enough sushi for an entire–”

“–Cute, Mr. Landa,” Arrison cut him off. “But the captain actually *respects* our studies.”

Any humor in Landa’s face vanished. “Nikto is no scientific benefactor. I saw firsthand what they’re *really* doing.”

Chandler paused at his tone. “What’d you see?”

“They got a minisub.” He pointed out the window as if he could still see it. “They call it the Cyclops. It was launched from under the lower hull.”

Arrison’s eyes flickered at the prospect, “A research sub?”

“Hardly,” Landa chuckled. “They sent it down to a smashed boat, sunken on the seafloor. I watched the whole thing from thirty feet.” He pantomimed with his hands, “When the sub maneuvered closer, I saw the boat was *filled* with narcotics –white bricks of it, pouring out the hull.” He spread his hands with drama. “He sinks the competition to steal their loads.”

Arrison and Chandler tilted their heads at the concept.

Landa flashed an ironic smile. “He’s *just* a drug dealer. Nothing more.” He paused for gravity, “–With a ship that could start World War III.”

They flinched at a voice behind them. They turned to see Captain Nikto as if he’d been standing there all along.

“We have pulled anchor.” Nikto gave a thin smile and turned. “Follow me.”

No one spoke as they hiked single-file through the narrow passageway. They only had to climb one flight of steps to the wardroom on the second deck.

When Nikto opened the door, Arrison was hit with the aroma of cooking. A faint scent of garlic, wine and perhaps seafood, a smell she’d nearly forgotten from the mainland.

The captain took his seat at the head of the table. Landa sat across from him, with Arrison and Chandler on both sides. There was an extra chair beside the captain.

Nikto looked to his right and a smile filled his face. Pilar entered from a side door. Her appearance was even more striking as she wore a bright floral dress that contrasted with everyone’s dark attire. She returned a faint smile to Nikto.

The captain gave her a once over. “Interesting you are so… dressed up.”

Pilar lifted a shoulder in a half shrug, “So..?” Her tone seemed insolent as she took a seat between Nikto and Chandler.

The captain turned to the three, “You must understand we have not had guests…” He paused to recount, “Ever.”

Pilar pursed her lips, seemingly uninterested. Chandler glanced at her and then back to his place setting. There were no sounds other than the tinkling of the swaying chandelier.

“Pilar is too modest to say, but she is quite a chef,” Nikto tried again to draw her into a conversation. “She is a graduate of *Moreno Escuala De Gastronomia*, a culinary institute in Bogotá. She leads a team in our galley.”

Pilar shrunk with discomfort. She raised her brows waiting for the topic to pass.

Nikto blinked, intolerant of her silence. “Why don’t you tell our guests the *carte du jour* this evening?”

Pilar manufactured a smile and cleared her throat. “We are starting with a wakame seaweed salad. Then Gulf oysters broiled with blue crabmeat; and sautéed Scallops in a chardonnay sauce.”

Ned Landa gave a lopsided smile to Arrison, impressed.

They turned at the clang of a crewman rolling a serving cart. Plates of food were protected in silver cloche covers. A magnificent aroma wafted in from the galley.

“That’d be like thirty bucks in a fancy restaurant,” Chandler grinned.

Pilar stifled a chuckle at his comment.

“As your American cliché goes,” Nikto smiled, “the Naumtsev’s food supply is very *sustainable,* considering we have 139 million square miles of ocean on our world.”

Pilar leaned towards Chandler. “Seafood starts to taste the same after a while...” She smirked, “I’d kill for a grilled *churrasco*. Rare.”

Chandler beamed at her acknowledgment of his existence. The best response he could assemble was, “I like steak too…”

Nikto frowned like an exasperated parent. “Adolescents are the same around the globe, no?” He looked at Arrison. “I am just thankful she is not tied to any mobile phone, electronics or the…Wi-Fi.”

The conversation paused as the server presented gourmet plates of food before each guest. Everyone’s eyes widened, with smiles to the server.

Arrison used the moment to absorb the subtleties. There was some tension between Nikto and Pilar. Perhaps comparable to any relationship between an adolescent and a parent figure, despite their dissimilar heritage –and being sealed in an illicit submarine.

The girl seemed formally educated, graceful yet assertive, and clearly beautiful. Arrison couldn’t imagine being the only female among an all-male crew of fugitives. But from observing Pilar’s confidence, it appeared she could hold her own.

Arrison looked at her food as the steam reached her nose. Her mouth watered to behold large oysters on the half-shell, swimming in butter and lemon, with broiled lump crabmeat on top, and a drizzle of hollandaise on each. On a separate plate, sea scallops were the size of large marshmallows. They’d been seared with olive oil, wine, garlic and cherry tomatoes.

She lifted a fork, eager. Such a meal would’ve been luxury, even back home. Studying her plate, she realized Nikto’s lofty speech about eating only from the sea couldn’t be entirely true. The presence of tomatoes, lemons, butter, garlic and wine meant the Naumtsev had to get provisions from somewhere. *But where and how often?*

Nikto raised a glass of *Fangoria Cru Lermont,* a Russian chardonnay.He waited for everyone to raise their glasses before toasting in Russian, “*Dlya nashego zdorov'ya i svobody i vechnosti, chtoby naslazhdat'sya imi oboimi.*” He smiled to interpret, “To health, freedom and an eternity to enjoy them both.”

Arrison inadvertently shot her eyes to Landa. *An eternity..?*

Everyone began to eat. To Arrison, it was better than she had imagined. The seafood was fresher than any she’d tasted on land –and she lived in Florida. Chandler seemed hesitant of his wakame salad, a bowl of neon-green seaweed with vinegar and sesame seeds. A hush fell over the room with just the sounds of forks touching china and crystal glasses being refilled.

Landa gulped his third glass of wine in one draw. He wiped his mouth with a forearm and said, “I have to admit everything seems *so* perfect…” He paused until he had everyone’s attention, “–on the surface.” He cut his eyes to Nikto. “Do you mind if I ask a blunt question?”

Arrison and Chandler lowered their forks, anticipating what was coming.

“I expect nothing less.” Nikto dabbed the corner of his mouth with a linen. “I am as transparent as… Abaco waters.”

Landa leaned forward, elbows on the table. “I’m not the Ph.D. in the room, so maybe you can help me understand…” He lifted a finger, “First, you’re a traitor to your own country by somehow stealing an entire submarine.” He raised a second finger, “Then… you steal it *again* from your new business partners –who happen to be drug lords– to then rip *them* off.”

All heads turned to Nikto. He leered with a venomous smile.

Landa plowed ahead, “But in reality, you’ve stolen at least twenty ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads, and a dozen cruise missiles with a range of 3,000 kilometers.” He paused for gravity, “Some might define that as a terrorist.”

Arrison and Chandler froze in their seats.

“You dare use the word *terrorist?*” Nikto’s voice swelled and his eyes blazed. “With Pilar as my witness,” he pointed at her face, “I jettisoned every torpedo, missile and warhead. Gone!”

His words echoed within the small room. He’d reacted as if ‘terrorist’ was the most profane word in any language.

Chandler’s voice broke the silence, “Where’d they all go?”

Nikto turned to the boy. “The Pacific. The Mariana Trench, the deepest in the world. Seven miles, 11,000 meters. Unreachable from *terrorists* –as well as your nations.”

Pilar gave a solemn nod.

Nikto continued with flailing hands, “I *stole* this vessel –as you so simplify– for a very precise reason: they took something from *me!”*

Arrison saw him look up again at the oil painting of the stunning Asian woman.

“My partner *Kana*. She was the scientist.” Nikto looked back at the three. “The cartel had partners in China for their *precious* opioids,” he uttered with sarcasm. “And their disgraceful fentanyl labs.”

Arrison and Chandler reacted to the abrupt shift in subject.

“I met Kana. She was chosen by the Chinese like an asset, to retrofit the Akula,” Nikto continued with disdain. “The cartel sourced their technology, to improve its smuggling, its speed...” His voice softened. “Kana’s intellect was more attracted to exploration than drug trafficking. I shared her vision. We fell in love.”

Silence. The guests studied the portrait of Kana, painted with an ill-fated smile. Nikto paused and smoothed his beard. Arrison felt like she was seeing a different side to the man.

His eyes reignited. “The cartel believed she was modifying the Naumtsev for exploration rather than smuggling. Her creation of Iris windows, the Cyclops…” He looked directly at Arrison. “So they *took* her to assure I fulfill my duties.”

Arrison’s mouth opened, unsure how to respond.

“So I seized something just as precious from them.” Nikto turned to Pilar.

Pilar said nothing. Her lip quivered, with large glistening eyes.

Chandler gazed at Pilar with confused empathy, then to his mother.

After an uneasy five seconds, Landa spoke, “With all due… respect, Skipper, I want no part of your cartel feud. But I will repair your Cyclops.” He pointed a finger at Nikto. “But then I get to I walk at the next port. As you *promised*.”

Pilar winced with confusion. She turned to Nikto and uttered furious Spanish, “*Les mentiste? No hay otro puerto. Nuestro combustible dura treinta años!*”

Landa’s lips drew into a snarl, “I speak Spanish you idiots. My mom’s Cuban!”

Chandler darted his head between them, “What’d she say?”

“I just called Nikto a liar!” Pilar crossed her arms, “There is no *next port*. Our fuel can last thirty years.” She cut her eyes to the captain with contempt.

Before anyone could react, all five cringed at a deafening alarm. Yellow lights flashed above the doors. Nikto dashed to the door to shout into a speaker, “What is the crisis?”

“*Kapitan*…” Pavlo’s voice responded in frantic English. “There is a coolant leak in the reactor compartment! Men are trapped!”

Nikto spun to his guests, “Stay here.” He opened the door and rushed out.

Landa bolted upright, almost tossing his chair. “Screw that…” he muttered as he jogged out the door in Nikto’s trail.

Chapter Seventeen – The Heart of the Beast

The captain jogged the passageway with Landa ten feet behind him. Unlike the wardroom, the corridor became more industrial the farther they walked. Crown moldings and brass fixtures turned into pipes and gritty ducts.

“Where are we headed?” Landa asked, working to keep up.

Nikto glanced back, irritated he was following. “Engineering.” His accent was more pronounced, “Reactor control.”

Landa needed the handrails for the incline. The relentless alarm was piercing. There were flashing lights every thirty feet. Below the lights were yellow signs with the red trefoil design, the universal radiation warning symbol.

*Great…* Landa groaned. He was a prisoner on an enemy submarine, led by an egocentric drug lord of the deep, and now marching into a radioactive crisis. *Which way will finally do me in?*

Landa quickened his pace. He was trained to use his skills to combat any emergency, despite any personal consequence.

They walked a straight path, which meant engineering was on the same deck towards the stern. They halted at a reinforced steel door. Nikto lifted some sort of badge from his hip and swiped it across a security pad. The Naumtsev seemed to be a hybrid of cold-war technology with modern upgrades. Nikto’s tale of China retrofitting the vessel with advanced technology made sense. He watched the captain turn the hatch wheel and step through the door.

The reactor control room was small, ten-by-ten feet, and stifling hot. It had steel bulkheads with the same flashing alarms. It smelled like the nearby diesel auxiliary engines.

Landa wasn’t a nuclear engineer, but he knew the reactor was the heart of the vessel’s propulsion and electrical systems. It was basically a sophisticated tea kettle. The reactor got hot, which heated water in its core. The resulting steam powered the propulsion turbines, which turned the propellers for motion, and the generators for electricity. The pressurized water would then recirculate through pipes, back to the reactor for the process to repeat.

If the reactor room was anything like those in U.S. subs, it was adjacent to the reactor, separated by a shielded door. The nuclear reactor would be housed within a three-story cylinder, accessed with ladders and catwalks.

When Nikto entered, two engineers stood at attention, oily and scared.They each wore dosimeters that looked like thermometers around their necks to measure the level of radiation. The men saluted and shouted, “*Kapitan!”* Landa was unable to read the radiation levels.

Nikto and Landa looked down to see a crewman sprawled on the deck and shouting in Russian. His leg was crushed under the steel door to the reactor. The pail, clammy man was writhing in pain, clutching his leg below the knee.

“*Aleksei*, report!” Nikto shouted to a lead engineer.

The man had wet bangs in his face. “*Kapitan*, there was a leak in the reactor.” He panted, “They went in to contain it. The door then closed!”

“It is a shielded door,” Nikto shouted to Landa over the alarms, “designed to drop as a safeguard.”

The crewman screamed in pain. When Landa saw a pool of blood under his shin, he dove forward to attempt to lift the door. Nikto crouched to join him. Together, they labored to grip the bottom of the thick door. It wouldn’t budge.

“If we contain the leak in the cooling circuit,” Nikto grunted to lift again, “we can stop any spreading risk.”

The two men struggled to lift in the confining space as the engineers monitored the radiation. The injured man released a deep, guttural groan with fading stamina.

Landa studied the cluttered room. He shouted to Aleksei, “Give me that pipe wrench –and that tool box!” The captain watched, curious.

The engineer frowned at the large American, but pivoted to hand him an enormous thirty-six-inch wrench of solid steel. The second man slid him a toolbox the size of a large brick.

“Make a lever!” Landa shouted, frustrated with the men, “Do you understand?”

He wedged the wrench under the door like a crowbar. He lied on his side and shoved the toolbox under the wrench like a seesaw. With one foot, he pressed the box closer to the door.

The men wiped their eyes, fixated on whatever Landa was attempting.

“Use the box as a fulcrum.” Landa’s perspiring face grew red. “A *fulcrum!*” Angry with their delay, he thrust down on the wrench with both arms. The men understood; they joined him to push down on the wrench as Landa kept pressure on the box with his foot.

After a minute of unyielding effort, the door lifted an inch –just enough to pull the man’s leg out. Aleksei pulled the man back by his shoulders, freeing his leg from door.

The steel door then fell closed with a resounding boom.

Landa shouted at the men, exasperated, “Do you even know basic mechanics?” When he looked up, he was shocked to see Aleksei pointing at the door with a trembling finger.

The man stammered with horror in his eyes. “Ivan…is still in with the reactor!”

Nikto froze at the realization a man had been trapped inside. Dread transformed his face as he gazed at the sealed door. Landa looked at the men, equally perplexed.

Nikto turned to Aleksei. “The only way to override is to shut the primary circuits?”

“*Da, Kapitan*,” Aleksei nodded. “If we do, auxiliary will slow us to ten knots... And we need to surface to ventilate.”

Nikto’s eyes ricocheted, gauging all consequences. He looked at Aleksei, “Shut the primary circuits.”

With an audible *clank, clank,* the door to the reactor was manually ratcheted open. Two figures wearing yellow radiation protective suits appeared in the doorway. With their large helmets, they looked like cosmonauts.

They looked down at the steel-grated catwalk encircling the radioactive core. Face down on the deck was Ivan Popov, their chief engineer. His hands were locked in claw-like grips at his temples as if he’d been in agonizing pain. His face was scarlet with oozing blisters.

It had taken too long to open the door.

Hunched in a chair, Captain Nikto kneaded his forehead at his desk.

Landa sat across from him. With no words, he watched the man brood. He looked away to observe the captain’s study. It smelled like pipe tobacco. The office was relatively small, but richly-appointed with antiques including a model sailing ship also called the *Naumtsev.* There were framed maritime charts and black and white portraits of, presumably, relatives from Russia.

Growing fatigued, Landa crossed his arms. Nikto’s desk was covered with unfolded charts. A pewter tray held a crystal decanter and two glasses. The only item that seemed out of place was a flat-panel monitor.

“We suffered a loss of coolant...” Nikto murmured as if speaking to himself. “Aleksei said it was a leak in the primary circuit. Cooling of the core had been reduced.” He shook his head, “That’s what Ivan had been repairing, to save us all…”

Landa quietly listened, allowing the man the consolation of grief. He was staggered how empathetic the man seemed towards his crew.

Nikto took a deep breath, emerging from his gloom. He reached for the two glasses and poured something clear from the decanter. He handed one glass to Landa. With glossy eyes, he lifted his glass to make a toast. He recited a lengthy quote in Russian.

He looked at Landa to translate, “May misfortune follow you the rest of your life, but never catch up.”

“Russian wisdom?” Landa studied his glass.

“Irish.” Nikto gave a thin smile, “My mother.”

Landa warily sipped his drink. It was vodka, bitingly strong but smooth like iced water. He nodded and finished his glass.

Nikto’s monitor illuminated. It was live video of Pavlo from control. “*Kapitan, ty zdes'?*”

Landa turned to his screen and replied. “Outcome? In English.”

Onscreen, Pavlo swallowed before replying. “Captain, regretfully… Officer Ivan Popov was exposed too long. He was pronounced dead. Dr. Yuri is testing the other men for sickness. Results will take time.”

Nikto shrunk hearing what he already knew. He shaded his eyes with a hand. “Status of the Naumtsev?”

“The leak can be repaired. But we need time,” Pavlo implored. “We do have a safe harbor off Haiti, only fifty nautical miles–”

“–That will take five hours on auxiliary!” Nikto barked, exasperated.

“*Da, Kapitan,*” Pavlo nodded. “We *will* need to vent…”

Nikto pinched the bridge of his nose. “Make it so. Launch a C-Buoy to scan for any sightings.” He turned off his monitor before Pavlo could respond.

Landa remained silent to digest the exchange. From Nikto’s mannerisms, it didn’t seem there was any ongoing radiation threat to the people onboard. He knew venting was usually done to bring in fresh air through a snorkel mast, while any potentially-contaminated air is expelled through a different duct. The Naumtsev still needed to surface, and they knew of a “safe harbor” –whatever that meant. *Could this provide a window to escape?* Landa wondered.

He watched Nikto drink another shot and then gaze with a thousand-yard stare.

“I knew Ivan Popov’s family…” Nikto stated in a sedate tone. “I went to *Kuznetsov* Naval Academy with his father in Saint Petersburg... Young Ivan volunteered for my crew and I was honored to have him.” Nikto gave a melancholy smile, “He followed me from *Severodvinsk,* all the way to Colombia…” His smile faded.

Landa fidgeted with his empty glass.

Nikto’s expression hardened, “Ivan and my entire crew agreed to follow me –essentially committing treason– because they *trusted* me, and agreed with my ideals.” His brows tensed. “And I have now failed him. *Dead,*” his tone underscored the word.

Landa inhaled to respond, but had nothing that would pacify the man. Nikto sat upright and paused as if studying him.

“Mr. Landa, you saved a man’s life tonight. If radiation had leaked beyond that seal…” He didn’t need to finish his sentence.

Landa squirmed in his seat. “I did what anyone would do.”

Nikto flashed an ironic smile. “To you I am the villain.” He motioned to the room, “Do you realize I lock myself in this very room to weep? I can admit that now.” He nodded with a shrug. “Any time a blameless dies. Whether they are defenseless refugees –or my crew.”

Despite his usual impulse, Landa remained quiet. He reached for the decanter and poured two more drinks.

“I’m no saint.” Landa handed the captain a glass. “And I’m not fascinated by fish like your other guests.” He drank the vodka in one toss and looked at Nikto. “Your man said we’re surfacing off Haiti.”

Nikto narrowed his eyes, “Briefly…”

Landa put down his glass. “That gives me five hours to fix your minisub.”

Chapter Eighteen – Things That Swim With a Neon Glow

Chandler’s hair was in disarray and his eyes were half shut when he opened his cabin door. The person facing him on the opposite side made him stiffen. He stared, speechless, at the lady who was not his mother there to wish him good-night.

At nearly midnight, Pavlo had assured Chandler and his mother there was no further emergency. He said the alarms had been a drill, and Mr. Landa was working with the captain.

They were told it was midnight, because neither of them had any idea of the hour. They had no phones or watches and the ship had no clocks. The concept of time was like that of a windowless casino.

Chandler’s brain felt like it was at least midnight. It had been difficult to stay awake after dinner, and he needed to recharge after the events of the prior twenty-four hours –or could it have been longer, considering time zones and so on?

His mother had retired to her quarters without kissing him. She said she wanted to read a few of Nikto’s journals, and to write entries in a diary the captain had given her. She seemed very swept-up by the captain’s stories and promises.

Chandler was alone in his cabin. His bare feet could feel a mechanical vibration through the floor. He looked around his room; it was homey and the bed appeared comfortable, but there was no television or any other form of amusement other than a deck of cards. To help go to sleep, he’d been accustomed to needing stimuli, such as music or television. But with his given predicament, he’d let his exhaustion take over. He was asleep within minutes.

Until someone meekly rapped on his door.

It was that awkward moment where you forget where you went to bed. In the unfamiliar space, he stumbled towards the door and shouted, “I’m comin’ mom!”

When he opened his door, wearing only a t-shirt and boxers, he needed a second to comprehend Pilar’s large brown eyes gazing back at him.

She was still dressed for the evening, with her long hair on one shoulder. She cocked her head with a poised smirk, “I want to show you something –or do you have to ask your mother?”

Pilar led him down one flight of steps, and forward towards the bow. Chandler barely had time to pull on his clothes. She walked six feet in front of him and said little. Chandler had no idea where they were going, but somehow felt safe with this exquisite stranger.

“Have you seen the grand parlor?” Pilar asked in a soft Spanish accent.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I love the Iris windows.”

She grinned over her shoulder. “*Bien.*”

They entered the parlor. The room was almost completely dark. The only sound was the slight hum of the Naumtsev’s engines.

“Is there a light switch?” Chandler asked.

Pilar gave a half smile, *“*We won’t need it.”

Chandler was further mystified when she pulled him into the room by the hand. His eyes slowly adjusted to ambient light from several art lamps. She proceeded towards a bookshelf. He watched her strike a match to light a stick of incense. She placed it in a brass ashtray, and pulled him towards an Iris window.

The aroma from the incense was sweet but spicy, and Chandler couldn’t help but associate it with the air floating from her hair. She mentioned wanting to show him something, but the large circular windows revealed nothing but black.

“But it’s night out…” He checked over his shoulder as if they’d broken into a museum. “Should we be here?”

“*Tranquilo…”* she cooed with a grin. “It is okay. Captain Nikto is busy with some radiation concern.”

His eyes went round. Pilar then pulled him down to sit beside her, cross-legged on a Persian rug two feet from the window. She turned to the glass, waiting for something.

He looked out the window, confused. “There’s no light. It’s darker than in here–”

“*Shhh…*” Pilar touched his lips with a finger. “You will see.”

“See what?” he replied. Either Pilar or the room smelled great.

“You must be patient...” Her voice was soothing. “There is no instant gratification in nature.”

“You been talking to my mom–” His mouth fell open mid-sentence and their faces glowed.

Outside their window, swirls of blue lights appeared within the darkness. The pinpoints of light twinkled and spun like a million blossoming stars. The radiant sapphire cloud was at least twenty feet in diameter.

“Bioluminescent life forms…” Her white smile was visible. “They are called dino–”

“–Dinoflagellates,” he finished her sentence, awestruck. “They’re…*beautiful*…” They watched the lights shimmer and bloom like slow-motion fireworks.

“They illuminate because the Naumtsev is upsetting their shallow home,” Pilar whispered.

Chandler replied without blinking. “They emit light when the water around them is disturbed…”

They shared a moment of silence to look out, engrossed by the show.

“Look!” Pilar gasped and pointed. A school of pulsing, illuminated jellyfish drifted by with long, irradiated tendrils. Alternating blue, pink and purple, like neon.

Chandler watched the serene, pulsing creatures. Their translucent bodies were like prisms, emitting rainbows of light.

“Comb jellyfish.” Pilar added softly, “They scatter their light through their cilia.”

Chandler cocked his head like a fascinated puppy. “In the 17th century, Spanish explorers tried to close-off a bioluminescent bay in Puerto Rico. But the warm water made the dinoflagellates multiply. The bay glowed even brighter. The settlers thought the lights were–”

“–the work of the devil,” Pilar completed his thought. She looked at him, “Sometimes things are not what they seem.”

When he turned to her, their faces were closer than he’d anticipated. Chandler said nothing, not because he had nothing to say, but because he was distracted by the lights reflecting in her eyes. She returned his smile and looked back out.

Chandler and Pilar remained on the floor, staring out at an undersea galaxy.

Ned Landa followed the captain down two sets of stairs, which was one deck lower than he’d been. It had to be the bottom of the vessel, probably some oily dungeon where Nikto wanted him to slave-away.

The captain paused at a large secure door. He pressed buttons on a pad and the door slid open, along with a second set of doors behind it.

Landa had seen double doors like this, usually used to shield against extreme pressures. When the second set opened, the chamber illuminated. It was bright white and metallic, unlike the rest of the ship. Nikto continued inside and Landa followed, cautious.

He was immediately hit with the briny scent of seawater. The chamber was thirty feet long and spanned the forty-foot beam of the ship. It was spotless, with modern mechanical fixtures like a space station.

“This is the moon well.” Nikto motioned for him to enter.

Landa looked left to see the Cyclops hanging by a crane system. The fifteen-foot minisub was positioned above a large mechanical door on the floor that appeared wet. The salty aroma made sense; this was where they’d launched the Cyclops.

“This is a pressurized and floodable chamber,” Nikto confirmed. “My divers and the Cyclops can submerge and reenter at any depth.” He motioned to the door beneath the sub. “The drop point has double doors. The well is waterproof, the inner is pressure resistant.”

Landa raised his brows. “You said divers?”

“That’s what those are for,” Nikto motioned behind Landa. “I call them ADS: atmospheric dive suits. State of the art.”

Landa spun to see high-tech dive suits hanging on the wall. His eyes examined the suits. They were gray metal, with dome helmets and thick jointed arms and legs. The suits looked more like nine ghostly astronauts hanging on the wall.

Though the suits were remarkable, he wasn’t stunned. The Navy and Marines had similar ADS suits. They were predictably heavy, designed for the user to walk upright on the seafloor. Landa had never worn one, but he knew they were used for military deep sea operations, including search missions and crash-site recovery for water and aircraft.

The suits were atmospheric, meaning they required almost no compression or decompression. The users didn’t need to be a professional diver; they could just suit-up and maneuver on the bottom of the sea with a 180-degree view.

Despite all that, the thought of wearing such a confining suit gave Landa unease. He turned back to Nikto standing beside the Cyclops. “The room’s pressure can be adjusted?”

Nikto gazed at the four corners of the room as he spoke. “If we dive to 600 meters, the pressure would be sixty-times greater than the surface.” He stepped closer to the minisub. “When the Cyclops is docked, the moon well’s pressure –as well as the pressure of the Naumtsev– is maintained at *one atmosphere* to mimic the surface.”

Landa turned to absorb the entire room. His eyes sparkled like a kid in a toy store. There were work benches with power tools. Bins contained replacement parts, cables and hand tools. He stepped beside Nikto to study the sub’s inoperative arm.

The Cyclops was suspended eight feet above the deck by steel cables attached to a winch. Beneath the Cyclops’ dome window, its left arm hung limp. Landa reached to inspect the grappling arm and claw. It was stainless steel, and the pistons confirmed a hydraulic system.

“I’ve never worked in robotics.” Landa looked at Nikto, “But it appears its mode of actuation is a basic hydraulic cylinder repair.”

“So you can restore it?” The captain raised his chin.

“If you give me access to your tools,” Landa nodded, “–and two men who can speak English.”

Without replying, the captain turned to a panel on a wall. He pressed a switch and began to utter quick Russian, presumably to summon men to assist.

Landa noticed the wall behind the Cyclops. It had a square opening, protected by steel bars like a vault. He stooped to look inside.

He closed his eyes, disheartened by what he saw. *Nothing’s changed…* Despite the captain’s noble sermons, Nikto was nothing more than what he’d already predicted.

Inside the vault were countless stacks of bricked narcotics.

Part Three

HUNTING OF THE SNARK

He had bought a large map representing the sea,

Without the least vestige of land;

And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be

A map they could all understand.

*The Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll

Chapter Nineteen – The Emissaries

BUENAVENTURA, COLOMBIA

The air tower at *Geardo Tobar López* Airport cleared the King Air 350i for landing.

Arriving from Key West, the pilot of the approaching plane confirmed, “Cleared to land runway two, King Air One Kilo Charlie.”

The pilot’s announcement didn’t wake Agent Ernesto Ruiz. He’d dozed off with Kurtz’s heartbreaking words echoing in his mind. “*The professor and her son were enjoying a normal life in Tallahassee before I called them... And now they’re dead*...”

Ruiz had been with Kurtz when he’d made the gut-wrenching call to suspend the search for missing Professor Patrice Arrison, her son Chandler, and consultant Ned Landa.

Though people could survive in waters above seventy degrees for days, they’d ultimately succumb to thirst or exposure. Their life jackets had been curiously recovered intact, and there were no missing rafts from the Lincoln they could have used. After the Coast Guard had spent days searching over one thousand square miles, Kurtz reluctantly made the call.

Ruiz knew the worst part for Kurtz: it had been his idea to hire civilian experts for their investigation. That was rarely done by the DEA, “*And now look what I’ve done. I’ve killed three innocents and two guardsmen,*” Kurtz’s emotional words lingered.

The King Air 350i was the finest of Beechcraft’s twin-turboprops. It could accommodate eleven occupants in its plush leather seats, with a maximum range of 1,800 nautical miles. The plane was registered to a Daniel Rice with KYC Research, a Kentucky coal firm. However, “Daniel Rice” and his coal were fictitious creations of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency.

The plane had been a confiscated drug plane, and the pilot was from the DEA’s Aviation Division, a small but vital unit of the agency. The division, also known as its “Air Wing,” could move special agents to remote jungles or track drug-carrying vehicles within a moment’s notice.

The JIATF in Key West had obtained DEA approval to use the plane. Agent Ruiz and Navy Intel Officer Engel were eager for this delicate opportunity.

Despite Agent Ernesto Ruiz’s boyish appearance, he’d made countless high-level calls, risking stepping on many toes to arrange the meeting. His senior partner, Kurtz, liked that quality about him, repeatedly grumbling, “You remind me of a better-looking me twenty years ago…”

When Ruiz had originally transferred to Key West from his hometown of Chicago, the DEA approved the move based in large part on his Colombian heritage.

Ruiz’s wife Elena had been in a manager with Ralph Lauren at Chicago’s prestigious Michigan Avenue location. With Elena as breadwinner, Ernesto had agreed to follow her wherever her career led them. His confidence knew he could find employment anywhere. If not the DEA, he’d gratefully work for any local law enforcement.

When Elena had been offered a promotion to their Key West store, Ernesto was excited. Though he loved Chicago, it sounded more stimulating to chase smugglers on the Gulf versus low-rent dealers on the south side –and he couldn’t imagine Christmas on a beach.

However, the DEA’s footprint in Key West was extremely small, limited to a few agents on the JIATF taskforce. Their primary South Florida office was in Miami, over three hours north. Nevertheless, Ernesto eagerly applied with glowing reviews from his Special Agent in Charge.

Though the agency would never select applicants based on race or heritage, when Senior Agent Kurtz learned Ruiz could speak multiple dialects of Colombian Spanish, his transfer was fast-tracked.

Agent Kurtz became a mentor to Ruiz. In his first year alone, Ruiz had been instrumental in multiple investigations and arrests, tied directly to his ability to charm and connect with key individuals within the Bogotá embassy and the *Policia Nacional de Colombia,* the National Police of Colombia.

Currently, “Project Devil’s Triangle” was no different. The project was named after the mysteriously vanishing and sunken vessels within a triangular region between Bermuda, Puerto Rico and Miami. The seven –*thus far–* vessels had been destroyed within a similar triangle.

The lead theory Kurtz and Ruiz had agreed upon was the likely existence of a narco sub, used by a cartel to destroy their competition. But when Navy’s Intel Officer Engel suggested it could be a black market Russian nuclear sub, the concept seemed unachievable –or was it?

Applying the forensic *rule of inclusiveness –*tofollow all leads– Kurtz agreed to check with their Colombian counterparts for any evidence that could prove or refute Engel’s theory. In Kurtz’s eloquent words, the presence of a 375-foot Russian sub at *any* port would create a “shitload of witnesses.”

“Prepare for landing.” The pilot’s voice over the P.A. roused Ruiz from his rest. “Approaching *Geardo Tobar López* Airport in beautiful *Buenaventura*.”

Ruiz knew that last part was sarcasm. He looked over at the only other passenger on the plane, Navy Intel Officer Engel, seated across the aisle. Her face was glued to her window. She seemed excited about travel, especially the thought of visiting another country. She’d mentioned more than once her job usually involved staring at reports while seated in a cubicle all day.

“You saw my timeline on the Bogotá cartel?” Ruiz asked.

Engel turned with a tranquil smile. “I did.” She looked back out the window.

Ruiz thought Engel was pleasant but academic. She was feminine, with no need to rely on make-up. Her hair was short and uncomplicated with any time-consuming style. She wore appealing slim glasses, but they were noticeably thick, so certainly not a fashion accessory.

“Your report didn’t include anything about Buenaventura itself.” Engel gave a timid grin, “I haven’t been out of country since Cancun when I was in college.”

“No fiestas on this trip.” Ruiz smiled. “Buenaventura means ‘good fortune,’ which is sort of ironic. It’s the size of L.A., but most land is rural. Its large port is their primary industry, with access to a large number of rivers used for commerce.” He pointed to her folder, “Many of those narco subs you showed us were seized in these rivers. They’re used to move narcotics to the port.”

Ruiz paused. There was a darker side of the city he needed to explain, but the plane jostled and its landing gear audibly engaged.

Engel turned back to her window to watch the lush countryside rise to meet the plane.

In the middle of a grassy meadow, the one-story airport was not much larger than an American chain restaurant. Its mustard-yellow walls and terracotta roof stood out against a backdrop of emerald-green mountains.

As with most small international airports, Ruiz and Engel had to exit the plane using stairs and then walk across the tarmac to its Customs office. For safety reasons they did not wear any uniforms. Ruiz was casual in a denim shirt and aviator Ray-Bans. Engel wore khaki slacks and a blue blazer.

Thankfully, Customs was quick with only two passengers. Ominous-looking military police stood at the doors, wearing full camo and carrying immense Colombian-manufactured ACE assault rifles. Ruiz simply nodded at the men as they walked by.

He explained to Engel the goal was to play it low-key. He gave a few pleasant nods, and spoke only in Spanish to the Customs officials on behalf of Engel and himself.

As they exited the building, within a queue of yellow VW cabs was a black Denali SUV. Engel tensed as if it were the cliché mob vehicle, but Ruiz knew it was their driver.

“It’s Pascal, local DEA,” Ruiz explained.

Engel dodged shady cabbies to follow Ruiz. “We have American DEA here?”

“Yes, Bogotá.” He paused to greet the large driver who stepped out of the SUV. The man was equally dressed in casual clothes. They exchanged pleasantries in Spanish, and Engel was advised they should get moving. She and Ruiz climbed inside and the truck exited.

Seated in the back, Engel wanted to clarify, “DEA can work in Colombia?”

“Yes,” Ruiz slid on reading glasses and opened a folder. “The closest office is Bogotá. We have a working relationship with the *Policia Nacional*.” He frowned with a shrug, “But we can’t make arrests or any seizures. So it’s about relationships and trading intel.”

Engel nodded, absorbing the information. “Kurtz mentioned the port wasn’t safe.”

He looked at her, somber. “It’s considered the most dangerous port in the world. Buenaventura has been called Colombia’s deadliest city.”

Her eyes bugged behind her glasses. “Why’d we fly here and not Bogotá?”

Ruiz unfolded a map and pointed to its northern coast. “Buenaventura has Colombia’s only port that’s deep enough to dock an Akula-class.”

She held the map and pulled it close to her face.

“Most deep-water ports are twenty-five to thirty feet deep, even for cruise and cargo ships.” Ruiz flashed a smirk, “But this port is over fifteen meters, nearly fifty feet deep.”

Engel nodded as she understood. “So if a cartel could ever obtain a submarine that size, it could only have come here.”

Ruiz winked.

Chapter Twenty – Catching Smoke

Officer Engel attempted her best poker face. She was accustomed to having all the facts, and rarely comfortable asking people for answers. Was it normal to be distressed –after not flying outside the U.S. for fifteen years– if she’d just landed in Colombia’s deadliest city?

She looked outside her window. Crooked dirt roads wound up the grassy hills. Their street was paved, but heavily potholed. On the right side of their truck, green pastures with barbed-wire fences rushed by. On the left, shacks and rickety cafes with ancient *Coca Cola* signs.

“We’re going to the *Distrito Especial de Policia”* Ruiz handed her a memo. “Buenaventura’s police department.”

She scanned the report and nearly choked. “The department that was bombed last year?”

“Evidently.” Ruiz chuckled. “But that was tied to protests or something.”

That didn’t make her feel better. He opened a file and shifted closer to compare notes.

“The Bogotá cartel controlled the port.” He pointed to a mug shot of a handsome fiftyish man with thick hair “Their boss, *Don Ricardo Salazar*, was arrested and jailed four months ago.”

Engel studied a spreadsheet. “From his seized assets, it’s conceivable he had enough money to purchase a black market vessel –if there ever was such a thing.”

Ruiz gave a wary frown, “Military vessels are your department. My job’s narcotics.”

She paused to look at him. “How long do we have to make our point?”

Ruiz lifted a finger. “The *Policia Nacional* has given us one hour...” He gave an iffy shrug, “Attorney General Martinez promised he’d stop by. We’ve helped him many times.”

Engel looked out her window, her insecurities surfacing. “So I’m presenting to bureaucrats whose first language isn’t English...”

“Please use layman’s terms and as little technobabble as possible.” He raised his brows, “And try to be…persuasive.”

Their SUV pulled up to Buenaventura’s *Distrito Especial de Policia.* They stopped at a guard gate where somber, uniformed men with rifles approached all sides of the truck.

Engel tried not to appear nervous. She studied the building. With its two-story curves, it looked like it was planned with a modernistic design, but the feds settled on gray cement walls that were now stained. With overgrown grass and barbed wire, it looked post-apocalyptic.

The guard finally uttered something in Spanish, and they drove through the gates.

Agent Ruiz and Officer Engel were escorted to a small conference room on the second floor. It was government-bland, only twenty-by-twenty feet and smelled like cigarettes. An archaic projector was on the table and a screen had been pulled down for Engel’s presentation.

She looked at her watch. It was seventeen minutes after the hour.

“They’re on Colombian time,” Ruiz exhaled under his breath.

Engel huffed. She’d been taught there was no excuse for bad punctuality.

Six men finally entered the room as a tight group. They were all wearing camo fatigues tucked into their boots, with holstered semiautomatics.

“Colombian National Police,” Ruiz whispered into her ear. “Not part of any military, but they combat illegal drugs.”

Engel nodded. She stood at the front of the room beside the projector like a teacher. The men didn’t acknowledge either of them as they sat around the conference table, chattering to each other in Spanish. There was a sudden quiet as a man in a tailored gray suit entered the room.

“*Buenas dias Fiscal General Martinez.”* Ruiz approached the man with a firm handshake. The man had silver hair and a red pocket square that matched his tie. Ruiz turned to Engel, “This is Attorney General Martinez, and this is Engel, an Intel Officer with the U.S. Navy.”

Martinez maintained a staunch frown as he gripped her hand for a shake. He said nothing to either of them. She wondered if Ruiz had overstated his relationship with the attorney general.

With everyone seated, Engel was ready to begin. It was already 10:27 a.m., and they only had until 11:00. She stood beside the screen and Ruiz remained seated at her side.

“Good morning, eh…” she paused, “*Buenas dias*–”

“–I’ll handle the Spanish,” Ruiz interjected. He rolled his hand, “Just go.” He turned to speak quick Spanish to the men. A few nodded.

“They read your memo,” he said to Engel. “So just dive right in.”

Engel forced a smile, feeling slighted as well as rushed. She clicked a remote to project a satellite photo of a sprawling port. “This image was taken above *Visakhapatnam* Port in India four years ago.” She pointed, “Note the long, dark cigar shape here.”

She paused to allow Ruiz to interpret. His version was noticeably shorter. The men squinted at the screen to discern what she was referring to.

“That object is a Russian Typhoon submarine,” she continued. “As I’m sure you read, Russia has leased Typhoons to other countries such as India. They’re usually retired vessels, leased for ten-year periods for between three and five billion dollars.”

The men frowned and nodded.

Her slide changed to a close-up of an enormous Typhoon sub. “As recently as 2019, India signed another ten-year lease for a nuclear sub they call the *Chakra III*. It was also a decommissioned sub that had been sitting useless in Russia’s port town of *Severodvinsk*.”

Ruiz translated, and again it seemed suspiciously shorter. He looked at Engel. “I think they’re curious what this has to do with them.”

“I’m getting to that,” she whispered. She turned to the men. “We call it Typhoon-class, but in Russia it’s called *Akula* which means ‘shark.’ It’s the quietest nuclear vessels in their fleet.”

She paused at a clamor from the door. The men turned to see a man wheeling a coffee tray into the room. The men all seemed excited, with “*Ahs…*” and “*Muy biens*…”

Engel’s presentation came to an abrupt stop as the men poured themselves China cups of coffee. They muttered and chuckled to each other as they clanged spoons to stir their cups. She watched them turn their backs to her with zero respect.

In a firm tone, she plowed ahead. “”Twenty Akula-class subs were planned, but only fifteen built –that we know of.” Ruiz translated into Spanish and she projected a chart with fifteen Akulas. “Out of those fifteen, only *five* are known to still be active.”

Martinez and the men finally settled, appearing to follow along.

“According to Russia, only three Akulas were retired and reportedly ‘scrapped.’” Engel made air quotes. “They claim some decommissioned subs were scrapped to make other vessels. One was reportedly destroyed by fire. Others lost to ‘perils of the sea’ –whatever that means– without any proof they were scuttled.” She paused for Ruiz to translate.

“My point…” Engel looked at the men to conclude, “With only five out of fifteen subs still in service, it’s conceivable a 48,000-ton, nuclear-armed Soviet sub can just *go missing*.”

The men began to quietly debate each other in Spanish. With a pensive nod, the attorney general turned to Ruiz to give an animated lecture in Spanish.

Curious of his reaction, Engel watched Ruiz sigh and rub his eyes, frustrated.

She whispered to Ruiz, “What’d he say?”

He huffed, “Attorney General Martinez is reminding us that his mission is to combat drug trafficking, not to track Soviet submarines.”

With dwindling patience, Engel turned to Martinez with a raised voice, “We are willing to waive Don Ricardo Salazar’s extradition.” She articulated her words to compensate for not knowing Spanish. “If he cooperates with our investigation –by just answering a few questions– the U.S. will not pursue any extradition from Colombia.”

A hush fell over the room. Engel instantly regretted how she’d addressed the man. She hoped the silence was more about her brazen conduct than the content of her offer.

Martinez gave a tight smile and fidgeted with a gold pinky ring. He then spoke in clear, intelligible English. “That means nothing to me.”

Engel froze, not entirely understanding.

“You wish to ask him about submarines?” Martinez continued, “For Salazar’s crimes, narcotics, extortion, kidnapping, and murder of children, he will serve *decades* in *La Modelo* prison in Bogotá.” He cocked his head for gravity. “He will not be alive for any… *extra…dition*.” He mocked the word.

“That was it?” Ruiz roared in the back seat of the SUV. He pounded his fist on an armrest between him and Engel. “That was our *one* play! And now it’s gone?”

Engel didn’t dare respond. She inched farther away from Ruiz. She didn’t feel physically threatened, but she knew she was responsible for their meeting coming to a screeching halt.

“I…wanted to cut to the chase,” she finally stammered. “Considering out reduced timeframe.”

Ruiz didn’t look at her. He released a gruff sigh and put his aviators back on. “All we had to do was hook him with just enough curiosity.” He mumbled to himself, rhetorical.

“Is there any other way we can question Salazar?” Engel looked out to see harried pedestrians just inches outside her window. “Some way to find out what he knows?”

Ruiz wiped his face with both hands. “The U.S. has no power to thrust our implausible investigation on their number-one convict.”

At a stop light, Engel watched locals buying fruit from booths. Barefoot children were shouting for some sort of coconut popsicles from a vendor. One shop had an obsolete Kodak sign that didn’t even sell cameras. She realized that different places and experiences meant nothing. People were essentially the same, with similar wants, needs and desires.

“We have *zero* leverage…” Ruiz continued to groan.

Engel noticed a handsome young father on the sidewalk. He wore a faded Disney t-shirt and he hoisted his toddler daughter onto his shoulders. The girl laughed and played with his hair.

Engel cocked her head with a new idea. She checked her file and turned to Ruiz.

“Doesn’t *Don Ricardo Salazar* have a wife and child?”

Ruiz’s entire body paused. He turned to her as his mouth curved into a smile. “He certainly does.”

Chapter Twenty-One – Ladders and Chutes

THE WEST INDIES

Freshly dressed for the day, Dr. Arrison leaned over the wardroom table to study a navigation map.

She sipped her coffee –a dark, earthy variety from Indonesia– and tried to visualize their track, southeast from the Keys to the islands of Hispaniola. *Roughly 700 miles*… she calculated in her head. *So today would be*–”

Arrison turned at the sound of someone entering. Ned Landa ducked through the doorway wearing fresh clothes and a smug smile.

“Mornin’, professor.” He stepped beside her to see what she was doing.

“Mr. Landa,” she nodded. “The gentleman in the galley can bring you breakfast or coffee.” She looked back at her map.

He made a sour face. “If all their food comes from the ocean, how do you do breakfast?”

She shrugged, “They brought me a shrimp and grits with a cream sauce that was excellent, and crab cake Benedict on an English muffin and hollandaise.”

He narrowed an eye, “How’d they make grits and an English muffin from the sea?”

“Kelp flour. I asked the same thing,” Arrison replied. “They grind flour from dried seaweed. It’s fairly common in Asia, filled with nutrients, with lower fat and calories.”

“I’ll stick to coffee,” he grumbled.

Arrison had to squint to scan the chart. “I never appreciated online maps until now...” She paused when Landa touched her shoulder. She turned to see his tense eyes.

“A man died last night.” He spoke low and checked over his shoulder. “A mechanical accident. Did *he* even tell you?”

Her face went pale. “Someone died..?” Her eyes skimmed the room at the startling news.

Landa nodded. “We’re surfacing off Haiti to vent for a repair.” He leaned close, “I’m leaving. I don’t care if it’s Haiti or the D.R., but I’m *gone*.” He captured her glance. “Come with me.”

She stepped back. “I can’t just…leave,” she stammered. “Nikto promised to show us an extremely significant–”

“–This is our chance!” Landa hissed. “Forget your big *National Geographic* opportunity.”

They stopped and awkwardly stood upright to see Captain Nikto enter the room. He was groomed and dressed for the day. Arrison was surprised to see Chandler and Pilar following in his trail. Based on his habits at home, she presumed Chandler would be sleeping for hours.

“*Dobroye utro*.” Nikto smiled at Arrison with his morning greeting. “Aside from Mr. Landa and myself, I trust you had a restful evening..?”

Chandler and Pilar traded a glance. When she grinned, he instantly blushed.

Pilar approached Arrison to see her map. “We are here,” she tapped a coordinate with a finger. “Islands west of the Republic of Haiti. We have a safe harbor–”

“–They are not interested,” Nikto moved between them, “in the minutiae of our navigation...” His expression hardened at Pilar as if she were revealing too much.

Landa glared at Nikto. “What makes a harbor ‘safe’?”

The captain clenched his jaw, then conceded, “It is a moon-shaped cay. An island too small for most maps, with a deep lagoon invisible from three sides. It is abandoned, a hundred years ago it was used for measles patients.”

Pilar grinned at Chandler, “He added signs warning of dengue fever.”

Nikto’s eyes blazed again at girl.

“How long are we surfacing?” Landa retorted.

“Less than an hour,” Nikto replied, eyeing Landa. “We can conclude our repairs and bring fresh air into the vessel through the induction mast.”

“What about your *casualty?*” Landa’s tone seemed vilifying, as if to expose the news.

The captain blinked. “It is true.” He turned to Arrison for full disclosure. “There was an unfortunate incident last evening. A man sacrificed his life to save this vessel, and our lives.”

Chandler, Arrison and Pilar inhaled, distraught at the revelation.

“What happens to his…body?” Chandler asked.

Nikto gave a poignant smile. “He is being preserved until we can perform a proper burial. In approximately twenty-four hours.”

Arrison glanced at the map, perplexed. “Where in twenty-four hours?”

“Under *Guanahacabibes.* Just as I have promised.” The captain turned and exited the room.

Nikto entered the control room. Several crewmen smoking cigarettes stood at attention.

“*Dobroye utro. Buenas Dias*…” Nikto greeted them in both languages as he approached Dmitri at the comm station.

“Reports of our existence?”

“None captain. Since Key West, 1,200 kilometers,” Dmitri replied quickly.

“Very good.” Nikto folded his hands behind his back. “Periscope depth –do not broach.”

“*Da, Kapitan*,” Pavlo replied, seated as helmsman.

In the center of the small room, the periscope lowered with a hydraulic hiss. Nikto grasped the handles and pressed his face to the eyepiece.

He had to squint due to the brilliant daylight. He adjusted the focus and range to observe a clear morning above the surface, with calm two-foot seas. He rotated the periscope 360-degrees, confirming no other vessels. Just the one small island directly ahead.

“*Isla Moustique*, two kilometers captain,” Pavlo announced.

“Make preparations to surface,” Nikto ordered.

“Aye,” a diving officer confirmed. “Secure ventilation. Shut bulkhead flappers.”

“Open main induction when ready and *no* surface alarm.” Nikto inhaled, content, “Proceed, four knots.”

It was a pastel dawn with pink and azure skies. The surrounding Caribbean was calm, with a golden sun just edging the eastern horizon.

The immense Naumtsev breached the surface with a gentle trail in its wake.

If there had been witnesses, it would appear to be an enormous prehistoric shark or swordfish. Stretching from the Naumtsev’s bow was a thirty-foot bayonet nose of serrated steel. Its modified sail looked like an immense dorsal fin. To its rear, the aft rudder was its sharp tail.

If a boater or witness ever attempted to report the 375-foot monstrosity, they’d be dismissed as either inebriated or delusional. That was precisely the plan.

The Naumtsev idled south towards the small, lone island.

Nikto lifted the periscope and turned to Dmitri to speak privately in Russian. “Please call Dr. Yuri up to the bridge. I’m heading up.”

“*Da Kapitan*,” Dmitri nodded.

“Where are our guests?”

Dmitri adjusted his glasses. “Dr. Arrison is studying journals in the parlor. Mr. Landa is in the moon well with the Cyclops.”

“Please call Dr. Arrison to join me at the bridge.” Nikto then asked, “Where are the kids?”

Dmitri shrugged, “Staying out of the way.”

Pilar swiped a security badge to proceed through a hatch, then up a ladder. She moved quickly with enthusiasm. Six feet behind her, Chandler struggled to keep up.

“Why does Nikto forbid us to go here?” He huffed in the narrow passageway.

“You will see…” she replied with a mischievous grin.

They entered an industrial area with metal bulkheads, pipes and a steel-grated deck. Chandler thought it smelled like motor oil, and it was noisier than the other areas of the ship.

“This is the torpedo room,” Pilar stopped in front of a wall with multiple round hatches.

Chandler’s eyes widened to study the circular hatches. He counted at least eight torpedo launch tubes, and each was roughly twenty-five inches in diameter.

“They are called breech hatches.” She unlatched and turned a wheel to open one.

Chandler moved closer to watch. “But Nikto got rid of the torpedoes…”

“With the missiles gone, it created room for cargo.” She opened the door, revealing a vacant black pipe. “Nikto uses them for hidden storage.”

Chandler half-grinned, intrigued. When he looked inside, it was dark and seemed endless.

“There are *three hundred* pounds of coffee beans in this one from three continents.” She moved closer to his face. “Can you smell it?”

Her warm breath on his ear made his spine tingle. He inhaled to smell an intoxicating mix of coffee beans and her spicy fragrance.

Chandler reached to open a second hatch, enthralled. “What else does he keep here?”

“I found champagne, bottles of vodka…” She placed her hands on his back to peer inside. “Last week I saw a large bundle covered in foil. I opened it to find *fifty* *pounds* of Belgian chocolate.”

He turned to her with pure wonder, “That’d be incredible…”

Pilar pulled an emergency flashlight from a wall and tossed it to him. “You go in that tube. I’ll look in this one.”

“What..?” Chandler fumbled to catch the light. “Go inside these?”

“Why not?” she replied. “It’s not too tight. Mr. Landa said Navy SEALS have exited through torpedo tubes.”

*I’m not exactly a SEAL…* Chandler wanted to reply. He shined his flashlight into the narrow tube. It was dark and metallic and he couldn’t see the other end.

He heard Pilar open another hatch. He turned to see her climb into a tube, face first. “It is easy!” She shouted, “You do that one!” Her voice echoed the deeper she climbed.

Chandler froze. Within seconds he tried to consider all conceivable outcomes. He didn’t *think* he was claustrophobic –but who would voluntarily enter a tube the width of a garbage can, with no light, forty feet underwater?

“Chandler, I think I see something…” her voice resonated from deep inside the tube.

He squeezed his eyes closed to rationalize. Would Pilar consider him a coward if he didn’t go in? He was an experienced scuba diver, including night and cave diving, which were considered daunting by some. *This isn’t much different,* he supposed. *And what could be in these pipes?*

Chandler opened his eyes with a renewed vigor. He took a deep breath as if diving into a cold pool, and climbed into the torpedo tube.

After computing any imaginable consequence, he’d concluded *what could possibly go wrong?*

Chapter Twenty-Two – Foiled Curiosity

“This way,” Captain Nikto motioned for Professor Arrison to follow him.

With a good sense of direction, Arrison believed they were mid-ship, on the upper-most deck. The industrial bulkheads and ceiling were darker and more confining.

Nikto stopped at a vertical ladder. “We are below the Naumtsev’s sail,” he explained. “The tower you had described as a *fin*.” He accentuated the word as if he found it amusing.

She looked up to see the ladder lead up a shaft. “What’s on top of the sail?”

“The bridge.” He started up the ladder. “Where I control the Naumtsev while surfaced.”

*We’re on the surface..?* Her heart fluttered with mixed emotions. She longed to see open sky and breathe fresh air. But she also craved to experience so many of Nikto’s undersea promises. She grasped the ladder and looked up to follow the captain.

At the base of the shaft were two dome portholes on each side. She had to squint from the blinding blue light flooding through the windows.

“Careful, please…” Nikto implored. “The steps can be hazardous.”

She found it amusing how considerate Nikto could seem. Was that a trait of a merciless drug lord as Landa had suggested? Or, like her, was he truly a scholar of the sea?

Arrison cautiously climbed. The shaft was about five feet in diameter and twenty feet high. It was welded steel with safety lights every few feet.

When Nikto reached the top, he opened a circular hatch. “This way… Careful…”

She squinted from intense sunlight leaching from the hatch. The roar of the sea echoed within the shaft. Arrison continued to the top and Nikto reached to help her out.

Gripping rails behind a four-foot partition, she stood. Her first impression was nothing short of exhilarating. It looked like they were flying since they were twenty-five feet above the water. She had to squint at the cloudless sky. Seagulls squawked and swooped over the cobalt-blue water. When she inhaled, she could taste salt in the back of her throat.

“This is the bridge.” Nikto lifted binoculars to study the horizon.

When Arrison gazed down at the sub, her smile vanished. It was a sobering reminder she was standing on the monster that had attacked them. The sail she was standing on had been modified to look like a twenty-foot dorsal fin. The sides were connected in the front to create a sharp edge like an upright hatchet blade. The two portholes below were designed to look like eyes.

The vessel stretched before her, seeming even larger in daylight. It was flat-black, probably coated in a material to avoid reflecting light or radar. At sea level, a long steel spike extended from the nose of the bow. It was at least thirty feet long, with a jagged edge that pierced the waves like a lance. *That’s how it destroys boats…* Her stomach roiled.

She flinched when Nikto touched her shoulder.

“There.” He pointed to a small island a half-mile ahead. “Our destination, *Isla Moustique.*” Nikto put his arm around her to point out to sea. “See those mountains to the east?”

She narrowed her eyes to see a hazy mainland on the horizon.

“That is near *Port-au-Prince*. We will maintain our distance here.”

Arrison had been to Haiti once before with an FSU group that helped victims of Hurricane Matthew. She was aware they had a coast guard, but unsure how far they patrolled.

Arrison turned back to the approaching small island. It appeared crescent-shaped and less than a mile in diameter. “You said it’s uninhabited?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “It has a deep-water lagoon, protected on three sides.”

The Naumtsev slowly idled into the mouth of the inlet. In the clear aquamarine water, Arrison saw faded channel markers, bent by prior storms. She then saw rusted metal signs on posts with some sort of warning symbol. As they got closer, she could see the warnings displayed an image of a mosquito with the words, “Warning Dengue Fever.”

Nikto noticed her reading the signs. “I also posted the dengue warnings in Spanish and French.” He smiled, proud of his deception.

The captain lifted a mic from a control panel. His amplified voice echoed from within the ship, “Attention off-duty: we will have a steel beach. Only thirty minutes.”

Arrison gave a half-smile, “What’s a *steel beach*?”

“You will see. Something for morale –and some vitamin D.”

Pilar crawled within her dark torpedo tube. As she’d done before, she pushed with the soles of her shoes, while pulling herself forward on the slick surface. She moved one foot at a time in the tight diameter. She paused to aim her flashlight in front of her.

“I might have found something…” Her shout resonated. The flashlight beam revealed a small wooden case the size of a shoebox. “It says Havana on it...”

She didn’t hear Chandler respond. He was either too far away for her to hear, or he didn’t hear her at all. *Or he passed out from fear,* she chuckled to herself.

It was hard to open the box with both hands in the tight space. When she cracked the lid, she sighed as if it were a consolation prize. “Cuban cigars…” She shouted, “*Hoyo de Monterrey.* Do you like Cuban cigars?” She heard no reply other than the echo of her own voice.

Chandler was not as calm. He guessed he was half-way into his tube. It was almost unbearable. The sides were tight against his shoulders. It was dark and smelled like a metal lubricant like WD-40. But there was a gnawing curiosity that kept him moving.

He tried to crawl forward using his fingers, but the surface was too slick. The echo of his breathing sounded like amplified stereo. Similar to cave diving, every few feet he’d pause to take a deep, meditative breath to focus on his task.

Chandler shouted, “What..?” He thought he heard Pilar say something. She didn’t reply, which made him feel even more alone.

When he aimed his flashlight in front of him, the light shimmered off something that looked like foil. He smiled and shouted, “Did you say foil could be chocolate?”

No response. With renewed interest, he inched deeper. The foil-wrapped bundle appeared larger than he’d imagined. He shouted again, “What do you think it is?”

On the bridge, Nikto pointed out features of Isla Moustique. “The center of this lagoon is more than fifty feet deep. Dredged for smuggling ships centuries ago.”

The Naumtsev entered the lagoon, bordered by a semicircle of tropical foliage. With no inhabitants, the shore was just a sliver of white sand, as vegetation had overrun the landscape.

A portly, older officer with white hair climbed onto the bridge. His eyes seemed surprised to see Dr. Arrison with the captain.

Nikto introduced her. “Dr. Yuri, this is our guest, Professor Arrison.” He turned to her, “Yuri is our Medical Officer. He followed me from *Severodvinsk.”*

The humorless doctor gave a small nod.

Nikto asked, “Do you mind if I speak Russian? Dr. Yuri knows limited English.”

“Go ahead,” Arrison shrugged, turning back to the island.

Nikto looked at Yuri and spoke in quick Russian, “Do you have the results on our engineers?”

“*Da, Kapitan*.” Yuri replied in gruff Russian, “There is no evidence of radiation poisoning. The men have no symptoms, no decrease in white blood cells. The men are healthy.”

“That is wonderful…” Nikto audibly exhaled. “And Leonid’s leg?”

“We were able to save it,” Yuri replied. “The door fractured his tibia. I gave him a plaster cast.” He paused with a slow shake of his head, “Ivan was not so fortunate.”

Nikto’s face withered, solemn. “Did you stow Ivan’s body somewhere *absolutely* secure?”

“Of course,” Yuri dipped his head. “His body is wrapped and protected in Mylar. Stored away, safe and dry from any curious eyes.”

Chandler inched closer to the foil-wrapped bundle. His chest ached as it seemed harder to breathe. He wondered if his oxygen was being depleted within the narrow space. With short breaths, he shimmied closer to the foil, now just two feet away.

He inhaled to shout, “It’s something *big!* Pilar..?” There was no answer.

With the flashlight in his left hand, he stretched his right arm to reach the bundle. He still couldn’t touch it, so he squirmed closer. When his fingers could finally feel the foil, he placed the flashlight in his mouth so he could use both hands to peel back the wrap.

“I’m takin’ a look..!” He mumbled with the light clenched in his teeth.

Chandler crept closer until his face was inches away. He pulled back the foil, trying to aim the light with his mouth. It reminded him of opening a foil-wrapped turkey at Thanksgiving. *I still can’t see*… he huffed. He craned his neck and adjusted the light until he could finally see.

His eyes bulged, mute with horror.

Gazing at him from the foil was an inflamed, blistered face. The man had milky red eyes that were locked open. The corpse’s head was wet with oozing sores.

As Chandler opened his mouth to scream, the flashlight fell out. The bulb turned off when it struck the surface. It was dark again and he could smell the sour corpse. He dry-heaved to vomit.

“It’s a *body..!*” Chandler finally roared. He flailed his arms, trying to scurry backwards like a crab. Acid crept up his throat to puke, but he gnashed his teeth to hold it in.

“Pilar, it’s a *body..!*” His shriek echoed.

Pilar climbed out of her hatch holding the box of cigars. She moved closer to look into Chandler’s tube. It was too dark to see. She wondered why he wasn’t using his flashlight.

She heard a muffled shout. Uncertain if she’d heard correctly, she replied, “Did you say it’s a *bottle..?* Of what?”

Pilar teasingly closed his hatch, covering her mouth to contain a chuckle.

Chandler’s tube went pitch-black. *Someone closed the hatch? I’m locked in with a corpse..!* He cried out in pure panic, exhausting his remaining breath, “*Pilar..!*” Fighting to contain his nausea, his whole body trembled to wiggle towards the opening.

Light flooded the tube as the hatch opened. Hyperventilating, Chandler peeked over his shoulder to see Pilar’s beautiful, grinning face.

She grabbed his legs to pull him towards the opening. He clambered to pull himself out. Chandler finally stood, hunched and dripping with sweat.

He scowled when he realized her impish grin. “Did *you* close the hatch..?”

She gave a demure shrug. “I was just being playful…”

Through labored breaths he pointed to his tube, “Do you…realize what’s in there?”

“You said a *bottle.*.?” She batted her large eyes. “Anything good?”

Chapter Twenty-Two – *Piraty!*

Alone in the moon well, Ned Landa had already completed the repairs to the Cyclops.

He never admitted he was finished, pretending he needed more time. His team in the Marines used to tease him, comparing him to Scotty from *Star Trek* –if a job required four hours, he’d tell the team leader he needed eight.

The minisub’s arm had been a simple repair. Previous crewmen had replaced a hydraulic fluid tube incorrectly. It was no mystery why the arm didn’t work. They’d used a tube that was too wide which decreased the pressure, and they never bled the line to remove air. Using tools available in the well’s shop, Landa completed the repair in less than two hours.

It was ironic the Naumtsev had nuclear engineers who didn’t know how to do minor hydraulic repairs. He guessed it was like asking a NASA engineer to bake a cake. Whatever mutinied crew Nikto had assembled came with a limited bag of specialties.

The repair provided perfect cover for Landa to be alone. Two men had been assigned to assist, but when he worked without ever talking, they finally left out of boredom.

Landa was now by himself in a first-class workshop. Sensing the waves gently rocking the vessel, he knew they had surfaced. *Let’s get off this barge,* he grinned with a gleam in his eye.

On a wall near an extinguisher was an emergency kit. He opened the box to find a small life vest with a water-activated homing beacon. The vest was neoprene and folded to the size of a small book. The emergency beacon was designed to transmit a signal to locate the user.

Landa stuffed the life vest between his shirt and pants. He left the beacon behind; he didn’t want to be found by anyone onboard the Naumtsev. He hit the switch to open the door and exited the moon well.

The massive Naumtsev idled in the center of the lagoon.

From the top of the sail, Dr. Arrison estimated the cove was the size of a football stadium. The vessel began to slowly rotate clockwise so it would face out for an easier departure.

As the sub turned, Arrison watched the shoreline pass by. It was an untouched utopia of tropical flora. She spotted orchids, coconut palms and sea grape trees. Absolute paradise.

Her trance was disrupted as Nikto made an announcement through the P.A.

“Off-duty: you may disembark through the forward and aft hatches,” his voice boomed. “Steel beach, thirty minutes.” A bell rang three times.

Uncertain what was happening, Arrison saw a square hatch open on the bow. She turned to see another hatch open near the vessel’s stern. Crewmen began to file out of the ship and onto its narrow deck like marching ants.

It took Arrison a second to realize the men were either shirtless or in t-shirts, and wearing bathing suits or boxer shorts. Some carried towels. The pale men grinned up at the sun like they hadn’t seen the sky in months. They laughed with spirited shouts to each other.

Arrison blossomed into a smile when she saw the first man dive into the water. Two others followed with childlike cannonballs, and the rest leaped with excited howls. They swam and splashed like children. They used rungs on the side of the vessel to climb back onto the deck to jump again or lounge on towels for sun. *A steel beach,* Arrison finally understood.

When she turned to Nikto, he had the widest smile she’d ever seen on the man.

The passageways were empty as Landa marched up three flights of steps. With the life vest stuffed into his pants –along with small binoculars and two bottles of water– he continued forward towards the bow. He finally saw several crewmen standing in the rear of a line.

When he saw an intense glare above them, Landa realized it was the open hatch. The men were waiting to disembark, wearing shorts and t-shirts. He casually entered the back of the line.

Landa almost chuckled; it was easier than he’d planned. He had been debating *how* to escape, and now Nikto was encouraging his men to disembark for sun and swimming.

He patiently shuffled forward in line. No one spoke to him and that was fine. He climbed the steps leading to the Naumtsev’s deck. He couldn’t contain a liberating smile as he squinted up at the blazing sky. Landa never realized how much he’d missed something as simple as the sun.

The Naumtsev’s hull created a long black path above the waterline. He was instantly reminded of the night they’d been captured. Mixing with the men, he looked up to see the towering sail and the aft rudder behind it.

He studied his surroundings. The vessel was anchored in a circular lagoon. The closest shore was fifty yards to the right of the vessel. It would be an effortless swim. The island looked like Fiji. *Too good to be true,* he tried to not laugh.

The narrow deck was congested with crewmen, jumping in the water or seated on the hull. The chaos helped Landa blend within the crowd. He kept his head down when he walked under the sail, knowing the captain was certainly on top. He swiftly continued towards the stern.

A tall bulging Russian stepped into his path. He growled, “*Tvoy pervyy raz?*”

Landa didn’t understand. He assessed the man who was roughly his same size. His bare, muscular torso was scribbled with tattoos. But whether he’d win or lose in a tussle didn’t matter; Landa didn’t need any undue attention. He decided to just smile and shrug.

The large man loomed closer. He uttered in broken English, “I say… this is your first time, *eh*..?” The man gave a warped smile and then dove into the water.

Landa exhaled with relief and continued towards the rear. The rudder was easily fifteen feet high and had been modified to look like the creature’s tail. The rudder contained the vessel’s sonar array, which used hydrophones to detect sounds from outside sources.

Landa dashed into the shadow of the rudder. He crouched and looked back to see no one looking in his direction. On top of the sail, he saw silhouettes of the captain and a second person with long hair. *A female…it’s Arrison,* he surmised. They were both looking forward.

Timing was critical. He slid on his belly down the curved hull to drop into the water without a splash. The sea was warm and crystal clear. Immersed with just his eyes above water, he confirmed no one had seen him. He took a deep breath, submerged and swam towards the shore.

Arrison and Nikto shared a moment of quiet as they enjoyed their views. Arrison relished the warm sun on her face as she watched a school of yellow striped sergeant-majors in the translucent water. The captain watched over his men like a contented lifeguard.

Nikto lifted a radio from the console. “Pavlo, this is Nikto.”

After a pause, Pavlo’s voice replied, “*Da Kapitan.*”

“Repair status.”

“*Kapitan,* Aleksei is preparing the last weld between the turbine and–”

“–We dive at 09:30.*”* Nikto shouted with an irritated shake of his head. “Not a minute more. *Ponyal?*

“Understood *Kapitan*. Over,” Pavlo replied.

Nikto turned to see Arrison’s raised brow. He grinned as if ashamed he’d lost his composure. “Improvised repairs can be challenging…” He rolled his hand to explain, “The defective pipe, it funnels steam to the reactor for the propulsion...”

“I get it,” Arrison smiled to relieve the man. She looked out with a wistful tilt of her head at the thought of going ashore. It looked like a five-star island resort she could never afford. But there was nowhere onshore to go. And possibly more to see beneath this world.

Ned Landa crawled out of the waves and onto an overgrown beach. His wet clothing felt like forty extra pounds. He slogged behind an overturned palm without looking back. He crouched out of view and checked his pockets to confirm his binoculars, water and life vest.

He needed a moment to catch his breath. Looking out at the Naumtsev, he could still see men jumping and swimming. He didn’t see any heads looking his direction.

The profile of the immense vessel did look like a fierce, spiny monster. Landa was surprised to find himself sad about leaving the professor and her son behind. But he had given her a chance, and despite Nikto’s deceitful motives, he was relatively sure he wouldn’t hurt them. He took one last glance at the Naumtsev, knowing it’d be his last.

Landa began to hike inland. The jungle became darker the farther he trudged. The faint hollers of the Naumtsev’s men were exchanged for squawks of wild parrots and the buzz of mosquitos in his ears. The air smelled like damp earth after a rain shower. Landa wished he had a machete as he stepped around vines, cypress stumps and dense cabbage palms.

To his surprise, he came upon a small clearing. It was an area that had been hacked clear by someone. There were stained wooden crates around a pit that had been used for a bonfire. He paused to breathe and study the camp. There were crushed cans of *Prestige* beer in the dirt. It was evidence the island wasn’t always uninhabited. Probably used by kids to party around a fire.

When Landa looked ahead, he saw the shimmer of the sea through the branches. Revitalized, he jogged along a path. It was indeed the ocean, just fifty feet away. He’d already reached the other side of the narrow peninsula. He smiled to absorb his view of freedom.

Landa stood on a rocky ten-foot cliff that faced northeast. He lifted binoculars to confirm a hilly mainland on the horizon. It was the west coast of Haiti.

“What do you think?” he asked himself. “Six, eight miles?”

Landa was a certified advanced-level swimmer, courtesy of the Marine Corps station at Cherry Point, North Carolina. The arduous regimen included Aquatic Intensity Training which required jumping from ships, treading water and swimming 250 meters while wearing sixty-pounds of gear. The notion of floating in a life vest, in heavily-traveled waters off Haiti, wasn’t daunting.

A sudden glimmer caught his eye. Landa aimed his binoculars –it was a reflection from a small boat’s windshield. His pulse quickened as he focused on the vessel. *How can I signal them?* He needed to get to them before the Naumtsev’s radar picked them up.

As the boat cruised closer, Landa could see it was a small skiff, less than eighteen feet long. Then he noticed a second boat behind it, almost identical. He debated *is this a good thing or terrible?* The Naumtsev might pick up their motors soon.

With the boats now approaching a hundred yards, he could see they appeared shabby with stripped paint. He could make out the figures of four men on each boat. *Haitian fishermen*… But he didn’t see any poles or rigging. His breath halted at another possibility.

The thin men were carrying immense AK-47 rifles. They were not fishermen.

Landa lowered his binoculars with dread in his eyes. “Pirates…”

He instantly dropped behind a bush. He peeked out to see a man standing on the bow to scan the island with binoculars. As the man rotated, he stopped –looking directly at Landa’s location.

Landa froze as his mind raced. *Did he see me?* He had zero weapons. *Do I run? Take cover? Return to the Naumtsev..?* He looked back out through the leaves.

The man on the bow aimed his AK directly at him. Then he fired.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Statues Fell at the Hand of God

Bullets struck palms above Landa with cracking *thwacks.*

Sprawled flat on the ground, he squeezed his eyes closed. He peeked out to see the men in both boats pointing and aiming his direction.

*Three…two…one!* With an internal countdown, he inhaled and sprung up to race inland through the brush. An obstacle course of coiled vines and dense growth slowed his pace.

Another burst of bullets peppered the branches above him. Twigs rained down.

“Those are shots!” Nikto cringed and shouted, “Get down!” He forcefully pushed Arrison down by her shoulders until she was shielded by a partition.

Nikto lifted his radio to shout, “Dmitri, report!”

Dmitri responded immediately, “*Kapitan*, three vessels. Could be pirates. Two small boats and perhaps a mother ship.”

Nikto gnashed his teeth. He lifted his mic for the P.A. “Emergency: all aboard! *All aboard!*” His amplified voice resounded within the lagoon.

The crewmen on deck looked up, confused. Some were still splashing around the perimeter of the Naumtsev.

“All aboard! That is an *order!*” Nikto repeated in Russian, “*Vse na bort! Teper’!”*

Nikto turned to see Arrison cowering, petrified. “We will be fine,” he assured.

Her voice quivered, “Pirates –in the Caribbean..?”

He huddled closer. “A coast with political and economic crisis can spark anarchy.” He stood upright to see his men climbing aboard. He repeated into the P.A., “*Now!* All–”

A spray of bullets sparked on the titanium just feet away. It sounded like clanging pots. Arrison screamed with hands over her ears.

“Go below!” Nikto barked as he opened the hatch for her. He looked the direction of the gunfire to see two small boats approaching the mouth of the lagoon.

Landa heard the echo of shots as he ran, but it was no longer behind him. The rocky cliff was no place to dock, so he knew the boats were proceeding to the lagoon. *Which means…* he huffed, *they’ll see the Naumtsev.*

He reached the clearing that had been a camp. He squatted behind wooden crates to catch his breath. In that instant, his psyche flashed with a conversation he’d had with a colleague months earlier.

When Landa had been bouncing between jobs, he’d considered working for a private contractor similar to Blackwater. The firm, Onyx Risk, supplied security troops who were retired soldiers who made more money working under contract.

Brad Snyder, a former teammate of Landa, worked at Onyx Risk, Inc., also known as Onyx Inc. or “Black Ink” within the security community. Snyder described his last contract was security for a cargo shipper. When Landa asked why, Snyder explained there had been recent acts of piracy in the Caribbean, including Haiti.

Reports of modern piracy had increased in the waters between Honduras, Nicaragua, St. Lucia and Haiti. Recently, a tanker anchored off of Port-au-Prince had noticed robbers armed with guns on their deck and they immediately raised the alarm. The pirates fired shots and fled.

Snyder explained how political and economic crises were exploding between Venezuela, Nicaragua and Haiti, sparking chaos. As the rules of law failed, areas in the Caribbean were becoming more dangerous. Incidents included robberies of merchant vessels and attacks on yachts. The severity ranged from muggings on the high seas to attacks worthy of 17th-century pirates.

Landa was jarred back to reality by another burst of gunfire. When he focused on a crate inches from his eyes, he saw it had been stamped, “7.62 x 39 mm.” That was the bullets used by AK-47s.He sprung upright; the boxes were ammunition crates –this was the pirates’ camp.

He ran towards the lagoon with a new sense of urgency. He snaked through the trees until he saw the white sand of the beach. The sporadic crackle of gunfire was closer. Were the scrawny pirates actually attacking an armed nuclear vessel?

Landa found the same overturned palm on the beach from moments earlier. He panted, relieved, to see the Naumtsev had not departed. The last of the crewmen were scurrying into the two open hatches. He looked to his right to see the two pirate boats blocking the mouth of the lagoon. They began to cruise towards the sub, firing their assault rifles as they moved.

Through his binoculars, Landa noticed a larger fifty-foot vessel a hundred yards behind the pirates. Though he hoped it was the Haitian Coast Guard, it looked like an old shrimp boat. He could see several figures on the deck. When he focused, he could see they were also carrying rifles. He’d heard stories of smaller pirate boats launching from mother ships.

Landa’s breaths hastened, conflicted. He felt helpless as he watched three pirate boats targeting Nikto’s vessel. He knew it’d be impossible for the scavengers to do any real harm, and the Naumtsev would certainly submerge and flee any minute.

*So what about me?* He tightened his jaw. He couldn’t survive against a dozen armed, lawless men. But could he get back to the sub before it departed –only to be held captive by a different set of criminals? Landa watched the last crewmen dash into the sub. He felt envious to see the hatches close behind them.

Within seconds, two pirate skiffs pulled alongside the Naumtsev. The frantic pirates leaped from their boats to climb onto the hull. All eight men were shirtless and barefoot. Some wore rags on their heads, and all of them carried AK-47s. They shouted to each other in creole, seeming desperate to find the hatches. Frustrated, they began to aimlessly shoot at the titanium hull.

Landa had to make a decision. He’d already been seen and was unarmed. There was nowhere to hide on the small island. He was no expert at computing probabilities, but it seemed he had a better chance of survival if he could get back to the sub, versus fighting the pirates on his own.

He stood and sprinted for the water.

Captain Nikto charged into the control room with Arrison at his side.

“*Kapitan*, eight men are on the upper hull. Heavily armed,” Dmitri announced.

Nikto watched a monitor above Dmitri’s head. Shirtless armed men were scurrying on the Naumtsev’s deck like insects. They appeared to be searching for any hatch or vent.

Incensed, Nikto barked, “Prepare to dive.”

Pavlo turned from his console with wide eyes. “*Kapitan*, Aleksei reports the welds require ten more minutes.” He swallowed, “Ivan was our lead engineer...”

Nikto glared at being questioned. Before he could respond, Dmitri shouted.

“–They are damaging the hull.” Onscreen, the pirates began to fire at the vessel’s aft rudder. “They could destroy our sonar array!”

Enraged, Nikto glared at the monitor as if his own offspring were being attacked. He tightened his eyes and uttered, “Auxiliary voltage to the deck mesh.”

Pavlo exclaimed, “That’s 115 volts, two amps–”

“–Make it so!” Nikto snarled, furious of his distrust. “*Seychas!*”

Pavlo turned back to his console. Though Arrison was terrified of the armed men, she was speechless at the captain’s outburst.

Landa struggled to swim in his waterlogged uniform. He gasped between unrelenting strokes. He squinted in the salt water to see the Naumtsev still thirty yards away. He pushed harder.

Through the water he heard shots that seemed closer. He looked up to see a man with a rag on his head firing his gun at the aft hatch. When the wiry man turned, he gazed directly at Landa in the water. The man’s eyes widened and he shouted in creole to his cohorts.

Landa halted, treading water. The other men looked his direction and aimed their weapons. He inhaled to dive but froze at what he saw next. He was stunned –and then aghast.

Sparks spewed at the pirates’ bare feet. Their perspiring bodies stiffened like boards. Wisps of smoke rose from their glistening scalps.

The Naumtsev’s deck was electrified with 115 volts from its auxiliary engines, carried through a fine wire mesh that covered the hull’s rubberized anechoic plating.

The netting was energized with a surge of *milliamperes*. The captain knew, at sixteen milliamps, the assailants would be unable to move. Their bare feet would remain locked on the netting without any ability to jump overboard. 100 milliamps would then deliver muscular contractions and lung failure. At 2,000, their hearts stopped with scorched internal organs.

The entire power surge lasted three seconds.

The pirates’ eyes rolled up into their heads. Smoke floated from their open jaws. All eight men fell onto the deck like statues.

The surge caused the lights to flicker off in the control room. With a mechanized hum, the lights resumed. Arrison, Nikto and the entire crew were riveted to the video screen. No one spoke as the image revealed the eight fallen bodies.

Arrison turned to Nikto with wide, misty eyes. The man who ostensibly shared a passion for the sea, and seemed to care so much for her security, stood rigid with a vacant expression.

With a fragile voice she asked, “Did we just watch those men…get executed?

Chapter Twenty-Four – The Nature of a Scorpion

Chandler and Pilar sat crossed-legged on the torpedo room floor. The lights had gone out and the abrupt darkness made him gasp.

Pilar placed a calming hand on his shoulder. Within seconds, the lights flickered back on to the relief of a pale, clammy Chandler gripping a bottle of vodka. From their hazy eyes and her lipstick on the rim, it was clear they’d been passing the bottle back and forth.

She tried to rationalize, “Where else could they have stored Ivan’s body? You wouldn’t want him kept in the food coolers.”

Chandler convulsed at the image. She snatched the bottle out of his hand and took a swig. The lights dimmed with the faint hum of the diesels.

Chandler looked up, “What’s going on up there?”

Feeling like her legs were giving out from anxiety, Arrison took a seat in the control room. Captain Nikto huddled over her with blazing eyes.

“They were *savages...”* He stressed the word in an effort to explain. “I’ve seen their damage. They kidnap women and children. They *assassinate* prisoners if ransoms are not paid.” He leaned closer, “I’ve seen what they’ve done to women…”

Still in shock, Arrison rolled her eyes up at the man.

“*Kapitan*, the mother ship is approaching,” Dmitri announced. “They are firing weapons.”

Nikto spun towards the monitor to see the large pirate vessel less than a hundred meters away. It continued to face the Naumtsev as if it were a foolish game of courage.

He lifted his radio, “Aleksei, weld or not, we must dive!”

A hectic voice replied, “We haven’t tested the seal–”

Nikto cut him off, shouting into the P.A., “All departments: rig for dive.”

“Rig for dive,” Pavlo confirmed. “Depth twenty meters as we exit lagoon. We need more depth.”

Nikto nodded, “Move and we’ll get our depth. Open main vents,”

“We have a green board.” A crewman checked the Hull Opening Panel, “All hatches sealed.”

Pavlo turned to Nikto, “All departments rigged for dive –except for engineering.”

Nikto’s face reddened. He shouted the venerable command, “Dive, dive, dive…”

The Naumtsev churned forward in the lagoon. The pirates’ bodies were either strewn across the deck or drifting off the edges.

Ten yards to the side of the sub, Ned Landa labored to swim. He glanced through the froth to see the Naumtsev begin to lunge forward. It was like swimming towards a dock that started to move away. He threw his arms forward and kicked with pure adrenalin to reach the vessel.

Dmitri leaned towards his monitor and wrinkled his nose. “Who’s that in the water?”

“Dead pirates,” Pavlo retorted.

Dmitri zoomed the image and adjusted his glasses. “It’s a man. In uniform and he’s swimming.” He shouted over his shoulder, “One of our men!”

Curious, Nikto stepped over to study the screen. “No…” He sneered, incensed, “It is Ned Landa...”

Arrison leapt from her seat to see for herself. Onscreen, the view was from a camera on top of the sail. To the right of the sub, a figure dressed in black was splashing towards the Naumtsev.

“Hatches are sealed.” Pavlo looked to Nikto, “Full stop?”

Nikto paused, deliberating. He finally uttered, “No.”

Arrison inhaled, “You can’t just leave him!”

“He wanted to return to land,” Nikto’s eyes raged. “He belongs with savages!”

Landa swam within ten feet of the Naumtsev’s side. His progress was slowed by a rolling wake from the vessel. Though the sub was cruising no more than four knots, it created significant waves. Landa’s shoulders ached and his legs burned, churning with every ounce of his dwindling energy.

Advancing within two feet, his blurred eyes saw a handgrip on the hull. As if coiled against an imaginary wall, Landa exploded forward, lunging for the rung. His right hand slipped off the wet handle. But like a windmill, his left arm revolved to grasp it as tight as a wrench.

Landa struggled to hoist himself up. His biceps flexed to climb one rung at a time up the curved hull. Only a five-foot width of the deck was still above water. Breathless, he reached the top of the hull and crouched. He gulped air and coughed salt water from his lungs.

As the Naumtsev picked up speed, Landa gazed forward to gain his bearings. He stood in a crouched position, with the sail and bow many yards ahead of him. Water was rising on both sides of the hull. He franticly searched to find the aft hatch, only to confirm it had been sealed.

The crew observed the monitor as if captivated by a movie. They watched Landa give up on the aft hatch, to then unsteadily hike towards the bow in a desperate search for any way in. It was like watching a rat on a sinking ship.

Arrison looked at the men, horrified. “You’re going to watch him panic until he drowns?”

Nikto gritted his teeth, frustrated. He refused to reply.

Onscreen, Arrison saw Landa balancing on the center of the hull, water climbing on both sides. “Someone, please…” she implored.

“*Kapitan,*” Pavlo interjected, “Too late to open the bow hatch unless we stop.”

“We will not stop!” Nikto shouted.

Arrison’s face knotted into a scowl. She turned to the captain with eyes that plead for him to reconsider.

“*Kapitan!*” Dmitri exclaimed. “The pirate vessel is firing a .50 caliber.”

She stared, unflinching, into Nikto’s eyes as he made fists at his sides.

After an excruciating moment of silence, Nikto barked, “Open missile door twelve!”

Pavlo frowned, confused by the command.

Landa shuffled towards the bow, water approaching two feet on both sides. He recoiled as .50 caliber bullets smacked the hull twenty feet away. He dropped to his belly, realizing it’d do no good if one of the massive shells ricocheted through his flesh.

He peeked through his fingers to see the pirate boat approaching. The old shrimp boat had wide outriggers used to launch their skiffs, and a .50 caliber gun mounted on its bow.

*I should’ve known,* Landa groaned. Of course Nikto wouldn’t let him back onboard. He guessed the vessel had cameras somewhere, and they were undoubtedly watching him search for a way in. *They’re probably laughing…* Nikto’s final snub, now the Cyclops had been fixed.

Water was rushing towards him on both sides as the Naumtsev gradually submerged. The pirates would fire again, and even if he jumped overboard with his life vest, he’d be a floating target. He could hide behind the sail, but that’d only add seconds. *It’s just a matter of time…*

Ned Landa hadn’t seen his daughter in ten months, and hadn’t been to church in ten years. But he prayed. He squeezed his eyes closed, wishing he’d taken so many different roads. Despite his transgressions, he would die an honorable Marine’s death.

Water was now touching his thighs on each side. There was no need to hold his breath.

His eyes sprung open at a mechanical hiss. Life a mirage, six feet away, an enormous eight-foot rectangular hatch opened. It took him a second to process it was a vertical-launch missile door –*but Nikto doesn’t have any missiles…*

With no deliberation, Landa jumped to his feet and dove into the hatch, head first. The hydraulic door closed behind him with a mechanical thud as the hull finally submerged.

Adjacent to the torpedo room, Pilar led Chandler to the missile compartment. It was equally industrial, with upright shafts for missiles that weren’t there.

Chandler was thankful she was guiding him by the hand. The effects of the vodka seemed stronger than what he’d read. It had been a surreal couple of hours.

“This area’s okay, but…” He had a slight slur. “Can we go back to the parlor and check out the windows–”

They flinched at an abrupt thud and a muffled shout above them. Void of any rational concern, Pilar hit a switch by a hatch on the ceiling.

When the automated door opened, Ned Landa toppled out, falling six feet to the deck, followed by several gallons of sea water.

Sprawled in a puddle, Landa looked up with a bleeding lip. Momentarily dazed, he gave a crooked smile, “Hi-ya kids… Stayin’ outta’ trouble?”

Captain Nikto leaned forward on a handrail to glare at the monitor. Dead ahead was the approaching pirate mother ship.

“We got our depth,” Pavlo announced. “Twenty-one meters.”

As if waiting for a precise second, he growled, “Ramming speed, forty knots.”

“Forty knots, aye,” Pavlo confirmed.

Arrison remained seated. Her emotions were depleted, and she was in no position to beg for anything more. She was grateful Landa was back onboard, and Chandler was reportedly safe.

She knew what was coming next. Arrison looked down for any sort of seatbelt, but there were none. She gripped a rail next to her and looked up at the monitor.

A seagull’s view would have witnessed a 375-foot serrated monster swimming six feet beneath the clear emerald sea. Though submerged, its sharp sail sliced through the surface. Its bayonet nose was concealed just below the waterline.

The monster sped directly for the pirate’s fifty-foot boat. Men scurried on its deck, shouting and pointing at the beast, bewildered. A man fired the .50 caliber machine gun.

The Naumtsev impaled the boat like a lance. In a single move, the impact thrust the bow skyward as the hatchet-like sail split the boat down its center. The shattered halves collapsed, and the Naumtsev’s steel spur struck the boat’s gas tanks.

When the spark ignited the fuel, the Naumtsev was fifteen feet beneath the surface. Its fin and tail vanished under a deafening sphere of fire.

There was an unnerving silence in the control room. Arrison watched the crew inexplicably resume their duties as if it were just another day at the office.

She looked at each man, searching for any shred of sentiment.

Nikto stood firm in the center of the room. He finally spoke as he turned towards the door, “I will be in my office. Alone.”

Part Four

OCULAR PROOF

“A hundred suspicions don't make a proof.”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment.*

Chapter Twenty-Five – The Pry Bar

GUANACASTE, COSTA RICA

The gorgeous estate overlooked thirty miles of pristine Pacific coastline from an altitude of 2,000 feet. The two-story home was Spanish Colonial with a terracotta roof. The landscaped grounds included an orange grove, a horse pasture and green coffee plants. The backdrop was green-swathed volcanoes to the east, and the azure sea to the west. The owner called it her *el cielo en la cima del mundo*. Heaven on the top of the world.

The homeowner had chosen to live alone. Aside from its splendor, the house had been selected because it was far from any potential neighbors. After all she had endured, she craved solitude.

The owner put on a silk robe as she stepped out of her marble bathroom. With such privacy, she played her *Cumbia* dance music at full volume throughout the cavernous home. Singing along to the harmony, she combed her long brunette hair while studying her face in the mirror. As an early-forties Latina, she tried to preserve her smooth skin by avoiding the sun when she could. She was proud of her high cheekbones, and her body was toned with age-appropriate curves. Though she was now humble, she’d been called stunning in a previous life. Today there was no need for heavy make-up or glamorous clothing in her private *heaven on earth.*

She looked up at a skylight to see a pink dusk. Grooving to the music, she swayed to the back patio door to enjoy the sunset. Maybe some wine on the balcony.

When she opened the blinds, she released a bloodcurdling scream. Looming in the window was an ominous figure in all black. His helmeted face jerked towards her.

She spun to dash to the closest exit, a French door at the end of a hall. As she rounded the corner, an identical figure stepped into view behind the glass. The nightmarish troop lifted a gun and tapped it on the glass. Clutching her robe closed, she sprinted towards the home’s front doors. Her screams were dampened by the pulsing music.

When she opened the tall oak door, a third black troop blocked her path, aiming an AR-15 assault rifle to her face. She froze in her tracks, unable to breathe with short gasps.

She didn’t realize the troops were with the *Unidad Especial de Intervencion,* or Special Intervention Unit, an obscure Costa Rican Special Forces Unit. They weren’t associated with any civilian police, but were part of the Intelligence and Security Directorate, which reported directly to the Minister of the Presidency.

The mostly-peaceful Costa Rica didn’t have any army or military forces. It did, however, maintain a police security force to keep public order within its borders and surrounding territory. This Special Intervention mission had been dispatched by the Minister of the Presidency, who’d received a special request from Colombia’s *Fiscal General Martinez*.

The woman gasped with panic, clasping her robe in fear of being assaulted. She noticed two black SUVs at the base of her gravel driveway. She realized she hadn’t heard them because of her music. The armed troop stepped back as a stocky man in a gray business suit approached. The man was bald with a staunch frown. He lifted a hand for the soldier to stand down.

The woman calmed slightly, realizing the man was dressed too conservatively to be from any cartel she’d ever seen.

He stopped two feet in front of her. The troops lowered their weapons and maintained a perimeter behind him. The man finally spoke without any pleasantries.

“You are *Mirta Salazar*, yes?” he asked in Spanish.

Her eyes widened. She stammered in Spanish, “No… I am Lina Negroni, visiting from San Jose–”

The man cut her off with a raised hand. “I am with Attorney General Martinez’s office in Bogotá.” He raised his thick brows, “The same man who gave you your new name.”

Her lip visibly quivered. She sounded rehearsed as she repeated, “I am Lina Negroni, visiting from San–”

“–You are Mirta Salazar,” the man interrupted with a raised voice. “Do you wish to confirm with a physical examination?”

Mirta looked at the ground and shook her head.

The man continued, “Our agreement states you shall continue to cooperate with any of our investigations, at our request.” He flashed a sinister smile. “Or you can join your husband in *La Modelo* prison.”

Mirta became flushed. As she searched for a response, she glanced at the wall inside her door. In a gold frame was a portrait of a beautiful girl, a near clone of herself. It was the face of fifteen-year old Pilar, her missing daughter.

She looked into the man’s eyes. “What is it you need?”

The door opened to Professor Arrison’s quarters. Light from the corridor created a bright sliver across her bed. Chandler quietly entered her room with Pilar at his side.

He approached his sleeping mother and touched her arm. “Mom…wake up…” He spoke in a low voice, “You gotta’ see it.”

Arrison’s eyes sprung open. She instantly sat up, blinking to discern the figures of her son and Pilar. She asked, “Are we there?”

“Yes,” Chandler smiled. “And it’s incredible.”

Chapter Twenty-Six – The King’s Garden

GULF OF CAZONES

Professor Arrison located the grand parlor in record time. *One ladder down, then forward towards the bow…*When she entered with Chandler and Pilar, she noticed the lights had been dimmed to allow the large windows to take center stage. Armchairs had been arranged in front of each window as if they were opera boxes to witness something amazing.

Captain Nikto and Landa were already seated at the Iris window to her right. The captain noticed her arrival with a wide smile.

“Good morning.” He pointed to a copper samovar in the center of the room. “We have fresh-ground Sumatra coffee from the Sunda Islands for our show this morning.”

Arrison skipped the coffee and proceeded to the window to the left. The three sat and scooted forward, just inches from the eight-foot circular window. Their faces were illuminated by the view.

Twenty-five feet below, they saw a vibrant reef teaming with tropical fish. Traveling less than four knots, Arrison watched enormous orange starfish glide by that were over a foot in diameter. Soaring yellow elkhorn coral nearly grazed the ship.

“Where exactly are we?” Arrison asked.

Nikto walked over to join them. “I call this place *podvodnyy ray.* My undersea Eden.” His eyes sparkled, relishing the view. “I can only reveal we are somewhere between *Jardinas de la Reina* and *Cayo Piedra.”*

The reef was bursting with colors more vivid than any Arrison had seen. Red, orange and purple corals. Undulating ribbons of lime-green kelp. Lustrous schools of yellow tail. The clarity and colors gave the reef a surreal quality.

“I know about Cayo Piedra.” Chandler looked at Pilar, “It was Castro’s secret island.”

“As in *Fidel* Castro?” Landa asked, approaching with a mug of coffee.

Chandler nodded, in his element with historical data. He looked at Nikto, “Captain, can you at least admit if we’re somewhere near the Bay of Pigs?”

Nikto raised his brows at the unexpected question. “Very well. We are indeed sixteen kilometers from *Bahia de Cochinos*.”

Chandler turned to Landa, “Castro had a private island *because* of the Bay of Pigs invasion.”

Landa dipped his head, “How is that..?”

“The U.S.’s attack on Cuba in 1961 was a disaster. Our boats didn’t know about the shallow reefs. After the failed assault, Castro came out to explore the entire region. He asked a local fisherman to give him a tour. That’s when he discovered *Cayo Piedra,* a small island ten miles off the coast. Known only to a few locals.”

“So how’s it Castro’s secret island?” Landa smirked.

“He loved the island so much, he took it for himself,” Chandler shrugged. “He even told the lighthouse keeper to leave, and he had to decommission the lighthouse. Castro ordered his men to build him and his wife an enormous house overlooking the coast. Their own private island.”

“While his citizens suffered in poverty,” Pilar scoffed, “Castro was in a hammock in paradise.”

Landa grinned at her, equally cynical.

“It is true,” Nikto conceded. “Only Castro’s personal yacht was allowed in these waters. The *Aquarama II* had engines built by Soviets, a gift from *Leonid Brezhnev* himself.” He waved towards the reef. “Imagine exploring all of this –with no other humans.”

The guests turned their attention outside. Arrison and Chandler gasped and pointed at lobsters over two feet in length. There were at least a half dozen red and brown Caribbean spiny lobsters. They crawled carefree on the seafloor, never knowing human predators.

Landa chuckled, “At Joe’s in Miami those tails would be five hundred bucks *apiece*.”

“This is the result of the U.S.’s attack. No more humans allowed.” Nikto watched from over their shoulders. “Even closures from your abhorrent COVID-19 made the waters of Venice crystal-clear within weeks. Imagine waters that haven’t been touched by man for six *decades*.”

Chandler smiled in a daze. “The fish and lobster were like the king’s deer…”

To Arrison, this dreamlike playground was entirely conceivable. She’d read about the other location Nikto had mentioned, *Jardinas de la Reina*. The untouched area was a sprawling reef stretching over two-hundred kilometers, the third longest barrier reef in the world. Cuba’s political isolation over the past sixty years had created an astounding marine preserve.

Arrison tried to envision how the Caribbean would have appeared without man’s destructive touch. The brightest color she’d ever seen on a reef in Florida was from a sunken beer bottle. Castro’s paranoia about his citizens escaping by sea had inadvertently preserved the entire region. The waters were strictly off-limits; no commercial fishing, no human visitors. The much-speculated Utopia of the Caribbean had existed all along, just off the shores of Cuba.

Nikto’s voice pulled her back to the present with a poignant truth.

“How much longer can this exist?” He had a critical tone, “Without chemical runoff from golf courses? Your unsightly resorts? The inevitable algae blooms…”

No one knew how to respond. Their attention was drawn back to the window as two goliath groupers swam by, each over five feet in length. Their spotted bodies against the vibrant coral backdrop looked almost psychedelic.

“Whoa..!” Landa shouted. He pointed at enormous clams over three feet in diameter. “That’d feed an entire platoon!”

Arrison’s mouth slowly dropped to see a bed of massive clams. “*Tridacna* colossal clams..?” They were at varying levels on the coral bed. The clams had deeply furrowed shells with incandescent royal-blue patterns. Some had their shells ajar like enormous jaws waiting for their prey. Arrison looked at Nikto, “That’s impossible –they only exist in the South Pacific.”

“And extremely endangered,” Chandler added, equally in awe.

“Precisely why I transplanted a colony to this garden,” Nikto stepped closer to the glass. “The waters and temperature closely resemble their indigenous homes.” He smiled like they were his children. “Some are a hundred years old... They are misunderstood. Legends say they have swallowed divers whole. I am sure that is nonsense.” He looked at Arrison with a raised brow, “You should see their pearls –the size of billiard balls.”

Landa’s eyes went round at the notion.

“The irony of a nation that does not progress,” Nikto gave a bittersweet smile. “It creates a revitalized world right off its shores.”

Arrison turned to him with an inquisitive frown. “So this isn’t Guanahacabibes…”

“Not yet.” He touched her shoulder. “Soon. *Very* soon.”

Dr. Yuri was ready for his dreaded but necessary chore.

At the captain’s direction, he played “Yaroslavna’s Lament” from Alexander Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor.* The Russian aria played softly through the Naumtsev’s speakers. It was Nikto’s preferred composition for such occasions, though mercifully infrequent. The haunting words invoked images of the hero’s wife *Yaroslavna* as she appealed to the forces of nature –the wind, the sun and the waters– for her husband’s enduring safety.

As the evocative melody drifted through the corridors, Dr. Yuri chose two crewmen to assist. The men remained solemn as the elder doctor led them up two flights of stairs and forward into the torpedo room.

Dr. Yuri paused in the chamber. Even-numbered torpedo doors were on the starboard side, so he turned right to locate hatch number eight. He nodded at his two assistants. It was time.

The wrapped corpse of Ivan Popov was gently removed from the tube. The men were methodical, treating their fallen comrade’s body with reverence. Dr. Yuri noticed the Mylar wrap around Ivan’s face had been moved. He shuddered, praying the vessel didn’t have rats. The men withdrew at the sight of the man’s face, and Yuri refastened the wrap.

The body was placed on a stretcher, and the two crewmen carried it out of the torpedo room. They took their time, cautious when stepping over thresholds. The stretcher was carried delicately down two stairways, back to the infirmary. Yuri and his men placed the body in the medical bay, ready for the next task. The mournful music fit the mood.

Under the direction of Dr. Yuri –who required a few nips from his flask– Ivan’s body was prepared according to maritime tradition. It was wrapped and sewn in a shroud of sailcloth. The only omission from 18th century custom was the last stitch was historically sewn through the deceased’s nostrils to awaken a man mistakenly in a coma. That would not be needed for poor Ivan. Since no cannonballs were available for ballast, several coral rocks were sewn into the bag.

The men then carried the swathed body down one flight of steps to the Naumtsev’s lowest level. Yuri entered the moon well and the men placed Ivan’s body on the deck under the Cyclops.

The opera played on.

Though Arrison could never grow tired of looking out the window, she had a gnawing impatience. Considering the approximate time she’d woken up, and how lunch was served with Nikto’s rigid itinerary, she estimated she’d been in the parlor over four hours.

*Four hours at forty knots…* she made a few calculations. Forty knots was approximately forty-six miles per hour. A brass compass in the parlor showed they’d been traveling due west. *That’s over two hundred miles, west of the Bay of Pigs…* She jotted that in her journal.

Arrison looked up to see Chandler and Pilar returning to the parlor from wherever they’d been. Arrison smiled; she liked Pilar, though there was a sadness about her. Nikto had said she was the daughter of a former business partner, and that she was now in a *safer world*. The girl seemed to smile more around Chandler, and she’d never seen her son so exhilarated by another person. It had all been books and journals until… She withered, *until our captivity.*

Their predicament was a concern that would not go away. Were they passengers or prisoners? A passenger would have a final terminus or port to disembark. Did they? Nikto said he could never allow them betray his existence. Would that allow any exceptions? Landa’s attempt to escape had been almost disastrous.

In the states, she and Chandler were certainly missing persons, undoubtedly presumed dead. But Arrison had to admit there was no real sense of urgency. They had no other family or relatives to contact to assure they were safe. She wondered if her students were worried or upset. She recalled a fellow professor who went missing and died during a hike at Yosemite several years earlier. The university issued a nice blurb in the school paper, and then sent a heartfelt email to his students and associates. Then they placed a job posting for his replacement.

In contrast, she had to admit Nikto’s tour of his domain was fascinating. Castro’s private reefs were a dream come true, and would have a significant impact within the marine biology community. Couldn’t Nikto see the benefits of sharing the coordinates with her colleagues? The research possibilities were boundless –and more people could witness untouched nature.

Nikto would certainly say *people are precisely the problem.*

Arrison found herself somber when she should be excited. What would be their ultimate fate? She turned to the other Iris to see Pilar and Chandler standing close. Arrison’s own romantic life had flourished and concluded with no regrets. But what did it mean for them? Pursue their relationship while confined underwater for the rest of their days? *They’re just kids…*

Arrison turned at the sound of Landa and the captain entering the parlor.

Nikto smiled with open arms, “I have confirmed the Cyclops is fully repaired.” He approached Arrison at the window. “Thanks to Mr. Landa’s fine craftsmanship.”

Landa forced a smile. “Took longer than I thought.”

Pilar and Chandler joined them. All five gazed out the window to see it had grown darker. Fish were just scarcely defined shadows. The solar rays diminished by every degree of depth. Arrison had watched the view slowly fade from aqua, to navy-blue, into ink black.

“We are now between Guanahacabibes and the Yucatan peninsula.” Nikto remained behind them with arms spread on Chandler and Pilar’s shoulders. “Approaching 600 meters.”

“That’s impossible,” Landa chuckled. “The max depth for Navy subs is around 250 meters.”

Nikto gave a smug grin. “That is the depth your militaries admit, but the true depth is classified. The first Typhoons could dive 400 meters. The Naumtsev has an outer hull of titanium, over a pressure hull of two-inch thick high-tensile steel. She was modified to withstand even the most extreme hydrostatic pressure.

That hushed Landa, who had no choice but to accept his words.

Arrison gazed into the darkness. “I can’t believe we’re here.”

Landa turned to Arrison and Chandler, “What’s this *Guana-haca*-whatever you two been going on about?”

“It’s just a myth,” Chandler chuckled mockingly. “An area that’s–”

“–Been inaccessible for decades,” Arrison scowled at Chandler, troubled by his lack of faith. “You think it’s a *myth..?* It was reported in National Geographic and the Washington Post.”

“The *theory* was reported…” Chandler retorted.

Pilar stepped back, amused at their debate.

“Be your own judge,” Nikto suggested diplomatically. He touched a switch on the wall and called out, “Dmitri, floodlights, please.”

At his command, lights ignited outside the windows. Arrison looked out to see spotlights shining down from the Naumtsev. Since there was nothing for the beams to reflect off of, the lights gave the water the appearance of milky fog.

Chandler and Arrison cupped their hands to the glass, waiting for anything. Nothing but twirling particles of plankton.

“What..? “Landa shrugged, “I don’t get it.”

After an eternal pause, light revealed a surface beneath the vessel. All five craned their necks to look down. Through the haze, a surface the color of sand appeared, but it was flat as if it were paved. It was the width of the Naumtsev, and there were seams every five yards like immense slabs had been laid to form a path.

“It looks like a road.” Chandler spun to his mother, “Like the Bimini Road in the Bahamas.”

“What’s Bimini Road?” Landa grumbled.

“North of Bimini there are flat rock formations underwater,” Arrison explained without looking away. “Limestone blocks that appear manmade. Archeologists have theorized it was an ancient road. A University of Miami study dated the slabs to be over 3,500 years old –thousands of years before the earliest known inhabitants of the islands.”

The three visitors huddled close to look out the window. The Naumtsev’s spotlights continued to illuminate the bizarre, flat path. It continued downward like a ramp, deeper into the darkness. Coral rocks came into view that looked like symmetrical blocks lining the path.

“Mom –look!” Chandler exclaimed. Through the blur, the path appeared to be obstructed by several stone columns resting on their sides. As the view cleared, the columns appeared too perfect to be random formations. They looked like crumbled pillars, two feet in diameter and twenty feet long. When the Naumtsev slowed over them, lights revealed engravings down their length, with pedestal bases. The fallen columns were unquestionably manmade.

Wonder softened Landa’s face. He turned to Pilar. “What *exactly* are we seeing?”

She tilted her head with a grin. “It’s the road to Atlantis, Mr. Landa.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Beyond the Pillars of Heracles

“The theories are true..?” Arrison had wide eyes and her voice was an octave higher.

Nikto just smiled. “As first suggested in 1951, then confirmed by sonar in 2001. Symmetrical structures and pyramids of stone. You are among the few non-communists to witness it for yourselves.”

Just hearing the word aloud gave Arrison goose bumps*. Atlantis…* It even rolled of the tongue as mysterious, exhilarating –and preposterous. Landa and the rest would consider her as respectable as a UFO fanatic.She didn’t care.

Then again –she looked at the others– they were equally fixed to the window. Her stomach stirred with anticipation. Could it be even the least bit true? In her chosen profession, she wasn’t qualified to have an intellectual debate about the existence of Atlantis. But she had read volumes about undersea discoveries that fueled speculation.

After Captain Nikto had promised to take them to *Guanahacabibes*, she’d reviewed every journal in his library, including a book about symbols found in Cuba’s *Punta del Este* caves depicting the demise of Atlantis.

Scientists were taught to regard coincidences as inherently meaningless. But wasn’t there too many auspicious discoveries to dismiss the notion entirely?

As Arrison leaned towards the window, a torrent of research flooded her memories.

In 2001, deep beneath the Yucatan Channel off the coast of Guanahacabibes, experts uncovered what appeared to be a lost city. Advanced sonar equipment aboard the *Ulises*, a vessel owned by Canadian firm Innovative Digital Communications (IDC), detected a several-kilometer square area of what seemed to be roads, pyramids and other structures at a depth of 2,200 feet.

"We have a real mystery," said Paul Weinz with IDC, the firm hired by Castro’s government. They’d been mapping the ocean floor of Cuba's prohibited territorial waters. Remote sonar equipment sent back footage of linear stone features and large stone blocks, with edges worn away by the sea. “Nature couldn't have built anything so symmetrical."

Weinz’s firm had been hired to hunt for shipwrecks, and to locate valuable oil and natural gas reserves in waters so deep the Cuban government didn’t have resources to explore it themselves. In the summer of 2001, as his vessel was towing sonar above the seafloor, the rock formations appeared on the readouts. The findings shocked Weinz and his wife, Paulina Litsky, a Russian-born engineer who had designed submarine bases for the Soviet military.

What Weinz and Litsky discovered ignited theories about the presence of Atlantis, as described by philosopher Plato more than 2,350 years earlier.

Arrison had taken Ancient Philosophy in college. Her first exposure to the notion of Atlantis was reading Plato’s description of the mythical island.

According to Plato, Atlantis was an island empire founded by Poseidon, god of the seas. It had been a diverse metropolis, with palaces, royal courts and harbors that received sea-going vessels from afar. According to legend, Zeus unleashed “earthquakes and floods” that submerged Atlantis. The date given for this catastrophe was between 8570 BC in Plato's dialogue the *Timaeus*, and 9421 BC in its follow-up the *Critias*.

Other writers of the era also described islands to the west that had been occupied by Phoenician and Carthaginian mariners, who kept their existence quiet to avoid drawing attention from foreign nations. Multiple academics seemed to agree that *some* version of Atlantis had existed.

Following Christopher Columbus' fated landfall in the Bahamas in 1492, explorers discovered stories from the native people of the Caribbean and Bahamas about a flood that had devastated the archipelagos. It had divided a larger landmass, killing the residents and leaving behind the many islands and cays that remain today. Similarly, stories from Venezuela and the Yucatan spoke of a period of devastation with “fire falling from the sky.”

Based on the parallel accounts, had some cosmic event caused a catastrophe that devastated the Bahamas and Caribbean? Was it tied to the destruction of a city called Atlantis?

Plato claimed Atlantis had a vast irrigated plain that “stretched for three thousand *stadia* (552 kilometers) in one direction, and two thousand stadia (368 kilometers) inland from the coast.” To the north, west and east were “mountain ranges,” while the southern end of the plain, on which the city was situated, was at sea-level. Plato had described an east-west positioned island approximately 600 by 400 kilometers in size.

Such an island, with a valley surrounded by mountain ranges, matched Cuba's plain that stretched from Havana westwards to *Pinar del Río*, and enclosed on its northern and western extremes by the *Cord de Guaniguanico* mountains.

Arrison had to admit Cuba’s topography was an almost exact description of Plato’s Atlantis.

According to Aztec and Mayan legend, the first humans emerged from somewhere called *Chichomoztoc,* the “Seven Caves.” The only site in the entire Caribbean that bears any resemblance to the Seven Caves, are the *Punta del Este* caves at the eastern end of Cuba. *Ceuva Uno* (cave number one) is filled with remarkable petroglyphs of concentric circles and geometric shapes that are thousands of years old.

In 1951, nearly a decade before Communist rule on the island, Cuban archaeologists theorized the drawings in Punta del Este's caves reflected some sort of cosmic catastrophe, such as a comet, which had devastated Atlantis.

In an article from the February, 1952 edition of the magazine ECOS titled, “*Formó Cuba Parte de la Atlándida?*” written by Francisco Garcia-Juarez, the press secretary of the *Instituto Cubano de Arqueologia* (Institute of Cuban Archaeology) the question was presented: did Cuba once form part of Atlantis?

The article concluded the best evidence that Atlantis existed was in Cuba’s Punta del Este caves. It agreed the petroglyphs illustrated a comet with a tail “hitting an astral or celestial body, and breaking up,” signifying an end to Atlantis.

Furthermore, Paulina Litsky, with the Canadian IDC team working out of Cuba, visited the Punta del Este caves shortly before their discovery of the submerged structures. She claimed a carving of a cross on a large rectangular block videoed at the underwater site, appeared remarkably similar to an abstract cross symbol found inside Punta del Este's caves.

And it wasn’t just decades-old conjecture from obscure sources. Revered modern periodicals confirmed the same information.

Kevin Sullivan, a Pulitzer Prize-winning senior correspondent for the *Washington Post,* described Cuba’s deep-water sonar findings, “The images appear slowly on the video screen like ghosts from the ocean floor. The videotape, made by an unmanned submarine, shows massive stones in oddly symmetrical square and pyramid shapes in the deep-sea darkness… Sonar images taken from a research ship 2,000 feet above are even more puzzling. They show that the smooth, white stones are laid out in a geometric pattern. The images look like fragments of a city, in a place where nothing manmade should exist, spanning nearly eight square miles of a deep-ocean plain off Cuba's western tip.”

Arrison never dreamed she’d be witnessing the edifices with her own eyes, from mere yards away. After she told the others what she’d read, Landa gaped with a warped grin.

“So why have *I* never heard of it?” He chuckled. “It’d be the top story on every news.”

“Think about it, Ned…” Arrison didn’t back down, impassioned. “Sixty years of communist rule… Castro had zero financial or technical resources to research –and do you think he’d share with the world what he possessed in his own private backyard?”

“Mom…” Chandler called out.

She turned to see him gawking out the window. She joined him to see the Naumtsev’s spotlights revealing a structure that looked like a crumbled Grecian temple. The lights followed its form to expose a triangular pediment atop leaning columns, laced with a thousand fish.

Chandler recited under his breath, “Islands to the west. Irrigated plains, mountain ranges on the sea…” He looked at his mother, “That matches Cuba almost precisely.”

She smiled. Her son knew the same material.

Chandler quickly paced to Nikto’s bookshelf to take a well-worn book, “*Cyphers of Punta del Este*.” He flipped to a page to show the others, “Look at this...”

Pilar and Landa briefly turned from the window to see the book opened to page with black and white photographs. They showed drawings on a cave wall, as if by primitive man.

“These petroglyphs,” Chandler spoke quickly. “They depict a cataclysm, destroying Atlantis.”

The others leaned closer to observe. Arrison pointed to a drawing of a circular swirling pattern like a spherical maze. Landa seemed more interested than she’d predicted.

Interrupting their attention, Nikto said coolly, “You may wish to see this.”

They turned back to the window. The Naumtsev’s lights slowly zigzagged to behold stones assembled in the shape of a large pyramid.

Arrison was wordless. As the lights traced the structure upwards –ascending above the Naumtsev– she estimated the height at almost a hundred feet. Unlike the smooth pyramids of Egypt, the sides had a tiered design like Mayan structures. Though it was fragmented and streaked with growth, the deliberate design was indisputable.

She’d once visited *Chichen Itza* pyramid in Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula. It was also thirty meters in height and appeared hauntingly similar. *Greek and Mayan influences…* she mused.

“My god…” was all Landa could utter. Both of his hands were on the glass as he stared out.

With tears in her eyes, Arrison turned to Chandler. “Your father would have loved this...” She gave a bittersweet smile.

Chandler returned the smile with quaking lips. “He would have.”

Dmitri’s voice rang from the intercom, “Captain: we have reached our destination.”

“Drop anchor please,” Nikto replied aloud. He turned to the four with a veiled smile. “Time to suit-up for a special memorial.”

Chandler’s eyes widened. “Suit up..?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Slumbering Sentinels

Captain Nikto led Pilar and the three guests into the moon well. There was a gust of humid air as the mechanical doors slid open.

It was Arrison’s first time seeing the moon well. She’d read of research submarines having smaller versions of the same thing, a floodable chamber to allow divers and equipment to move between the sub’s interior and the water. As with most innovations on the Naumtsev, it was beyond what she could envision.

Arrison’s eyes were drawn to the most prominent thing in the room: the Cyclops, hanging from its hoist. She stared, drinking in the graceful design. It was almost identical to minisubs that could dive two miles below the surface. She’d seen a documentary about director James Cameron’s sub, the *Deepsea Challenger,* which cost over eight million dollars and had completed the deepest solo dive to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, nearly seven miles deep. Arrison felt like a high school violin teacher gazing at a Stradivarius.

Chandler, however, walked straight to the dive suits hanging on the wall. He beamed like an enthralled kid, “These are like a cross between an astronaut and Iron Man.”

“Indeed,” Nikto smiled, smug. “My ADS exosuits, atmospheric dive suits.” They were gray metal with maroon joints for flexibility on the arms, legs, neck and torso. Chandler compared his hand to its hefty mechanical glove. As the others gathered around, Nikto motioned to the suits’ features.

“Light-weight aluminum alloy,” Nikto explained like a spokesman. “Divers can work safely to depths of 700 meters and still have flexibility with unique rotary joints for any delicate work.”

Arrison stepped closer to study the details. “Pressurized?”

“Yes. The same cabin pressure as the surface. No need to decompress. No danger of decompression sickness or nitrogen narcosis.” He pointed to the suit’s integrated backpack. “It has two redundant oxygen systems with a total capacity of fifty hours.”

Chandler tapped the helmet’s teardrop-shaped globe face mask, “An almost perfect 180-degree view.”

“Reinforced acrylic, with integrated lights.” Nikto nodded. “The wearer need not be a skilled swimmer.” He smiled at Arrison and Chandler, “But it would help.”

“Ironically…” Landa interjected with competing authority, “ADS suits have been used by our Navy for submarine rescue.”

Their heads turned to see two crewmen enter. One was fully suited aside from his helmet.

Nikto motioned to the men, “These gentlemen will help fit the suits on each of you.” He spread his hands, “It is as easy as walking in a park.”

“It is regular oxygen,” the lean crewman said to Chandler in a thick Russian accent. “Breathe as you would on land…”

The thought of diving wasn’t daunting to Chandler. Thanks to his mother’s vocation, he’d been a PADI-certified advanced open water diver since he was eleven. His mother was a certified dive master. And Landa had bragged about his dive training in the Marines.

In Chinese *hanzi* symbols the suits were designated either small, medium or large. Pilar said she always wore small. Chandler guessed Landa would be snug in a large. He and his mother should be fine in mediums.

The crewmen were methodical, applying the suits to each of them. They stepped *into* the suits, which were then sealed in the back by an assistant. A crewman fumbled through his thick accent to explain the application.

“The helmet is last thing installed before the diver enters the water,” he muttered. The base of the helmet had an O-ring seal at the neck. Each diver had to adjust the fit on his or her helmet by adjusting the neck ring. Once the collars were locked, each diver had to inhale to create a suction on the neck ring, indicating a proper seal. The assistants then immediately turned on the oxygen so the divers could breathe.

When Captain Nikto, Pilar and the guests were fully dressed, they were led by four suited crewmen to a platform beneath the Cyclops.

Chandler froze –there on the deck was a wrapped corpse. The body was bound in a tight linen, with the unmistakable outline of a man. He knew it was the dead body from the torpedo tube. His anxiety subsided, hearing how it was the crewman who had died trying to save the Naumtsev. Captain Nikto explained this outing was to ceremoniously bury the deceased.

They stood on the platform, suspended over the well by steel cables as thick as a man’s thumb. Chandler looked down at the floor. It was a lattice of grated steel so he could see the well door beneath it. He stood beside his mother, eager for what existed on the other side.

All nine divers were a snug fit on the platform. Ivan’s wrapped corpse was added to the floor. Nikto nodded to a crewman, who hit a switch. A motorized winch began to lower the platform. Chandler awkwardly bent to look below his feet. The well door opened like an elevator door on the floor. “This is it…” he whispered on his voice-activated mic.

Ned Landa estimated the Naumtsev was anchored twelve feet above the seabed. From the bottom of the hull, floodlights lit the barren landscape below. Curious fish flurried away as the platform carrying the divers descended.

The stage landed on the seafloor with a small cloud of sediment. Nikto and Pilar were the first to step off. Then the four crewmen, who carried the wrapped corpse on a stretcher like pallbearers. Landa followed, along with Dr. Arrison and Chandler.

Landa tried to calm his breathing. He looked up in his dome helmet. It looked like night skies above him, with just the glimmer of faraway sunrays. To his sides were structures set against a backdrop of black. The 180-degree view looked like a virtual reality game. The open vista suppressed any feelings of claustrophobia, though the suffocating darkness was menacing.

He wondered if this was how it felt to walk on the moon. Everyone looked like they were moving in slow motion. Despite the hefty suits, it wasn’t difficult to walk. The weight was balanced by the buoyancy of the water. Landa looked down to see his heavy feet create a trail of disturbed sand. When he looked up, they were dwarfed by ruins that were inconceivable.

Captain Nikto and Pilar led the group, aiming powerful spotlights. As they hiked the path, their lights revealed immense leaning columns that seemed suspended with vine-like flora. Thirty-foot-tall formations had the unequivocal outlines of human statues. Shadows of large fish slithered away from the light, back into their ancient homes.

Landa didn’t know anything about Roman or Greek –or even Aztec history, but the seaweed-covered ruins looked like every photo he’d ever seen on the subjects. Some structures were several stories in height. The columns had ridges down their length. Their triangular tops had etchings that had to be ancient words.

Grasping the entirety of what he was seeing, he realized he was within an entire city, not just random relics or towers of coral. Their straight path had been a central road. Streets branched off to other structures with their roofs open to the sky. Temples had fallen when their columns crumbled to the earth. Something had annihilated this prehistoric city.

He understood why people like the professor would find it fascinating, but he felt like he was walking in a sunken ghost town. He could imagine black, beady eyes of unknown sea creatures watching them from ancient windows.

Landa took a deep breath. He needed to focus on marching in a straight line behind Nikto. When he turned to the four geared crewmen carrying the body, he noticed one man had a speargun attached to his back.

*Why does he get a gun?* Landa wondered. He checked the darkness above him. *Do I need a gun..?* Behind the dome of his helmet, his face perspired and he could hear the echo of his own breathing. He looked towards Pilar.

“How much farther?” Landa asked into his mic.

“The temple structure, just ahead.” Nikto’s voice crackled through his headset.

Pilar looked at him with a tranquil smile. “Just breathe Mr. Landa.”

Without words, Dr. Arrison and Chandler walked together, relishing the moment. She felt a sort of *déjà vu;* her stomach had the same butterflies as when her parents had taken her to Disney World for the first time as a child. After reading so much about it, there it was. But what she beheld was so overwhelming, she tried to view her surroundings as an academic.

As her eyes became attuned to the shapes in the haze, the lights revealed the base of an Acropolis. To her distant right was the outline of a Parthenon. All of it dormant at the foot of a pyramid with tiered steps. Where the streets had certainly accommodated thousands of inhabitants, they were now forsaken, aside from nine walking divers.

The sceptic in her knew she’d never *really* be able to confirm this was some version of *Atlantis*. At the least, it was a sunken ancient metropolis. Nikto didn’t allow cameras, so she’d have to rely entirely on her journal entries with approximate coordinates, descriptions and sketches. Perhaps after the burial, he’d take her inside some of the structures.

“Mom, an oarfish,” Chandler’s voice announced through static.

She turned to see an enormous fish weaving its way through a row of columns. “It looks like a silver serpent!” Arrison exclaimed. The oarfish was a rare deep water fish she never imagined seeing in its natural environment. It was elongated, at least twenty-five feet long, with large eyes and a dorsal fin that ran down its length. It was the longest bony fish alive, and with occasional beachings after storms, the oarfish had been responsible for “sea serpent” sightings.

Pilar approached with her light in an attempt to track the creature, only to see its shimmer vanish within a structure, like a fish hiding in a vast aquarium’s castle. As her light wandered upwards, it exposed the towering statue of a woman.

Arrison, Chandler and Landa stopped in their tracks to behold the effigy. Though its edges had been worn by time, the figure was at least thirty feet tall, and curved in the classical female form. Its face gazed eerily down at them.

“Who do you think she was?” Landa uttered.

“I believe a woman of some great import,” Nikto’s voice responded. “Perhaps a leader.”

With all beams on the statue’s face, Arrison studied the features, struggling to grasp the significance. Was it some ruler or queen of Atlantis? Though her traits were faded, the woman had symmetrical features, with wide eyes and full lips.

As the lights moved on, the figure was both beautiful and unnerving, looming over them in the blackness. When the lights brightened its base, it revealed a carved pattern. Arrison gasped to see it was the circular, swirling design that looked like a spherical maze.

“It’s the same pattern from the Cuban caves…” Chandler declared, excited.

He was right. It was proof of some connection. Landa touched the chiseled symbol, genuinely fascinated. The lights then faded to their right as the captain and his team proceeded on their course. The guests hastened their pace to catch up.

Chandler led the three. But as the lights converged on a rectangular area five yards ahead, he halted in his tracks.

“Mom…. Captain…” Chandler stammered within his helmet. “There are–”

“–Yes,” Nikto turned to the three. “They are the sentinels of Atlantis.”

In their path were a dozen sharks, eight to ten feet in length –but they were frozen in place, motionless, eerily suspended five feet above the sand as if tethered by invisible cords. But unlike stone statues, their gills were moving.

“They are sleeping.” Nikto stepped between a pair of ten-foot sharks. “Certainly Dr. Arrison knows the discovery of sleeping sharks off the Yucatan.”

Arrison’s smile and eyes widened with instant recognition.

“They are Atlantis’s loyal guards.” With outstretched arms he added, “If you are cautious, they will let you pass.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine – A Perilous Procession

Twenty-two years earlier, Patrice Arrison helped organize a dream trip she couldn’t attend.

As a Marine Science student at her alma mater, Florida Atlantic University, she’d been asked to plan a dive tour of Mexico’s *Isla Mujeres* to observe the legendary sleeping sharks firsthand. She and her newlywed husband Michael had been counting down the days for the unparalleled adventure.

They’d never had an official honeymoon because of school and monetary limitations. When the class sponsored the trip, it was a godsend, a dream destination, infinitely better than a weekend in Niagara Falls or Vegas.

Patrice and Michael had met at FAU, and their mutual passion for marine sciences had been an instant attraction. “There’s no logical reason to wait to get married,” Patrice had said to Michael. They were already sharing an apartment in Deerfield Beach, and spent every weekend diving out of Hillsboro Inlet. Weekdays were spent studying for class or nuzzling on the couch to watch Jacques Cousteau DVDs featuring adventures on the high seas.

“That’ll be us one day…” Michael had promised. They married six months later in a small ceremony at Boca Raton’s City Hall. Both sets of parents paid for dinner at the Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale, show included.

One evening, the radiant couple watched *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*’s special, “Sleeping Sharks of the Yucatan.” Cousteau’s vessel, the Calypso, traveled to Mexico to investigate the discovery of sharks who retired to deep-water caves to sleep.

When their department announced a trip to Isla Mujeres to study the very same sharks, it had been a perfectly-timed miracle.

Until Patrice was diagnosed with another miracle: she was pregnant.

After strange bouts of seasickness –and she never got sick on boats– a visit to FAU’s clinic confirmed the unexpected blessing. They projected she would be in her third trimester at the time of the dive trip. Patrice wasn’t permitted to travel.

She pled for Michael to go without her, to witness the sharks for himself. “How can you miss this exceptional opportunity?” she’d begged.

Michael unwaveringly refused, stating he wouldn’t miss the birth of his child for the world.

Twenty-two years later, that child was standing next to her, 600 meters beneath the sea, somewhere in the proximity of the Yucatan, staring at sleeping sharks.

Arrison became almost teary eyed within her dome. She looked at Chandler, six inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than she was. He’d become a remarkable man, and they were together, both petrified and amazed. Michael would have been honored.

She took a brazen step closer to the sharks. They were a mix of reef sharks and deep-water bluntnose sharks. “No one knew sharks slept…”

Landa didn’t move, tentative. “I thought sharks had to always keep moving.”

“So did most marine biologists,” Arrison replied without looking away. The closest shark to her was six feet away. It was a thick, eight-foot bluntnose shark with six gills, a rare creature usually found at deep depths.

“Scientists theorized sharks had to continuously move to keep water flowing through their gills.” Arrison stepped closer. “Until a group of reef sharks –the most dangerous species to humans– were discovered sleeping in the caves off the Yucatan Peninsula.”

The sharks hovering in her path made sense. Nikto had said they were *somewhere* between Guanahacabibes and the Yucatan. They were in the correct vicinity, at a sufficient depth.

Arrison approached the shark. She’d only seen bluntnose sharks in deep-water photographs. It had characteristics of prehistoric sharks. She noted the species’ girth and muscular body. Its snout was blunt and wide, and its jaw hung open. She bent forward, within twelve inches of the beast’s gaping mouth to see six rows of serrated teeth the size of arrowheads.

“Mom, *please*…” Chandler implored. Landa equally glowered, tense.

“Don’t worry…” Arrison whispered, “They’re out cold...” She leaned closer to stare into the shark’s large eye. It was the size of a lime but appeared white, rolled up into its skull.

“The depth produces a euphoria similar to nitrogen narcosis,” Nikto explained from several yards away. “Some deep divers have experienced the same.”

Arrison stepped back to absorb the entire school. “Aren’t they…gorgeous..?”

“That’s not the first word that comes to mind,” Landa mumbled.

The sharks were about six feet from each other. Some faced the team head-on, while others had their flanks exposed, creating a winding and perilous obstacle course. There was no other way around them.

“The goal is to *not* wake them.” Nikto motioned for his men to resume their trek. His crewmen cautiously coiled around the beasts as if accustomed to the task. Arrison followed in their path, and then Landa. They tried to step directly into the tracks of the preceding men.

Before Chandler could move, Pilar tapped his arm. He turned to see her mischievous grin inside her dome. She stretched her arm to gently stroke a shark’s tail as if it were a game.

“Are you insane..?” Chandler exclaimed.

Her finger paused within a centimeter of the tail. She winked and turned to follow the others.

Like a maze, the nine wound a path through the sleeping giants. Fortunately, Ivan’s corpse was strapped to the stretcher. The crewmen had to gently roll the stretcher to the side to navigate around a curve of eight-foot sharks.

Landa held his breath to step sideways through a lane of parallel sharks. He rotated and shuffled slower through a passage of two more beasts.

Arrison and Pilar were more graceful, with arms outstretched to loop their bodies around two sharks that were perpendicular. Chandler followed in their steps, focused and precise.

As Nikto and his team approached the last shark, Landa tensed to see a man’s speargun almost graze its massive tail. He calmed when the men finally exited, unscathed.

Landa completed the course with Arrison, Chandler and Pilar close behind. Relieved, Landa’s deep sigh was audible to all.

“This shrine is our terminus,” Nikto pointed up at a triangular pediment resting on six slanting columns. Its roof was open to the night sky of the sea, with a bed of untouched sand underneath.

Landa watched the crewmen remove equipment from each other’s backs. They assembled an underwater dredge, along with two folding shovels. The men worked fast to extract sand. They used a pry bar to unearth rocks and ancient conch shells. Landa saw they were digging a trench about seven feet long and three feet deep. Nikto remained on one side of the trough, while Pilar and the guests watched from the other.

Landa stepped back as a cloud of silt drifted his way. When his boot struck something, he turned to see a stone barrier that must’ve been part of a wall. His peripheral vision caught a sudden sparkle. He looked down and saw nothing, guessing a spotlight had flashed past him. Seeing the glimmer again, he bent to notice the remains of a tall broken urn. He nudged it with a glove to see it filled with shells.

Curious, he leaned closer to rake his hand through the shells. With another yellow glint, he froze at an epiphany: only one metal never tarnished after centuries underwater.

Gold. Only pure 24-karat gold.

He looked up to confirm no one was looking his direction. The others were occupied watching the crewmen dig. He then stirred the shells, sifting away eons of sediment. Without blinking, Landa halted at what he beheld: a mound of gold coins. Hundreds of them.

With his pulse escalating, Landa lifted a coin towards his face. His helmet illuminated a rough, circular piece of gold. *Dear god…* he almost exclaimed. The coin had been engraved with the same circular swirling symbol as on the statue.

“–Mr. Landa,” Captain Nikto’s voice boomed in his helmet. “Won’t you join us?”

Landa turned and dropped his hand to his side. Nikto’s view was blocked by the others; he hadn’t been seen. “Yes, of course…” Before anyone could turn, he scooped a handful of coins and dropped them into a side compartment of his suit.

While walking to join the others, his mind raced at what he’d uncovered. What would be the value? Solid gold *on top of* the historical significance? *How many did I grab?* Landa wondered.With the clumsy gloves, it was probably only five or six coins. The four crewmen lifted Ivan’s corpse. Landa tried to appear unruffled as he stood beside Arrison and Chandler, but his mind continued to spin. If he announced his discovery, Nikto would either claim it all, or insist it not be touched, with some pretentious speech. *Will I have a chance to go back to the urn?* Landa wondered.

He fought to contain a grin in his helmet. What he’d found would extinguish his crushing debts. *Finally, a fresh beginning*… But his enthusiasm waned; the value would mean nothing if he never saw home again.

When he watched the men lowering Ivan’s corpse into the trench, the reality of the moment took root. This was a funeral. Of an innocent sailor, just doing his job. This man –*Ivan Popov–* would forever be buried under sand and coral in his Atlantean grave. Gold or riches meant nothing 600 meters below the surface.

After the crewmen covered the mound, they stood beside Nikto. With all nine divers encircling the grave, Nikto began a solemn sermon in Russian. He paused after each line so Pilar could translate into English.

“Hark, now hear the sailors cry,” Pilar recited gently. “Smell the sea and feel the sky…”

Nikto continued in Russian, his eyes closed.

“Magnificently let your soul and spirit fly.”

“*V mistiku*…”

“Into the mystic.”

The nine paused with reverence.

The currents pulled a cloud of silt away from the excavation. Particles of sand swirled and drifted until it reached a dreaming shark.

Its large eye twitched.

Chapter Thirty – The Zombie Horde

The divers drew in deep breaths to shed the weight of the moment. It was time to return to the Naumtsev.

As two crewmen led the way, Arrison and Chandler gazed up, absorbing their surroundings as if etching it onto their memories.

Nikto approached Landa before he could plot any path back to the gold. Landa gave a reverent nod, “Buried deep enough from the sharks?”

“It is not the sharks I fear,” Nikto remained stoic. “His body will be safe from men.”

The nine reentered the maze of “zombie sharks,” as Landa had named them. Two crewmen walked as leaders; then Chandler, Arrison and Pilar, with two crewmen behind them for protection. Captain Nikto and Landa brought up the rear.

Landa had to concede there was no going back to the urn. The coins he’d taken would have to suffice. He wondered if Arrison had any idea of their approximate coordinates, *in case we’re ever able to return…* He halted any fantasies to focus on their hike. There was a sense of relief seeing the Naumtsev’s lights smoldering through the gloom, just over fifty yards away.

The crewmen navigated the maze of sharks easier than when they’d arrived. There was no stretcher to carry, and everyone followed by stepping into the men’s footprints. It was like charting a path through a wax museum of monsters.

Landa cringed when Chandler’s arm nearly grazed a shark when he pointed at something. Arrison pushed his arm down, along with a few terse words. Pilar then pretended she was going to stoop *under* a shark as if playing limbo. Nikto scolded her in Russian. No one seemed as daunted by the zombie sharks the second time around.

The first two crewmen exited the maze. They turned to assist Arrison, Pilar and Chandler. Landa could see their smiles inside their domes. They were back on Atlantis’s spectral boulevard that led straight to the Naumtsev.

“Fifty meters ahead,” Nikto commanded, pointing forward. “Let us move along.”

“I’m doing the best I can in this suit of armor,’” Landa countered. “Seems faster going back.”

A Russian crewman in front of him turned, “You are expert soon, eh?”

When the man rotated, Landa saw his speargun protruding from his back. As if every detail were suddenly clarified, he could foresee what was about to happen. The spear slanted two feet above the man –as a shark loomed just twelve inches over his shoulder.

Before Landa could shout, “*Watch it..!*” the spear jabbed the shark. When the man kept walking, the barbed tip raked its tail, pushing the entire fish like bumping a float.

The shark flinched at being roused. Its eyes rolled open, white to black. It thrashed its powerful tail, knocking the crewman off balance. Landa lunged to help the man.

Arrison, Chandler and Pilar turned at the commotion. They saw a ten-foot bluntnose erratically flail, dazed by its sudden awakening. Like bodyguards, the crewmen escorts pulled the three back, away from any threat.

Nikto and Landa bent to help the man who’d fallen. In his cumbersome suit, the man was lying on his back like a helpless bug.

The floundering bluntnose bumped two reef sharks, waking them. Their eyes rolled open and they began to wallow in confusion, each waking two more like dominoes.

“*Speshite na korabl'!*” Nikto exclaimed in Russian. “To the ship!”

The captain’s words resounded in everyone’s headsets. Landa and Nikto labored to pull the man up. Landa was infuriated how slow he could maneuver in his suit. More sharks swirled above them like a nest of riled hornets.

“Go now!” Nikto shouted to the men standing with Arrison, Pilar and Chandler. “That is an order!” When he pointed towards the ship, a circling bluntnose shark bit his upper arm.

Landa turned at Nikto’s startling cry. The shark clenched its jaws on the captain’s arm above the elbow. Landa instinctively turned, knowing a speargun was still on the crewman’s back. With no time to explain, he tried to unfasten the gun.

The shark continued to chomp with a vice-like grip. It swooshed its head, heaving Nikto back and forth like a doll. “Leave me..!” Nikto screamed, “*Ostav'te menya!*”

With his glove’s thick fingers, Landa fumbled to unfasten the gun. He winced at another guttural roar from Nikto. He looked up to see the shark sawing its head from side to side in an effort to tear the man’s arm off. So far, the metal was too thick.

“Red tab,” a crewman mumbled, his accent almost unintelligible. “Push the red tab!”

Landa understood. He pushed the tab on the man’s back and the gun released.

“Go to the Naumtsev!” Nikto bellowed. “*Now–*” He choked on his words as the powerful beast lifted him a foot off the sand. Three more sharks swirled closer, drawn to the turmoil.

As Arrison trudged towards the Naumtsev, she recoiled at another ghastly scream from Nikto. She couldn’t look back with crewmen on both sides, wrangling them towards the ship.

“That’s the captain!” Chandler exclaimed, panting. “We have to help–”

“–Negative,” a voice crackled in their headsets. It was Dmitri from control. “Get the guests to the platform. We’ll send tranquilizer spears. The Cyclops is not ready.”

“They want us in the ship first?” Chandler asked.

Pilar looked at Arrison and Chandler, “These men were ordered to protect you.”

Clashing voices of panic resonated in their helmets. Nikto screamed again and Landa anxiously yelled something about a speargun.

Arrison could see the ship’s platform twenty yards away. Trying to move in her suit was like running in molasses. To her side, Chandler was attempting to look back. Pilar remained oddly quiet about Nikto. Was she so used to sharks and threats that she was confident of his safety? Or did she despise the man?

Arrison’s world had abruptly swung from the relics of Atlantis to a race for her life. She’d desperately wanted to explore the temples and structures, but a maternal instinct consumed her. This was about her son’s safety. She tugged him by his hand.

She’d lectured to students about how sharks rarely attack people. Less than twenty attacks a year in the U.S. Usually cases of mistaken identity, where a human is mistaken for an injured fish. But she also understood their volatility. They were in the sharks’ domain, with an unfamiliar deep-water species, that had been recklessly awakened by trespassers.

“If he uses a speargun…” Chandler panted, “It’ll make things worse...”

He was right. A wounded fish among a dozen sharks would cause a blood frenzy.

Spotlights illuminated the sand twelve feet below the Naumtsev. The dive platform was hanging below the moon well. As the control room aimed its lights towards the sharks, the crewmen ushered the three onto the platform.

Watching in horror, Arrison could see a cyclone of sharks surrounding a blur of four men. Nikto was hanging by his arm from a beast sweeping him back and forth like a mop. The largest man stepped back –she could tell it was Landa. He aimed a speargun towards the erratically moving target less than eight feet from him. He fired the single shot with a muffled thump.

“He got him!” Chandler shouted.

It was a direct hit to the shark’s abdomen. Its jaws instantly released Nikto, who dropped to the sand. But Arrison knew a single barb wouldn’t kill a ten-foot bluntnose. She also knew what would happen next.

“Run!” Arrison roared.

The shark flailed above Landa like a cut worm. A trail of red spewed from its white belly. With Arrison’s shouts echoing in his helmet, he knew they had to move fast.

He and a crewman helped Nikto to his feet. Inside his dome he could see Nikto’s shocked, distressed eyes, certainly a side of the man few had seen. When he hissed at being pulled, Landa saw an enormous bite mark on his left arm. The suit’s aluminum alloy had saved him, but the metal had been perforated by countless teeth.

The men huddled together to proceed towards the Naumtsev. The lights of their destination looked like an eternal twenty yards away.

“They’re sensing the blood!” Arrison’s voice warned.

Slogging as fast as they could, Landa glanced back to see the horde swarming around the wounded bluntnose. The sharks seemed crazed by the scent, looping in wild patterns through a scarlet haze.

A reef shark was first to take a bite from the injured shark’s stomach. Then a second shark, and then a third joined in. They feverishly competed to rip chunks of flesh from the carcass. In the mayhem, some nipped at each other. The swarm looked like piranha attacking a drowning calf.

“That won’t last…” Arrison cried, “*Hurry!*”

Landa and a crewman helped Nikto walk. They struggled to trudge in a straight line towards the ship. With their heavy suits, the muck felt like quicksand. Landa prayed the sharks would remain occupied tearing each other apart. They needed a few more minutes.

Arrison felt her entire body ease as the men arrived –but it was not over. Nikto’s face was ashen in his helmet. He had a half-circle imprint on his arm, eighteen inches across.

For the first time, Pilar’s face appeared pleased to see the captain.

A crewman helped the men onto the platform as another stood ready at the controls. They assisted Nikto first, and then Landa. When the final crewman stepped aboard, he gave a thumbs-up to the man at the controls.

Nikto barked, “*Vverkh!*” With a muted grind, the platform slowly began to lift.

“His suit…” Arrison exclaimed. She touched Nikto’s elbow joint. “His ADS was punctured…” A high-pitched torrent of bubbles spewed from a tiny hole –with a stream of red.

“He’s bleeding,” Chandler affirmed their worst fear. “And he’ll decompress.”

Arrison looked towards the sharks. Lights revealed a fading cloud of crimson. Their rage was slowing as the injured shark was now just a shredded skeleton. Its spine drifted from the scene as smaller fish moved in for their turn to peck at the bones. The remaining sharks circled, frustrated and ravenous.

“Can this thing go any faster?” Landa shouted. Cables lifted the platform at an unbearably slow pace.

Arrison stood close to Nikto, feeling powerless to help him. Her effort to cover the injury with a glove couldn’t stop the bubbles or wisps of blood.

She drew in a sharp breath when she looked over his shoulder. A large bluntnose seemed to look right at them. It withdrew from the herd to swim towards the Naumtsev.

“*No*…” Arrison groaned. She knew sharks were drawn to vibrations. The platform was creating a mechanized thrum –and Nikto was bleeding.

“One’s coming this way!” Chandler shouted. The shark was swimming fast, uncompromising. Other sharks turned in their direction, also curious.

*Five more feet...* Arrison looked up to see the well’s light getting closer. The platform was already six feet above the seafloor.

Confined on their stage, everyone’s eyes were locked on the sharks. The bluntnose was now ten yards away. Its iridescent green eyes studied the nine humans stuffed on the platform. Four more sharks raced in its trail, competing for the prize.

“This rail’s not gonna’ do us any good,” Landa grumbled, gripping the single guardrail enclosing the platform.

The well door was now three feet away. In the clear shimmer, they could see the silhouettes of crewmen looking down, waiting for them. Chandler and Pilar instinctively raised their arms, hoping to be plucked to safety.

Four sharks –each over ten feet long– surrounded them, circling in a tight orbit as if evaluating how best to tear them apart. The remaining throng rapidly approached, close behind.

Arrison saw Nikto look at his arm. They caught each other’s glance, accepting his blood was wafting towards the beasts.

“We’re in!” Chandler voice blared. A shadow surrounded them –it was the rim of the well door. They were seconds from the cool air of the Naumtsev.

*Boom –*came the first jolt under their feet. A massive bluntnose rammed the bottom of the platform. Arrison and Pilar screamed and sprang back. Through the grated floor, they could see the shark butting its large snout into the metal.

Landa kicked down with his boot in vain. Then another shark smashed its scarred nose into the platform’s mesh.

“No sudden motions!” Nikto shouted with feeble authority.

Sharks jarred the floor from two sides like charging bulls. Everyone stomped or hopped to dodge the mouths grinding under their feet. A husky reef shark attached from the side, nearly swallowing an entire corner of the platform. Above its gaping mouth, its black eye rolled, curious and angry. Landa stomped down on its nose.

Arrison looked up, *two more feet and we’re*– She cringed at a nails-on-chalkboard screech. She looked down to see a jaw scraping the edge of the platform. A shark’s three-inch teeth grated against the metal, unaffected by its bleeding gums. The platform trembled like an earthquake.

All nine divers rose above the waterline. Their helmets had entered the sub, though they continued to stomp and kick.

Crewmen rushed in to help them off the platform, ladies first and then their captain. Around the open edges of the stage, teeth and fins continued to scrape and splash.

When everyone had exited the platform, the winch lifted it out of the water. The weary divers collapsed to the floor to remove their helmets. Two men assisted Nikto with his suit.

The well in the center of the room was still churning with sharks. Black eyes and the slosh of overlapping tails. Their mouths made wet, snapping sounds at the waterline.

“Seal the well!” Nikto commanded, his vigor returning.

A man hit a switch and the double doors closed as fast as a mousetrap. So fast, a single shark was trapped in the ship. It had been above the door when it sealed. Everyone was stunned to see an eight-foot reef shark violently flapping on the sealed door like a caught marlin. It made a wet barking sound, flailing in a puddle of seawater.

One crewman gabbed a six-foot electric prod. Another lifted a spear gaff.

Chandler watched the fish, breathless. He looked at Pilar and Nikto, “What are we supposed to do with it?”

A silver tray was served showcasing a long, thick filet of a solid white fish, garnished with lemon and chives.

Pilar smiled with her hands clasped behind her back, “Filet of *tiburón*, prepared with a Chilean sauvignon blanc, butter, scallions, with a touch of cream.”

Chapter Thirty-One – Coastal Comrades

Professor Arrison was less hesitant to eat shark than Chandler and Landa. They glowered with sour expressions when she tasted her first forkful.

“Exceptional,” she nodded at Pilar. It was thick and meaty like swordfish, but slightly sweeter. Since the meat had a fine marbling, the meat was moist. She knew it was an alternative to eating swordfish, due to that fish’s troubled sustainability. And Pilar’s rich wine sauce was decadent.

Chandler and Landa listlessly raked their fork through kelp that had been seared with olive oil and garlic. Pilar had lied to the men, calling it sea spinach.

Exhausted, no one spoke as they ate. Pilar took her seat between Chandler and Nikto. The captain used his right arm to refill their glasses with a 2014 *Momento Verdelho,* an African chenin blanc. He gave just a humble smile, with no toast, wearing a sling on his left arm.

After their dive, Arrison had insisted she go with Nikto to Dr. Yuri’s cluttered medical bay. Thankfully, the Naumtsev’s outdated x-ray machine revealed no broken bones. The doctor confirmed he’d suffered severe contusions on his left humerus, causing heavy bruising. The aluminum of the ADS had saved his arm. The only open wound was a one-inch gash above his elbow. Yuri used a Russian version of Liquiband superglue to seal the cut, and Nikto was given a sling to immobilize his arm. Nikto said little during the exam, perhaps humbled at being damaged.

No had one wanted to eat dinner after the harrowing day, but the captain incessantly preached they would have one formal meal a day in the wardroom. He said dressing up for a proper meal was good for morale.

But the day hadn’t begun as harrowing. The submerged ruins that *could have* been a version of Atlantis were a marine scientist’s dream come true. The evidence from multiple sources seemed promising, but she’d departed without any tangible proof. Just a nebulous proximity, and perhaps sketches she would draw in her journal.

*But we are alive…* She looked at Chandler. They were both alive to tell the tale.

Nikto cleared his throat to break the silence. He blotted his mouth with a napkin and said softly, “There is an old Russian saying, ‘*Nikogda ne budite spyashchuyu akulu*.’” He stared as if everyone should understand.

Chandler took the bait, “So…what’s that mean?”

“Never rouse a sleeping shark.”

The guests mutely glanced at each other around the table.

“That was my attempt at a joke.” Nikto’s lips lifted into a weak grin.

Everyone exhaled collective chuckles. It was the first time Arrison had seen any suggestion of a sense of humor in the man. She wondered if it was Nikto’s way of deflecting the discomfort of being injured and vulnerable in front of his guests and crew.

The entire room seemed to unwind. Unseen speakers played a beautiful piano piece by Russian composer Tchaikovsky. Nikto explained it was “*Valse Sentimentale in F minor*, a sentimental waltz.”

Everyone drank and ate more heartily. Pilar bullied Chandler and Landa to try the shark. They did, and each loved it with an extra helping.

“I could’ve stayed on that *road* to Atlantis forever…” Arrison mused while sipping her wine. “It was like every fantasy of my entire career...” She smiled with a faraway gaze.

“I’ll never forget what it felt like seeing it for the first time…” Chandler nodded.

Landa shrugged with mouthful of food. “To me, it was like the grand canyon. Fun to see once, but then you’re like, *I’m good…”*

Nikto eyed the man as he took a bite of fish, “You saved my life today, Mr. Landa.”

Landa paused at the unexpected comment. He almost seemed to blush, “It’s only because I can’t pilot this thing alone...” He motioned to the vessel around him. “The manual’s in Russian.”

Pilar and Chandler laughed, undoubtedly aided by the African wine.

Landa raised his glass towards Nikto. “You saved me in Haiti, so I guess we’re even.”

The captain narrowed an eye. “I recall saving you twice…”

Landa paused to recall. He shrugged and downed the last of his wine.

To Arrison, Nikto seemed like a different man. Either it was the wine, or perhaps a new humility. He’d nearly been killed on his own expedition –ironically to a funeral. He had been seen pale and nauseous behind his helmet, even unable to walk. He’d required the help of a civilian and his men to survive.

She wondered if this *new* captain would have a more compassionate perspective of the world above. Would all lands above the sea still be the enemy?

“Patrice…” Nikto said as he poured her another glass.

She looked at him, thrown by the use of her first name.

Though weakened, he leaned towards her with an entrancing smile. “Atlantis was just the beginning. I can promise you many, *many* more wonders... The *Sao Miguel* pyramid, deep under the Azores of Portugal… Cleopatra’s lost kingdom off the shores of Alexandria...” He smiled, “All if you simply remain by my–”

“–*Kapitan*,” Dmitri’s voice blared from the intercom.

“This is Nikto,” he barked at the wall.

“We picked up an approaching vessel,” Dmitri spoke fast. “A *Stenka*-class patrol.”

Landa stiffened, back to business. “Stenkas are Russian boats built for Soviet Allies –Cuba.”

“We are near Cuban waters,” Nikto replied. “So I am not shocked.”

“But Captain,” Landa frowned, grim. “Those vessels carry anti-sub torpedoes.”

Captain Nikto entered the control room like a cyclone, pointing and shouting orders in all directions. The three guests and Pilar followed like an entourage. In the tight space, they remained on the sidelines as Nikto pulled the periscope from the ceiling.

“Status?” Nikto shouted.

“Single vessel, less than four nautical miles,” Dmitri responded, monitoring the sonar through headphones. “Approaching from due north, perhaps *Cienfuegos* port.”

Nikto growled at the inference. He gripped the periscope’s handles and pressed his face to the eyepiece.

Landa and the others remained quiet, listening to follow the action. Though weapons were his specialty, he tried to remain silent to let the captain and crew handle the situation.

“One boat...” Nikto expounded as he looked into the periscope. “Gray, less than forty meters in length. It is from the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias.*..”

Landa knew that meant the Cuban navy. The Revolutionary Armed Forces included the naval military of Cuba. It had existed since the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship in 1959. They were still a lethal force, with vessels and weapons provided by the former Soviet Union.

Though Landa still considered Nikto his abductor, he also didn’t want to get sunk by a torpedo. “Captain,” he stepped forward. “The Stenka’s primary anti-sub weapon would be the SET-40 torpedo.”

Nikto said nothing as if he already knew the information. He finally replied, “Tell me about this *SET-40*.”

“It’s old, Russian. Designed way back in the sixties.” Landa was succinct, “Non-nuclear, but a high explosive. It can’t go faster than thirty knots, or dive more than 200 meters.”

“How do we know if they see us?” Arrison exclaimed. “Or aims at us?”

“The sub has sensors,” Landa replied simply. Though he had no training with submarine sonar, his Marine Corp training included radar technician courses. He figured he had a fundamental understanding of how sensors can tell if you’ve been spotted by the enemy.

Vessels, aircraft and missiles use sonar or radar waves that can be identified by their specific signatures. Radar uses radio waves to locate objects; sonar uses sound waves, usually underwater. If an enemy approached –such as this Cuban boat– it might have its detection systems set to a wide spread to scan a large area. With a wider spread, you can time the gaps between each time their beam hits you.

If the beams suddenly drop to a narrow focus, your adversary may have spotted you. The time between beams hitting you will decline if they begin scanning a smaller area. They could be attempting to focus directly on you.

If their weapon’s homing system is trying to lock onto you, the beam will be even narrower. Time to move fast with a defensive maneuver.

Landa recalled a perfect analogy: If you want to see someone in the dark, you shine a flashlight at them and look for the light to bounce off of them. However, if you’re the guy who they’re aiming at, it’s obvious when it’s shining directly at you.

And Landa was equally curious if they’d been spotted by the Cuban vessel.

“Captain,” Dmitri spoke up. “The Stenka is now less than two miles.”

“If it’s a communist boat,” Chandler asked aloud, “would they even consider us an enemy? We’re in a Russian sub.”

Landa paused, it was a good question. The crew frowned at Chandler like he’d spoken out of place, but then turned to the captain.

“You must remember…” Nikto explained as he adjusted his scope, “Russia is still Cuba’s chief creditor. *Vladimir Putin* strengthened their relationship, investing in their offshore oil…” He stepped back to look at the guests. “If they do identify us, they will certainly believe the Motherland is simply conducting drills off their coast–”

“–They’ve locked on our position!” Dmitri exclaimed. A red light flashed above the receiver.

Nikto closed his eyes, dismayed by the boat’s stance. He hung his head and sighed as if he’d endured enough for one day.

The entire room looked at him, waiting for the inevitable.

“Ramming speed captain?” Pavlo enquired.

“Affirmative, ahead forty knots,” Nikto ordered.

“Ahead forty knots, aye.” Pavlo dialed his EOT to the right.

Nikto looked at Arrison like a child having to explain, “They targeted us *first!*”

She scowled, furious with his command. Any farfetched hopes of Nikto becoming non-aggressive, or even peaceful, had been doused. She glared to recapture his gaze.

Nikto ignored her and gripped a rail at his side. The floor vibrated with the hum of the accelerating engines. He finally spun back to her, defying her emotions.

Without words, her jade eyes pled for any sense of compassion. Arrison would never verbally debate the man in front of his crew. She cocked her head with eyes that implored, *is there any other way..?*

With a granite frown, Nikto refused to look away. His steely eyes sharpened onto hers. At her unyielding refusal to blink, he noisily huffed and bent at the knees.

“Cancel Attack!” Nikto snarled, furious.

Pavlo and the helmsman turned to him, mystified.

“They just fired!” Dmitri bellowed. “Torpedo locked on our position.”

Nikto seethed through his teeth, “Launch countermeasures. Dive, dive, dive!”

Dusk embraced the indigo waters between the Cayman Islands and Cuba. Twenty meters below the surface, Nikto had brazenly plotted a course due east, ninety miles south of *Cienfuegos* naval base*.* And now he’d be seen.

He knew the imminent torpedo was a deadly equation of time and distance. His order to increase speed would create more noise, further confirming their position to the enemy. But he had no choice.

From the Naumtsev’s forward bow, tubes launched an array of countermeasures. Some rapidly ascended, spewing bubbles. Others hovered at a designated depth in a concerted effort to confuse the oncoming missile.

The Naumtsev employed two types of countermeasures. One involved small drum-like devices filled with compressed air. The air was released forming a virtual wall of tiny bubbles. To the enemy’s sonar it would sound like propeller churn from an accelerating submarine, and perceived as a large but false target.

Nikto’s vessel also launched ADC (Acoustic Device Countermeasure) decoys, also designed to mislead the torpedo. With tiny shrouded propellers, the rocket-shaped decoys hovered vertically at a pre-selected depth. They were programmed for twenty meters, to emit acoustic signals to deceive the impending torpedo.

At the very least, Nikto needed the countermeasures to add precious seconds so he could dive beyond the torpedo’s abilities.

The Naumtsev’s steel skeleton squeaked and groaned like the Cold War sub it was. The deck sloped forward at a near thirty-degree angle. Everyone in the control room had to grasp the rails around them.

Arrison tensed. It was like the entire room had just crested the drop of an enormous rollercoaster. The soles of her shoes struggled to grip the floor. The wall panels hummed, rattling her teeth.

“Torpedo closing, 1,500 meters,” Dmitri announced.

“Emergency deep!” Nikto ordered a crash dive maneuver. “Flood negative.” An alarm bell rang for the crew to return to their stations. The Chief Engineer would flood the forward ballast tanks. “Forty-five-degree on the stern plane.”

Coffee mugs and ashtrays tumbled to the deck. Water flooding into the hull’s ballast tanks sounded like a freight train. Arrison’s arms ached, clasping the rails to stay in place. She turned to Chandler, whose eyes were wide with anxiety. Pilar gripped his hand.

“Torpedo 800 meters…”

“Prepare for impact!” Nikto roared. He cringed to unbend his injured arm to hold a rail.

Twenty meters below the surface, the countermeasures created a screaming wall of bubbles. The illusion filled the space previously occupied by the Naumtsev. Though torpedoes were designed to see through such deceptions, Nikto prayed for *any* deviation in course, no matter how miniscule.

The fifteen-foot torpedo, delivering eighty kilograms of explosives, raced towards them. With decades of practicing maritime mathematics, Nikto tried to calculate. At 700 meters, with the torpedo’s current speed, a deviation of just one degree would create a lateral error of fifty feet away from the target. The Naumtsev was diving at a rate of four feet per second. *Is it enough..?*

A muffled boom reverberated overhead. A thrumming jolt resonated through everyone’s hands holding the rails. When her vision went black, Arrison knew it was over.

But the control room’s lights flickered back on. No one blinked or made a sound.

The deck began to level, and the engine’s deafening drone eased.

Arrison inhaled with deep relief to see Chandler smiling at her. Pilar grinned beside him. Landa looked at them with a gawk of astonishment.

More curiously, the entire crew resumed their duties without a word. Nikto rubbed his eyes and readjusted his sling. The room remained unnervingly quiet.

“Take us to 250 meters,” Nikto commanded in a low voice. “Rig for quiet. All non-essential *do not* make a sound.”

Landa gave a relieved chuckle. “God bless fifty-year-old weapons.”

“*Silence,*” Nikto whispered. “We’ve been reported. Planes may be on the way.”

Arrison found herself smiling at Nikto. Without intending to be patronizing, her entire face said, *I’m proud of you…*

Nikto didn’t return the smile. He turned away, indignant. His ashen face looked like it had aged a year in the past twenty-four hours. He finally groaned, “I have had enough of this hemisphere…”

The captain approached the helmsmen. “Plot a course due east. To our grateful *recipients*.”

Part Five

THE BOUNTY

Chapter Thirty-Two – Looking for Mr. No One

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

The witness, forty-three year-old Mirta Salazar, sat rigid with anxiety. Across the table, two plump Colombian attorneys in black suits spoke over each other, barking orders.

Mirta’s large glossy eyes didn’t know which man to look at. She looked like she might cry.

An hour earlier, Navy Intel Officer Engel had to visit a boutique in her Bogotá Marriott to purchase another business outfit. She and Agent Ruiz’s trip to Colombia had been approved for only three days, including travel. With this new opportunity to question a witness, Ruiz had attempted to get approval from the DEA to extend their trip. When Kurtz denied his request, Engel contacted her commander in D.C.

With Engel’s geeky passion –eager with a theory of a rogue Russian submarine– her boss chuckled with skepticism but agreed to the extra days. Unknown to Ruiz, she’d been ordered to report any findings directly to her commander.

Engel noticed Ruiz’s attitude had begun to decline. He kept grumbling how his investigation was being slowly hijacked by the Navy. Engel had no time for such trivial concerns. She missed her husband and son, and was in a strange country for the first time. Though travel was exciting, she’d much rather be home, conducting an investigation from her desk.

Officer Cynthia Engel lived in worked in Suitland, Maryland, a community in Prince George's County. Though it sounded rural, it was one mile from Washington D.C. Her office was at the Nimitz Operational Intelligence Center. The center’s mission was to provide intel to support Navy fleet commanders and national officials.

Engel was rated IS, an Intelligence Specialist, and her role was to assist in the collection and dissemination of intelligence information. She analyzed existing data to help plan military operations and search for any new threats to national security.

For such a significant job, few knew her work was done almost entirely from her cubicle in Maryland. After she’d completed her Navy sea rotations, travel was infrequent. And she enjoyed working in solitude –until this unique request to assist the DEA in Key West.

The night before meeting their new witness, Engel studied her file on *Mirta Elena Salazar*. She’d been transported to Colombia from her new life in Costa Rica. She was the ex-wife of narcotics kingpin Don Ricardo Salazar. He’d been arrested four months earlier and jailed without bail at *La Modelo* prison, one of the worst in the country. The arrest made international news, second in significance after the sentencing of Mexican kingpin *Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera* in 2017.

Mirta had been married to Salazar for twenty-two years. Upon his arrest, Colombian prosecutors granted Mirta full immunity in exchange for her testimony. With her help, Don Salazar was further charged with extortion, kidnapping, money laundering and arms trafficking.

The well-educated Mirta Salazar negotiated two requests. She wanted a fast-tracked divorce from her husband. And she wanted a new life, far away in their Witness Protection Program.

Ms. Salazar’s demands had been fulfilled. She was granted a divorce, and though her dream was to live in America, she was relocated to Guanacaste, Costa Rica with a new identity.

According to Engel’s records, the Salazars had a daughter, *Pilar Louisa Salazar.* Engel found it curious there was no mention of her. The girl would be approximately twenty years old. She guessed the girl could’ve run away, wanting no part of the family humiliation –if she was alive.

After reviewing Salazar’s history, Engel removed her glasses and made a few notes. She needed concise questions for Mirta since they’d been granted only one hour. The meeting had been arranged after her superiors leaned on the U.S. Ambassador in Colombia for a favor. The prosecutors reluctantly agreed, believing they’d already squeezed Ms. Salazar of any useful information.

After the escape attempts of *El Chapo* in Mexico, Colombian officials refused to allow Engel or Ruiz to meet with Ricardo Salazar under any circumstance. They vowed he’d “never see another human being.” Engel hoped his ex-wife might have the same information she needed.

With a *ding* of her laptop, Engel received an email she’d been waiting for. She’d requested a rush job from a fellow analyst in Maryland. Engel had contacts at the Department of Justice, who happened to be the parent department of the DEA. She’d learned the DEA’s foreign offices could share intelligence they’d collected with other agencies in the event of a parallel investigation.

On a hunch, Engel requested records containing thousands of phone calls. Though they’d been placed in a workable spreadsheet, it was going to be a long night.

After noisy streets packed with busses and bicycles, Ruiz and Engel arrived at the *Fiscalía General de la Nación,* the General Prosecutorial Office of Colombia at 11:00 a.m. The gray, boxy building was Attorney General Martinez’s office in Bogotá.

Ruiz wore a new shirt and tie, and Engel had purchased an ivory blouse and navy skirt to match her blazer. She hadn’t packed her service dress blues, the Navy’s uniform for business, since she hadn’t been on an “official” trip when they’d flown to Buenaventura.

A frumpy receptionist escorted them to a conference room that had two guards at the door. Inside the small room, they were surprised to see Mirta Salazar already seated at a table, facing two standing men. They were loudly telling her something in Spanish, and she appeared scared.

“They’re meeting her without us?” Ruiz whispered, irritated.

It was the first time Engel had seen Ms. Salazar in person. Despite the mood, she was beautiful, with wide cheekbones and golden-brown eyes. Her hair was pulled back into a conservative ponytail. The only thing marring her face was a scowl at the two attorneys trouncing her with questions.

“What’s going on?” Ruiz boldly asked the men, “We haven’t begun..?”

The men looked at him with pompous hands on their hips. The larger man responded in rapid Spanish. With a wave of his arm, she and Ruiz were told they could have two seats beside Ms. Salazar. Unable to follow the conversation, Engel felt excluded.

She sat to Mirta’s right. She flashed a feeble smile at the woman. Mirta simply studied her, undoubtedly curious why they were there. Ruiz continued to argue with the two men.

Engel noticed the room had a table in the corner with coffee and a tray of *pandebonos,* a Colombian cheese pastry that she’d devoured almost every morning while in the country.

She awkwardly pointed to the tray of pastries and smiled at Ms. Salazar, “You want some..?”

Mirta frowned at her with a slow shake of her head.

The two attorneys resumed their lecture to Ms. Salazar like a firing squad. Engel watched the exchange with no clue what they were saying.

Ruiz pointed to one of the men and whispered in Engel’s ear, “That guy just told her, ‘If you wish to keep your life in Costa Rica, you must tell us anything you have not yet revealed.’”

It appeared the men enjoyed bullying the fragile woman. They were sweaty and their suits were a size too small. Mirta Salazar’s glossy eyes kept growing in size.

Ruiz pointed to the other man, “He’s warning her if she’s holding back information, it’ll void the entire deal she signed–”

An emotional Mirta finally cried out, “*Me estás ladrando como perros!*”

“What’d she say?” Engel whispered.

“She said they’re barking at her like dogs.”

Engel shamelessly reached to touch Mirta’s shoulder. She asked her in clear English, “Ms. Salazar, would you be more comfortable speaking just to me? Privately?”

Mirta turned to her like a savior amidst the horrid men.

Ruiz looked at Engel with a baffled grin, “You can’t just walk out with her...”

“We’re the ones who asked for this meeting,” Engel replied so the men could hear. “There are more guards in this building than the White House. They can follow us. I just need fifteen minutes.”

The attorneys chuckled. The larger man exclaimed in English, “She is our witness. You are just a visitor here.”

Pragmatic, Engel shot back, “I have a very narrow line of questions.” She raised her palms, pretending to have a sudden idea. “Let’s call the ambassador at the embassy and the Attorney General at his daughter’s birthday party. They can come in and decide for us.”

The men frowned at each other, tongue-tied. Ruiz looked at Engel like she’d lost her mind.

“How did you know I speak English?” Mirta Salazar asked Engel with no trace of an accent.

Engel sipped her espresso and placed the cup on the café table. “You have a master’s degree in accounting from the University of Miami. You lived there for eleven years. You worked for two years at a Benihana –even though your history was under a different name.”

Engel had been granted precisely fifteen minutes alone with Mirta. The building had an enclosed courtyard, with a small coffee bar for employees. The ladies were permitted to use the piazza, though armed guards watched them like hawks from each corner.

Ruiz was furious he wasn’t permitted to join them. “*This is my investigation…*” he’d bawled. Engel promised to share any pertinent information –after calling her superiors.

Engel had purchased two espressos with her last few pesos, and they sat at a café table within the blue-skied courtyard.

“You were your husband’s bookkeeper for nine years,” Engel continued. “You knew the names and locations of most of his business associates.” She moved her saucer aside and leaned forward. “You already got full immunity to tell me anything –but I don’t work narcotics.”

Mirta blinked, staggered by her level of information. She tilted her head and asked, “You are not DEA or law enforcement?”

“No,” Engel smiled. “I’m an analyst with the Navy. I sit at a desk with my Tupperware reading spreadsheets all day.”

You’re not in uniform…” Mirta frowned, bewildered. “How could I ever help a Navy?”

Engel pulled a folder from her bag. “They gave us fifteen minutes; we already wasted five. I’ll talk fast and get straight to the point.”

Still perplexed, Mirta looked down at a stack of prints.

“The DEA began its investigation into your husband four years ago,” Engel lifted a spreadsheet. “They tracked his calls. Back then they couldn’t listen to the content, but they could track the locations.” She handed Mirta the document.

“Okay..?” Mirta narrowed her eyes at the report.

“There were thousands of calls between Central and South America and the U.S.” Engel slid her finger down the page. “But within those thousands of calls, there are *nineteen* from your husband to a phone located in *Severodvinsk*, Russia.”

Mirta’s eyes imperceptibly widened.

“Have you ever heard of a *Severodvinsk*, Russia?” Engel feigned confusion, “It stands out because it’s a strange word.”

“I don’t know…” Mirta shook her head. “He had contacts in Eastern Europe with his heroin and opioid labs.” She shrugged, dismissive.

“I don’t think that was it…” Engel’s face became grim. “Severodvinsk is very specific town, only known for one thing: it’s Russia’s largest shipyard, for submarines.”

Mirta looked up, caught in Engel’s gaze as if ensnared in a web.

“Do you recall any of your husband’s associates who were Russian?”

Mirta’s eyes began to water. After an uncomfortable pause she replied, “He despised the Russians. But there was one…”

Engel remained quiet, hoping silence and caffeine would keep her talking.

“My husband never used real names with me,” Mirta dabbed an eye with her hand. “I was just his bookkeeper. So he always used…code names.”

“Who’s the Russian you’re talking about?”

Mirta doubled over and covered her face with her hands. She sniffed back a tear, “A man who I *never* want threatened.”

Engel paused, baffled. She’d struck a chord with the woman who suddenly seemed terrified. “Why..? What was the man’s name?”

Mirta took a deep breath and wiped her nose. She sat upright like she’d made some resolute decision to talk. “The name he used was easy to recall: it was Nikto.”

“*Nikto..?*” Engel frowned as she jotted the word. “Does that mean something?”

“No one,” Mirta replied, firm. “It’s the Russian word for ‘no one.’”

Engel wasn’t sure how this detail fit the larger picture. But Salazar seemed to confirm a Russian male in a town that built submarines. “Why do you *never* want this man threatened?”

Mirta’s face agonized before replying, as if debating how much to say. “He took something very *valuable* from us so my husband would never try to find or destroy him.”

Engel was now even more puzzled. *Never try to destroy him..?* What had this Mr. No One taken that was so valuable? With the clock ticking, she decided to leap straight to the point.

“Was it a Russian submarine?

Chapter Thirty-Three – Fractures in the Iris

THE ATLANTIC CROSSING

In the parlor, Pilar and Chandler stood together at a large Iris window. They smiled as they watched immense 100-foot blue whales swimming beside the Naumtsev.

The vessel was cruising fifty meters below the surface. When the morning sun brightened the royal blue water, a pod of four massive whales joined the vessel for a sunrise race.

“*Ballenas azules*…” Pilar cooed. “The largest animals on our planet –is that true?”

Chandler’s jaw hung slack as he watched the blue-gray giants. They gracefully arced up and down, just yards beyond the window. He replied, “Not even a dinosaur was larger than an adult blue whale…” They had long, torpedo-shaped bodies with lighter undersides that were visible when they rolled to the side.

“They’re playing with us…” Pilar touched the glass.

“I never thought I’d see one in the real world. Only books and video…” He instinctively put a hand on her shoulder to look out. They gasped when a whale swerved closer, equally curious. Its large black eye seemed to study them before the animal rolled under the ship to the other side.

They reminded Chandler of seeing dolphins racing alongside their dive boats. This appeared to be the same game, but these mammals –and vessel– were almost twenty times larger.

When Pilar looked at Chandler, her entire face beamed to realize his natural joy.

On the other side of the parlor, Dr. Arrison and Ned Landa watched the whales through the opposite Iris. Arrison studied them, captivated and curious. Landa smiled but was equally engaged in stirring his coffee.

“I’ve never seen blues this size…” she remarked. “Highly endangered and poorly misunderstood. We must be in the *very* deep Atlantic.”

“Captain says we can maintain forty knots,” Landa replied while gazing out. “So what’s more than two days at forty knots?”

“That’s about forty-six miles per hour…” Arrison squinted to calculate, “Forty-six times twenty four hours is…1,104, so we’re well over 2,000 miles.”

“Over halfway across the Atlantic.” Landa leaned towards her and lowered his voice, “Did he tell you where we’re headed?”

She shook her head, “He said east. To his ‘recipients’…?”

“What’s that mean?” Landa’s face hardened, “His *drug buyers*?”

His blunt words made her wither. She stepped away, closer to the window. When she looked out, it was just blue. The whales had gone under the ship. She felt a sadness not seeing them. They’d fled the same moment Landa had spoiled her bliss.

“Patrice…” He looked over his shoulder and moved closer, “Nikto loves to remind us how he saved our lives.” He motioned to the window, “He shows us cool stuff. Ruins… Fish… Fancy food… But it doesn’t change the fact he’s still a *narcotics dealer*.” His tone darkened the words.

She looked up at him, dismayed with his harsh approach.

“Let’s not forget,” he focused on her eyes, “we *are* here against our will.”

Arrison frowned to weigh his words. She had deliberated about their situation –every night as she struggled to sleep in a small, windowless cabin with humming floors. Yet every morning, she awakened to a new discovery.

She replied, calm, “Do you realize I’ve learned more in six days than twenty years in a lab or classroom? If I were to go home today, it’d be to a two-bedroom condo off I-10 in Tallahassee.”

He shook his head with a derisive chuckle. “Confinement within freedom.”

“What’s that mean?” she winced.

“We freely walk his ship. I can go from one end to the other, up and down the ladders.” He pointed to her, “You’re free to study. You have access to his entire library. He’s even given you blank journals…” He flashed a bitter smile, “We just have no freedom to *leave*.”

Arrison huffed without a response. With the silence, his words loomed. Her eyes were pulled back to the Iris. She wanted to be part of the blue aquatic vista. With the curved glass, her view was almost 180 degrees.

She crossed her arms. “I don’t necessarily see things the same way as you.”

Landa expelled a laugh. He covered his eyes, incredulous. “I’m no shrink, *professor,* but this is textbook Stockholm syndrome.”

She recoiled, “Do you even know what that means?”

His smile vanished. “Feelings of trust or emotions for your captor–”

“–*You’re* the sociopath,” she exclaimed. “With delusions of grandeur.”

“Have you heard of a ‘sub psycho?” Landa raised his voice. “Some sailors go crazy the first week underwater. Hostility, obsession, paranoia…”

She glared with rage, “Have you analyzed yourself?” She stepped into his space. “A dishonorably discharged Marine? Charged with dereliction of duty?” She stuck a finger in his chest. “What’d you do? Probably hit someone?”

Ominously silent, Landa looked down at her finger. He looked back up at her. “What’d I do? I tried to run. Just like in Haiti, and just like now.”

“You run away from tough situations?” She fired back with a crooked smile, “Good luck in a sub –fifty meters underwater!”

She watched him stare at her, fuming. There was an unsettling pause before he replied.

“My sergeant ordered me to march ten miles. He thought I was being a wise-ass.” Landa’s voice was startlingly calm. “I was just excited. My ex-wife was going into labor.”

Arrison halted, hushed by his words.

“She was high-risk. Diabetes. And forty miles away, so I refused to march.” A caustic mile creased his face. “So I ran. AWOL. To see the birth of my only daughter. *That’s* the order I disobeyed. That’s why I was discharged.”

Staggered, Arrison’s knees felt weak. She took a seat on an armchair two feet behind her. With no quick retort, she realized she didn’t know anything about the man. He was crass and arrogant –*and he’s a father?*

His story of being there for his daughter was evocatively similar to her late husband refusing to miss Chandler’s birth. Saving her from crafting a rueful response, Captain Nikto’s voice rang from the speakers.

“Good morning...” His voice was tranquil, “We have live audio you may enjoy...”

The speakers began to play whale songs. Hauntingly beautiful vocalizations from the whales echoed throughout the parlor.

Arrison smiled with a gaze lost in the sounds. “Only the males sing like that…”

Landa sat beside her, perhaps as part of some unspoken truce. “What are they… saying?”

“No one’s sure…” She shrugged, “Their songs can be heard over sixty miles. The males sometimes sing when they dive deeper. It may help with pair-bonding.”

“So they’re calling out for buddies?”

“Something like that.”

On the other side of the parlor, Chandler gawked at the ceiling, enthralled by the whale’s mournful melodies. “Isn’t it remarkable?”

“Nikto’s still trying to *astound* you,” Pilar ridiculed. “I guess it’s working. As sincere as a politician…”

Chandler’s smile vanished. Confused by her manner, he asked, “Do you hate Nikto or something? You only say negative things about him. Isn’t he like a…father figure?”

She turned, abrupt. “He is not a father!” Her accent was more pronounced, “You have *no* idea what I have endured.” She leered, “But you could never understand.”

“Is that so..?” Chandler frowned, insulted. “I watched my dad wither away to nothing before I was ten. I have a perfectionist mother who thinks autism means I can memorize *everything.*” He raised his voice, “There’s no excuse for anything less than a 4.5 GPA. *‘Just memorize the textbooks,’* she says. And with her all-consuming career, eighty-hour work weeks are expected.”

Pilar didn’t blink, staggered by his anger.

“Look at your life here,” he pointed out the window. “You essentially travel the globe. Seeing the *wonders of the world* in an undersea…cruise ship.”

Pilar gasped –and then stiffened. She bellowed, “Nikto kidnapped me so my father would never try to destroy the Naumtsev!”

Silence. Chandler’s mouth opened, and then closed.

Pilar’s face reddened. “He said I would have a better life underwater, than on land as the child of a *‘drug lord’!*” Her words were amplified within the chamber.

Chandler stood silent. Pilar didn’t budge, with hands on her hips. They slowly turned to see Arrison and Landa gaping at them. They’d heard the entire exchange.

Landa asked, “So why is *he* dealing thousands of kilos of stolen narcotics?”

Arrison’s jaw dropped at his tactless question.

Pilar spun and stormed off towards the parlor’s rear door. Chandler scowled at Landa and marched out the side door.

Landa shrugged at Arrison with a vacant expression, “What’d I say..?”

Chandler stomped into the passageway and up a ladder to the third deck. He was hit with the unmistakable scent of the crew’s berthing racks. He said nothing and made no attempt to greet the men who were reading or playing poker on their bunks. He continued up to the next deck.

He’d never been so embarrassed or confused –or upset. He’d been told his entire life he was “always happy” because of his ubiquitous smile. But he had wavering emotions like anyone else.

It was evident his mother’s *undersea world* was her sole passion since his dad died. Her pursuits had stolen precious hours from him, barring her from ever truly knowing him. He wasn’t a klutz, he wasn’t a coward, and he wasn’t a parrot that could recite everything he’d ever read.

*Then there’s Pilar...* he groaned. He’d angered the only female he’d ever developed an affection for, and she’d shredded him in front of the others. *Who –or what– is she?* A kidnap victim? *A drug lord’s daughter..?* Was Mr. Landa correct, they were all trapped in a criminal’s narco sub for the rest of their days?

Anxieties collided in his psyche as Chandler climbed the stairs to the Operations Compartment. At least Dmitri might’ve launched a new C-Buoy with fresh news. He craved any distraction.

The level was darker, with colder A.C. to protect the computer servers. The smell of cigarette smoke meant men were working. As he rounded the corner into the control room, he saw the backs of Captain Nikto and Dmitri standing at the comm station.

A curious intuition stopped Chandler from speaking or making his presence known. He quietly approached the men. Perhaps they were still monitoring the whales. He heard faint voices from a speaker. A man’s voice and then a woman’s.

He stopped –it was the voices of his mother and Landa. They were still speaking to each other in the parlor.

*“…I don’t do this much, but I apologize about before,*” his mother’s voice said. “*I didn’t know those things about you*.”

Landa responded in a monotone, “*Don’t judge a book, right?*”

Chandler’s eyes flickered. Had Nikto been spying on them? How long had he been listening? *Did he hear what Pilar called him?*

The captain turned. Without any reaction, he peered into Chandler’s eyes.

“Mr. Arrison…” Nikto’s mouth smiled but his eyes did not. “Why don’t we go for a walk? In a forest, just you and I.”

Chandler stepped back. “A forest..?” He stammered, “We’re…surfacing?”

Nikto replied, “We are not.”

Chapter Thirty-Four – The Commandeers

SOMEWHERE OVER CARTAGENA

Engel sat in a plush leather seat in the King Air 350i. She felt the armrests and looked around, admiring the interior of the DEA aircraft.

She usually flew on one of the discount airlines that made you pay for water or peanuts. And that was just once a year if they were lucky. With her husband Chuck’s insurance agency, he could rarely get away. Their son Sean had just started middle-school, and he loved to visit theme parks. Their trip this year had been cut short with the call from the DEA.

*Bogotá…* Engel grinned to herself. They’d be envious of her international travel. She wanted to show Sean her passport stamped “Colombia.” Chuck would be amazed how she’d handled a conference room full of loud bureaucrats. *Nothing like that back at the office,* she mused.

And the opportunity with Mirta Salazar seemed promising. She’d agreed to speak, but had only offered kernels of information until her demands were met. Things were looking good.

Engel shrunk in her seat with a thought. Would her command chief be able to work with the DOJ to grant Mirta immunity in the U.S.? And then –not to get ahead of herself– how much evidence would she need to persuade them to contact the Commander of Submarine Force Atlantic? At last count, they had thirty-eight subs that could help look for a possible rogue.

*Possible* rogue*…* She huffed at her own word. The Navy would never allocate precious resources for an analyst’s fantasy about an illicit Russian submarine covertly cruising the Atlantic. At the office, she was just a five-year employee who was in charge of her team’s coffee club. Even the security guard at her office building could never remember her.

She gazed out the window at distant clouds. *How can I get tangible evidence..?*

“Gotta’ love DEA travel…” Ruiz declared as he shuffled down the aisle. He was holding two green bottles of Coca Cola.

“It is comfortable,” Engel smiled. “I fly Spirit once a year to Epcot so we can see all the countries.”

Ruiz bobbed his head at the interior. “This King Air was courtesy of the Sinaloa Cartel. Got it three years ago in a federal asset-grab.” He chuckled, “There was actual blood on the carpet by the mini-fridge, but they got it up.” He handed her a bottle, “Try this Mexican Coke, it’s way better than American. They use cane sugar instead of syrup, or something.”

Ruiz and Engel sat together, again the only passengers. He tapped his bottle against hers for a job well done and they sipped their drinks.

“Just hung up with Kurtz.” Ruiz was animated with excitement. “He is *juiced!* He’s checking NCIC right now for anyone who’s ever used the alias ‘Nikto’.”

She frowned, puzzled. “The NCIC database is for national criminals. If this Nikto is Russian, I plan to reach out to Interpol. Maybe beg for records from Russian Armed Forces.”

Ruiz looked at her like he’d sucked a lime. “He’s a *drug dealer..*.” He inflated the words. “If he was *ever* tied to the Bogotá cartel, Kurtz will find him. Believe me.”

Engel cocked her head with a curious blink. “You do realize this is no longer a DEA matter…”

His jaw dropped with a smirk, “Our witness –who was the wife of a cartel boss– says her husband was approached by a Russian wanting to sell him a *narco sub*–”

“–A *nuclear* sub,” she boldly countered.

“Cartels only do one thing: distribute narcotics,” Ruiz lectured, patronizing. “They don’t care how it’s powered.”

“A rogue nuclear sub is a national –no, an *international* security threat,” Engel corrected. “According to Salazar, Nikto has no interest in drugs.”

“If she’s talking so much,” Ruiz crossed his arms, “why’d he steal a sub –twice?”

Engel hesitated. She raised her palms, equally frustrated. “Something terrified Nikto…” Her vague conjecture had an air of dread. “Ms. Salazar refuses to say more unless she’s granted protection in the U.S.”

Ruiz stared at the seat in front of him, digesting her words. He turned, “This needs to remain quiet…”

“I have a duty to report to my command chief,” she shrugged. “Maybe then work with Sub Force Atlantic to locate–”

“–*Locate*?” Ruiz forged a laugh. “You’re gonna’ find a sub in 41,000,000 square miles of Atlantic? From your desk in D.C.?”

She slouched at the jab. Engel knew she had zero credibility with this man. She wanted to prove her skills and expertise could surpass the abilities of rash DEA agents using boats and guns. She collected her thoughts and turned to him, cool.

“I can search Coast Guard witness reports that fit the profile.” She was calm and succinct, “Then I cross-reference satellite imagery for those dates. With those events, I can use predictive tracking to forecast its possible course. Our vessels can then use passive sonar to listen–”

Ruiz stood, mid-sentence, to move three rows in front of her and sit. Without speaking, he looked out the window like a pouting child.

Engel almost chuckled, *that’s it..?* That was all it took to shut him up? Rational strategies? She involuntarily grinned. With her job, it was all data and statistics. She rarely had verbal debates with other humans, yet alone brash egotists.

Her smile spread wider. She liked how it felt –and evidently she was good at it.

Engel slid over to sit by the window. She gazed down to see the infinite blue sea. According to the pilot, they’d flown over Cartagena, now over the Caribbean for their route home.

Studying the field of blue stretching to the horizon, she wondered *where are you..?*

Ned Landa entered the moon well, alone. When the lights automatically came on, he paused to confirm no one else was in the chamber. He looked up to see the only security camera was aimed towards the Cyclops.

He approached a locker beside the hanging dive suits. He squatted to the lowest bin and opened it. Reaching past wadded rags, he felt an ADS dive glove. He glanced over his shoulder, and pulled it out.

He tilted the large glove until six gold coins jingled into his hand. With a scoundrel’s grin, he lifted one until his eyes glinted with gold. He studied the two-inch diameter Atlantean coin with the unique swirling symbol. His brows fluttered at the possibilities. *How much is this thing–*

He flinched at the hiss of the automatic doors. He sprung upright and turned to see Captain Nikto facing him from the threshold. At his side were Chandler and two crewmen who appeared equally surprised to see him.

“Mr. Landa,” Nikto stated with narrow eyes. “May we help you?”

Landa folded his arms, still holding the glove. “I guess I’m more comfortable around tools than marine biologists right now.”

“Then you are in luck,” Nikto countered. “I need some work done on a C-Buoy rack.” He turned to the crewmen, “Please show Mr. Landa to the racks.”

Landa swore under his breath at the arbitrary command. He wasn’t Nikto’s servant –or even a paid worker. But considering what was hidden in his hand, he chose to shut up and cooperate.

Nikto turned to Chandler, “Let us now suit-up for our stroll.”

Chandler’s eye twitched, equally flustered by the captain’s orders.

Chapter Thirty-Five – Little Farm in the Big Woods

SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

The dive platform slowly dropped from the moon well. Unlike the last walk, the sea was brightly illuminated. With the Naumtsev anchored at a shallow 100 feet, solar rays painted the turquoise water with shafts of light.

Also unlike the previous excursion, the platform held only two divers. Geared in their ADS suits, Captain Nikto and Chandler stood alone. No weapons and no escorts.

Chandler abandoned any sense of alarm when he realized their surroundings. His gasp echoed and his eyes darted to absorb the scenery. It was truly a forest.

“A kelp forest…” Chandler broke the silence between them. “We’re off the west coast of… Africa?”

“Correct,” Nikto replied, stoic.

Before them, towering “trees” of kelp created a true jungle. Their stalks soared a hundred feet above the seafloor. Some trunks were ten inches in diameter. Like true trees, their stalks were brown and their lofty fronds were a bright green. Some were accented with red blooms of color. When Chandler looked up, the silhouetted stalks looked like slow-motion palm trees.

“This forest stretches over 150 kilometers,” Nikto added.

Chandler was still absorbing the scene when they stepped off the platform. The soaring expanse of seaweed appeared as dense as the Congo Rain Forest.

“Follow me,” Nikto moved towards the stalks.

As far as he could see, the forest swayed in unison, back and forth like a choreographed waltz. Almost overwhelmed, Chandler didn’t know where to begin. He was torn between darting off like a child to play in the woods, or stay in place to study the forest as a whole.

He recalled how he and his mother had visited a kelp forest exhibit at a California aquarium. They compared the kelp to a redwood forest. The stalks grew vertically due to air-filled bladders, giving the plants a woodland appearance. Its thick fronds grew from bulbs near the surface. They provided shelter and food for thousands of species of plants and animals.

“It is one of the most productive ecosystems in the world,” Nikto uttered as if reading his mind. “A complex habitat for rock lobster, abalone, sea cucumbers, and almost every fish.”

Chandler tried to follow Nikto while still looking up. The largest kelp was called sea bamboo. He knew the forest was in shallow waters because sunlight was required for photosynthesis, just like land plants.

His eyes followed a stalk down to its base. Unlike real trees, the kelp didn’t need roots to extract nutrients from the soil. It obtained all the nutrients it needed directly from the water. The stalks were anchored to the rocks through a root-like structure called holdfasts.

Chandler trailed ten feet behind Nikto. When they walked through a gate of trees, the light dimmed from the canopy above. Unless it was his imagination, the water felt five degrees colder. He never considered what it’d be like walking *into* the thick labyrinth. The darker it became, his excitement ebbed into apprehension.

“We come here to restock our rations,” Nikto stated without looking back. “A nursery for more species than one can count.”

Intrigued, Chandler looked down at the ground. Though rocks were carpeted with vibrant flora, he didn’t see any sea creatures. Turtle grass swayed at the base of the stalks. There was coral and shrubs of red algae. The floor was speckled with abandoned clam and conch shells.

“You see nothing.” Nikto watched him skimming the seafloor. “But a *thousand* eyes are watching you right now.”

Chandler’s brows leaped at the thought. He bent to look closer at the floor around their feet. A shaft of light brought a new focus as if seeing through a different lens. There was suddenly life everywhere. A small camouflaged octopus slinked between rocks. Lobsters’ antennae protruded from behind a sea fan. Red reef crabs the size of his hand skated across staghorn coral. Tiny yellow Goby fish swirled past his ankles.

He smiled at the tapestry of busy creatures. With his newly-attuned eyes, everything seemed to move. A bustling community of life; each species interacting and gathering food. Chandler stepped back as a shimmer of blue and yellow angelfish rushed by like a passing train.

“A seadragon!” he gasped. Rising above the grass, he looked into the eyes of a rare seahorse-shaped creature. The two-foot seadragon was red and purple, with long fins and wing-like fronds that supplied camouflage. Chandler wished he had his mother –or camera– with him.

He reflexively ducked when a six-foot manta ray glided over him like a kite. “Whoa, captain…” When he turned, Nikto was gone. He called out, “Captain..?” Nikto was nowhere in sight. Nothing but the infinite, swaying jungle.

He had to keep moving. “Captain Nikto..? His gasps increased inside his helmet. He had to twist in the bulky suit to meander through the trees. Like a house of mirrors, everywhere he turned looked the same. He wondered if the captain had abandoned him on purpose. *He left me here? Maybe as a test?* Even in his bulky suit, Chandler felt eclipsed by the underwater wilderness.

In his paranoia, the sea life somehow appeared more hostile. The ground was carpeted with crabs, like giant insects, with their pincers raised to attack. An orange moray eel the size of a man’s leg slithered past his waist. When Chandler turned, he saw a three-foot lemon shark chase and devour a clownfish. He spun the other direction.

Using his hands to separate trees, he pressed forward. “Captain Nikto…?” He continued to shout, hoping the frequency would remain in range. *Maybe Dmitri will pick me up*… He saw a shimmer of sand through the stalks ahead, perhaps a clearing with a broader view.

When he stepped beyond two stalks the size of coconut trees, he found himself gazing down at a breathtaking undersea valley. Columns of light brightened the area as if it were divine. He smiled to see at least four divers wearing the same ADS suits. They were crewmen from the Naumtsev, marching into the vale. *Maybe a search party–*

“–Remarkable visibility today,” Nikto’s voice blared.

Chandler nearly leaped out of his suit at the voice. He turned to see Nikto standing two feet beside him. With the shadows and pulsing rays of light, the captain blended perfectly with his surroundings. Relieved but unnerved, Chandler wondered if he’d been there all along.

“Time to check our crops.” Nikto stepped towards the valley.

Though the captain spoke, Chandler thought he still seemed incensed. He didn’t smile and there was zero warmth from the man. But there was no choice but to follow him.

Chandler agreed the water’s clarity was extraordinary. Sunlight showcased the area from just thirty yards above. The valley was nestled between elevations that looked like underwater sand dunes. Wooden traps rested on the sand; some had ropes pulled vertical by round glass floats.

Nikto’s divers spread out. Some carried poles, while others had shovels or nets. The men went about their work without any regard for Nikto or Chandler. From their actions, it looked like they were performing routine tasks.

Nikto finally spoke, “If you pledge to follow me, and remain *with* me, you will never be lost again…”

Chandler scowled to interpret his words. He didn’t like his foreboding tone. Was he referring to him being lost in the kelp? Was he speaking metaphorically about remaining with him on the Naumtsev? “*Never be lost again…”* sounded like some religious zealot.

Before he could utter a response, they approached a diver emptying a square trap.

“Stone crabs.” Nikto motioned to the large brown and orange crabs. They had enormous claws the size of pears. “We take just one claw from each to preserve the species.”

They proceeded to a patch of sea grass to see a man pulling South African crayfish from a rectangular trap. The lobsters had beautiful rust-colored patterns and no claws, but their meaty tails were over a foot long.

“This way…” Nikto muttered again. They observed two divers harvesting short stalks of seaweed using hoes. “Baby kelp. Much more…tender.”

Chandler attempted a smile to warm the man. “Your favorite sea vegetable?”

“It is indispensable,” Nikto retorted, humorless. “Ten times more calcium than milk. Rich in antioxidants, including vitamins A, C, and E.”

Chandler watched the men, now fascinated. “How many ways do you serve it?”

“Our chefs use it in many dishes,” Nikto replied. “Sautéed. Dried into chips. Ground into flour for pasta, a thickener for soups, puddings...” He looked at Chandler, “Even ice cream from that machine you and Pilar abuse so much.”

It was the first time he’d heard Pilar’s name in hours. Chandler hadn’t seen her since their argument in the parlor. She’d marched off to parts unknown of the vessel, while he’d made the mistake of bumping into Nikto. *Am I on trial with some protective father-figure?*

The man still wasn’t smiling. Nikto turned and walked, implying he should follow. Beyond a ridge, Chandler was comforted to see the blur of the Naumtsev hovering in the distance.

He followed the captain like a reprimanded child. Had Nikto been listening to all their conversations? Were their quarters bugged? Was he angry at Landa for calling him a criminal?

With the deafening silence, Chandler watched the kelp forest roll by to his left. To his distant right, a diver was collecting oysters and abalone from a reef. They marched 100 feet before Nikto spoke again.

“I need to know your intentions.” His words were sharp.

“Intentions?” Chandler slowed his stride, “With Pilar..?”

“No.” Nikto spun, his eyes laser-focused. “Your plans. Your intentions. Both you and your mother’s.”

Chandler opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Nikto placed a hand on his shoulder. He felt like it was to keep him from fleeing.

“Do you consider me a depraved narcotics dealer?” Nikto paused an eternal three seconds. “Or a terrorist?”

Chandler shrunk within his suit. “I’m… not sure I under…”

Nikto lunged within ten inches of his helmet. Their glass visors nearly touched. “I need to know you and your mother’s allegiances by sundown.” The captain didn’t blink. “And we are *very* far from your home.”

“I *refuse* to be given ultimatums,” Dr. Arrison exclaimed, incensed. She crossed her arms and paced the floor of her small quarters.

Chandler and Landa were crammed in her cabin. They were gathered at the foot of her bed, shouting in whispers.

“What if they’re listening to us right now?” Landa hissed, thumbing to the walls.

“I checked the room,” Chandler replied. “The air vent, closet and all corners. I think it’s safe.”

“You’re an expert at surveillance now?” Landa snapped.

“That’s not fair,” Arrison furled her brows at the man. “That’s more than you’ve done.”

Landa gave a bitter laugh, “I told you on *day-one* he’s a drug trafficker.” He raised his voice, “Then I witness his stolen stash myself –twice!” He looked at Chandler, mocking, “How much evidence does a scientist require to prove a hypothesis?”

Chandler didn’t reply. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, defiant.

Arrison’s jaw clenched as a hundred cruel responses spun in her head. But she said nothing. Had she been so blinded by Nikto’s hospitality and marine discoveries that she’d been ignoring the truth?

She studied Landa and her son. Their postures were indignant –which was completely out of character for Chandler. Landa stood with his arms flexed. Chandler stewed, wordless. They scowled, waiting to attack each other’s words.

A new thought entered her mind: perhaps this is what Nikto wanted. To create turmoil so they’d have to choose sides. Was this some sort of emotional manipulation?

Arrison took a breath to change course. “Maybe they can only hear us in the parlor.”

“Who knows..?” Chandler softened. “I don’t even know where Pilar went. She also hates the captain because of God-knows-what.”

“I hate ultimatums…” Arrison looked at Landa, “But I can’t align myself with a drug dealer…” She raised her palms, “I just haven’t witnessed any evidence of that.”

“*Jesus!*” Landa bellowed, “I’ll show you his stash myself!”

Chandler turned to his mother. “When Nikto looked at me, his eyes were like those sharks’ eyes.” He paused, “I didn’t like what I saw.”

They jerked their heads towards a voice. It was the intercom.

“Dr. Arrison and Mr. Chandler,” It was Pavlo’s voice. “Please come to the control room.”

Arrison and Chandler cringed; they’d never considered the intercom.

Landa shouted, “What about me?”

“The C-Buoy rack is incomplete,” Pavlo finally replied. “We still require your assistance. We will send an escort.”

After the intercom went silent, Landa pointed at the wall. “So how’d they just know we were all in *here*?”

Chapter Thirty-Six – Turning Tides

CÔTE D'IVOIRE – THE IVORY COAST

Twenty meters below the surface, large missile doors opened on the bow of the Naumtsev.

After an initial discharge of bubbles, three teardrop-shaped bundles were launched. The four-foot-diameter parcels quickly ascended like an underwater race for sunlight.

When they breached the surface, CO-2 cylinders instantly inflated the bundles into fourteen-foot rafts. Each of the three skiffs were constructed of military-grade PVC vinyl, and could accommodate six people. The boats were navy-blue for low visibility, and came with compact six-horsepower outboard engines.

Two larger bundles were then launched from the Naumtsev. Due to the weight of the five-foot square bales, small round floats were required for buoyancy. They bobbed to the surface, held in place with cargo nets.

As commanded, Chandler and Arrison stepped into the control room, timid and quiet. A half-dozen crewmen were at their stations while Captain Nikto stood at the periscope. When he turned at their arrival, he wasn’t smiling, but his face didn’t seem angry.

“I would like you both to accompany me for my… *dobrovol'chestvo*.” He rubbed fingers together to recall the word, “Charity work.”

Arrison and Chandler looked at each other. It was the last word they had expected.

With a rolling surge of water, the imposing Naumtsev surfaced. Jagged yet graceful, with only its spine and fins visible, the sea beast glistened in the midday sun.

From the forward hatch, eight crewman appeared. They stepped along the hull to tie-up the rafts. Four men hoisted the large bales into two of the boats.

After a man radioed the all-clear, Captain Nikto, Dr. Arrison and Chandler emerged from the hatch. Gazing up at the radiant sky, Arrison and Chandler followed the captain to the lead boat. Crewmen helped them aboard and untied the ropes.

Six of the men climbed aboard the boats carrying the bails. The two remaining men joined the captain to pilot the lead boat.

As soon as the last man’s foot stepped off the Naumtsev, the sub sunk back into the sea. Thought its huge fin and tail were the last to disappear, the vessel was soon gone without a wake. Like a calculated drill, surfacing and boarding the skiffs had taken just seven minutes.

Arrison was seated next to Chandler in the rear of Nikto’s raft. She looked straight up, soaking in the noon sun like a sponge. Chandler was occupied watching the men maneuver the boats. Whatever Nikto’s cryptic “charity work” meant, intuition told her there was need to fear for their safety.

With the Naumtsev gone, Arrison squinted at the horizon to study their surroundings.

“Land!” Chandler shouted as he pointed east. Arrison turned to see a lush, tropical coast about two miles away.

“Captain,” Chandler had to shout over the breeze. “West Africa?”

“*Côte d'Ivoire*,” Nikto replied with a decent French accent. “Closer to the border of Ghana.”

Though he again avoided giving an exact location, Arrison tried to envision it on a map. The Ivory Coast and Ghana were halfway down the length of the continent, closer to the equator. Located near Togo and Nigeria, she guessed it was a poor nation. Otherwise, she knew nothing of its people, political or economic issues.

The three boats sped towards the coast. Nikto’s boat was the lead as the two boats carrying the bundles followed in a triangular formation. Their small but powerful motors raced over the two-foot swells.

Too noisy for conversation, Arrison watched the captain. He stood on the bow, leaning into the wind like George Washington crossing the Delaware.

She tried to remain cool to absorb the scenery. The warm wind was humid, somewhere in the mid-eighties. As they got closer to land, she could see tall palms and tiny structures like shacks on the beach. She didn’t see any larger buildings to indicate any hotels or commerce.

Studying the shore, something caught her eye to her left. She turned to see a small boat speeding towards them. *Other people..!* Arrison almost exclaimed. Were they being returned to civilization?

“A boat,” Chandler shouted, but he was pointing to their right.

Arrison turned to see a second boat, also ten or fifteen feet long. Its bow pounded the waves as it approached. When she narrowed her eyes, her face went gray.

“They have guns!” Chandler roared. He half stood, rigid.

Arrison covered her mouth. As the boats grew closer, she saw gangly teens holding large assault rifles. Unlike their attackers in Haiti, she knew the perils of the African coast. Both boats were charging over the swells like missiles.

“Pirates!” Chandler yelled to the captain. “Both sides!”

Nikto didn’t flinch. He turned with a tranquil smile, “They are our escorts.”

Ned Landa didn’t care what everyone else was doing. He was fine being away from Arrison and Chandler –and even the girl Pilar. They all seemed brainwashed anyway. He had his two favorite things: tools at his disposal and the solitude to work alone. And at the press of an intercom, he could have lunch brought to him anytime.

He sat, sprawled on the torpedo room floor. He’d single-handedly built an entire C-Buoy rack, and now had to attach it to the bulkheads so it could withstand extreme angles.

The C-Buoys that were launched to the surface for satellite communication were the size of volleyballs. A rack that once held countermeasures had slots the same diameter as the buoys, but were long like a giant wine rack. Since the buoys were small and round, he had to disassemble the front and back of the rack, and weld them closer together. The buoys could now be stored in cradles like bowling balls at his favorite alley back home.

Landa smiled at his handiwork and wiped his hands with a rag. His pleasure faded to realize he was happy about his craftsmanship, versus receiving any reward. This was not a job; it had been a command. And C-Buoys were ultimately devices to help his captor.

His stomach growled, now feeling like a traitor. Maybe he’d order lunch. The chef said they had fresh dolphin –or called mahi-mahi in the Pacific, or *dorado* in South African waters, or *lampuka* in the Mediterranean. He’d have to figure out where they were to know how to order it. He scoffed at the absurdity of his day.

When he stood to stretch, he looked at a workbench to see a C-Buoy that had been damaged during the last emergency dive. Landa peered over his shoulder and an eyebrow shot up. Ever since dissecting a frog in high school, he realized he could understand how things worked by taking them apart. *And this is how they communicate with the outside world?*

Landa leered like the Grinch. His lunch would have to wait.

Chandler maintained a vacant gaze, still confused. He didn’t sit back down in the raft until Nikto’s pilot waved at the approaching skiffs. The shirtless young men lowered their weapons and waved back. Their skiffs circled them, and then led Nikto’s three boats towards shore.

Chandler looked at his mother. She shrugged, equally puzzled.

The boats slowed as they came within twenty yards of the beach. Chandler could see a smattering of locals standing on the sand –they appeared to be children. When Nikto gave a broad wave to his arrival party, the kids all waved back.

Arrison also gawked at the scene. Chandler couldn’t help but grin when he saw wide smiles on the kids’ faces. They ran towards the surf to wave the boats in.

*They know him…* Chandler realized. From the kids’ actions, it appeared they knew Captain Nikto. They weren’t frightened by three boats arriving with eleven foreigners.

Chandler’s smile faded when he saw the condition of the shore. The water was carpeted with plastic and debris. An accumulation of water bottles, plastic bags, toy parts, even medicine containers. The waves on the beach were mere sloshes of water, burdened by the weight of the debris.

Fixating on the trash, Chandler nearly lost his balance when the boat abruptly stopped in the shoal. The local children ran towards them with happy splashes. They were gaunt and barefoot, and shouted in a language he didn’t understand.

To his far right, Chandler noticed weathered tombstones just twenty feet from the water. Some slabs were overturned, leveled by the elements. He wondered, *who’d build a cemetery so close to shore?*

The young men who looked like pirates helped pull the boats onto the sand. Glistening with sweat, they were muscular but spindly. They didn’t smile as much, and also shouted to each other in a foreign language.

Captain Nikto hung a satchel over his shoulder. He was the first to step ashore as his pilot helped Arrison and Chandler onto the beach. The crewmen tended to the bundles in the rafts.

Nikto turned to the children with raised arms. They encircled him as if he were some deity. He grinned and spoke to them in their native tongue.

“I thought they speak English in Ghana,” Chandler whispered to his mother. “I don’t know what that is.”

Nikto reached into his pockets to produce handfuls of candy bars. He tossed them to the smaller children and they all laughed and jabbered “*Nikto..!”* with delight.

The captain turned to the men helping his crew. They were pulling bales off the rafts and onto the beach. He shouted in their language with a tone that seemed more business-like. The men nodded*,* then whistled to smaller boys to roll wooden carts to them.

Nikto finally turned to Chandler and Arrison. “This village is *Mohamé.*” He pointed towards a murky waterway that spilled into the sea. “West Africa’s rivers flow into the *Bandama* River. Then here.” He scowled, “Into the sea…” He spoke with scorn for the sludge polluting *his* ocean.

“What’s that language?” Arrison asked.

“It is *Akan*,” Nikto replied. “Indigenous, spoken by tribes in the southern regions. I speak Akan to show respect, just as I speak English to you.”

Nikto spread his hands on Chandler and Arrison’s shoulders. “There is someone I want you to meet in Mohamé.” They began to walk inland.

Beyond a scrubby path, Chandler could see an assembly of shacks fifty yards away. He took a quick glance back towards the beach. The men were unloading the bundles into two wagons. When he saw what they were unpacking, he tried to contain a gasp.

The men were stacking white bricks. The bricks Landa recognized as narcotics.

Chapter Thirty-Seven – The Last Elder of Mohamé

“The village of Mohamé is one of the last of its kind,” Nikto said as he ushered Arrison and Chandler down a red-dirt path. “Those huts shelter families, with a fence around the community they call a *kraal*.”

Chandler studied the village. Igloo-shaped huts had thatched roofs. Nikto explained the walls were made of woven branches plastered with an orange clay. Some sheds were plywood and bare aluminum panels. Outside their doors, large bowls were filled with the day’s fresh water. Baby goats freely wandered the red sand that appeared neat as if it had been raked.

Children ricocheted between homes with excitement. They were all barefoot, and some wore secondhand t-shirts with outdated logos for “Blockbuster” and “Sports Authority.”

Chandler paused his stride to see more shirtless young men holding rifles. They roamed the corners of the wooden fence like guards.

From one of the huts, a small person ambled on the path to meet them. Chandler presumed it was a small girl, but as she got closer, he realized she was a tiny, ancient woman. She was draped in a bright red garb and had a shriveled face that had to be over eighty years old.

Nikto approached her and uttered “*Ete sen*” with a respectful bow. He then smiled with a traditional handshake.

“*Ete sen, Nikto,*” the woman replied in a croaky voice. Her mahogany face gave a pruned smile.

Nikto turned to Arrison and Chandler, “This is *Sewaa*, an elder of Mohamé.”

Timid, Chandler stepped forward to shake her hand. It felt small and fragile but with a strong grip. Arrison gave an uncertain tip of her head and then shook her hand.

“Elders maintain values and traditions of the tribe,” Nikto explained while they greeted her. “They uphold, enforce and teach new generations.”

Sewaa simply blinked at the guests.

“This is for you,” Nikto reached into his bag to produce a bottle. “Peach schnapps, your favorite.” He handed Sewaa the bottle.

She clutched it with both hands and pulled the bottle within inches of her eyes. Her entire face creased with a smile.

“Tell her… ‘Nice to meet you,’” Arrison offered, hesitant.

“She hails from Ghana,” Nikto replied. “She speaks English.”

Seeing the men with rifles, Chandler blurted, “Ask her about the pirates.”

Arrison cringed. She frowned at him for his graceless question.

“Those men…” Nikto looked at him without any shame, “are Mohamé’s coast guard.”

The four entered the wooden gates of the village. Nikto helped Sewaa walk by gently guiding her arm. Arrison and Chandler followed close behind.

Arrison thought the air smelled more pleasant than she’d expected. A scent of dry earth with a breeze of a wood fire and perhaps sage.

“The huts look almost new,” Chandler stated, his eyes analyzing the structures.

“Mohamé has been rebuilt four times,” Nikto replied.

“From fires?” Arrison imagined with dismay, “Attacks of some kind?”

“A sort of attack, yes. From the sea...” Nikto’s voice became solemn. “Thanks to your… *climate change*.” He groaned the words.

“Coastal erosion?” Chandler guessed, “From global greenhouse gas emissions?”

“Yes,” Nikto replied, sharp. “West Africa’s coasts are most at risk. The rising waters will wash away Mohamé’s shore by the end of the decade.” He turned to Arrison, “In this village, three-quarters of its residents have left. The sea swallowed precious farm land. The school’s playing field. Their only cemetery.”

*The tombstones on the beach*… Arrison now understood.

Sewaa startlingly spoke up, “The sea wants to even take our dead...” Though her voice was frayed, it was powerful. “Our elders for a thousand years. Gone *forever.*”

Arrison and Chandler had no response. The place did seem to have limited residents; just a few kids and the young men. Was it inevitable that inhabitants of such villages ultimately move on to more modern towns?

Two teenage girls wearing colorful *kanga* fabrics emerged from a hut. They assisted Sewaa back inside as if they were handmaidens. Nikto, Arrison and Chandler remained in the sandy courtyard. They sat at a round wooden table that looked like it had been a giant spool for cable. Nikto lifted a bottle to fill three small glasses.

“Palm wine.” He slid the glasses to Arrison and Chandler. “It is called *nsfufuo* in Ghana. Produced from the sap of palm trees.”

Arrison examined her cup. The wine was white and cloudy. When she took a sip, it had a flavor between beer and a grape white wine. Though it was lukewarm, it was good.

Nikto rubbed his eyes with both hands and released a weary sigh. He seemed exhausted, as if multiple events were taking their toll. Arrison wondered if he ever got frustrated of appearing virile all the time, to so many. *The weight of the world…*

“In villages such as these…” Nikto finally muttered, “Anyone older than you has had more life experience. They are respected.” He motioned to a young man gazing at his cellphone. “Knowledge here used to not be from books or technology. Urbanization means new generations know more about the outside world. So the elders are dying out... Soon to be extinct.”

“Dying out?” Chandler asked.

“Sewaa is sick.” Nikto looked squarely into his eyes, “She is dying.”

The three turned to see the young ladies escorting Sewaa to the table. She required help to take a seat beside Nikto, as the ladies placed wooden bowls of food on the table.

Arrison smiled when children ran by chasing a ball. They were laughing, happy, but what did their future hold? She noticed two of the boys kept coughing. The more they ran, the more violent their coughs. When she looked up, Arrison saw an armed young man scowling at her.

“Enjoy land food while you can,” Nikto announced as he passed a bowl. “These are spiced yams they call *mpotompoto.* A delicacy.”

When Chandler reached for the bowl, Nikto touched his arm.

“Use your right hand to receive items and to eat.” Nikto gave a half-grin, “In this culture, your left hand is considered your 'toilet hand'.”

Arrison almost chuckled, but paused when she saw Sewaa. The woman winced as if gored by a sharp pain.

Nikto sprung upright, over her. He whispered if she was okay. The old woman dismissed him with a swish of her hand. She took a meditative breath and the pain seemed to subside.

When Sewaa looked up, she saw Chandler openly gawking at two armed young men. They had blank expressions and carried large AK-47s.

Sewaa pursed her lips and spoke, “The men you call pirates… Were once our fisherman.”

Chandler looked at her, tongue-tied. “Fishermen, ma’am..?”

“Mohamé once had *many* fishermen…” The wizened woman became animated, speaking with her hands. “Before your nations came to *steal* from our waters. London, Paris, Spain… All dine on all of *our* fish. Our *African* fish…”

Nikto lifted a hand to clarify, “With almost no laws, many ships came here. Cargo ships, cruise ships… Commercial fishing vessels came and took all the fish. The villages could no longer feed their families or earn.” His eyes narrowed, “The ships dumped their waste. Fuel, oil, *mercury*…”

“Our babies become sick!” Sewaa uttered in a hoarse voice. “So our fishermen must *fight* back.” Her words were fierce for a woman so delicate. “These are no…pirates.”

Arrison and Chandler sat dumbstruck. As a visitor from a first-world society, Arrison somehow felt culpable.

All four turned at a commotion. Boys were pulling the two wagons from the beach. For the first time, Arrison saw the mounds of countless white bricks, precisely as Landa had described.

“*I know, I see it…*” Arrison whispered to Chandler after he nudged her with his elbow. She decided it was time to solve the dispute.

She tilted her head at Nikto, “What are those bricks?”

He didn’t flinch. “They are kilos of cocaine and pure heroin.”

Arrison felt numb. She had no sharp response. She was shocked, but why did it feel like betrayal? Nikto had never made any promises about his moral character. Arrison felt a paralysis similar to the time Michael had been diagnosed with cancer. Her husband, Chandler and her career had been her entire world, and her first love had been ripped from her.

She scrunched her face, *Nikto’s nothing more than a grandiose drug dealer?* She looked at Chandler without words. His eyes revealed a dismay similar to hers. Ned Landa had been right all along.

She’d grown fond of Nikto. His discoveries, his devotion and passion for the oceans. This revelation felt like a death. *The death of a fantasy...* The man she had imagined was gone.

Nikto remained at the table, completely unflustered. The way he continued to speak, remaining so pragmatic, made him seem even more callous.

“Notice the clean, white color.” Nikto pointed to the wrapped kilos, “Heroin from Colombia tends to be brown, chalky... Heroin in Europe is also brown, from Pakistan, Iran*…”* He uttered those places with disdain. “However, white-powder heroin is more refined, pure. It is from Southeast Asia.” He waved a hand, dismissive. “The powdered junk sold in the states has fillers or contaminants, sugars and poison.”

Chandler and Arrison sat mute, staggered by his words.

Sewaa groaned, hissing through her teeth. She doubled over, clutching her stomach.

Nikto shouted towards the hut, “Ladies, please..! *Boa! Mesre!*” The two maidens instantly appeared. They approached Sewaa to help her stand.

Nikto placed a gentle hand on Sewaa’s back. He leaned to her to whisper something. With trembling brows he watched the ladies lead her away.

“Will she be okay?” Chandler asked with empathetic eyes. “Where’s she going?”

“She is going to a home.” Nikto plopped in his seat and looked heavenward. “In *Abidjan*, the closest city.”

“Her family’s home?” Arrison asked.

“She has no remaining family,” Nikto replied. “A home for the dying. You call it a *hospice*.”

Arrison had an instant gush of emotion. Michael had spent his fragile last days at a hospice. She’d remained by his bedside, watching the disease ravage his body. Arrison’s eyes began to well with tears. She flinched as Chandler put his arm around her.

Their moment was severed by the hacking of a ten-year-old girl. With a hand to her chest, she forcefully coughed several yards away. She then skipped away as if it were commonplace.

“Many more will become sick…” Nikto saw the distress etched on Arrison’s face. “Whether it’s from the dumped poisons or something else…” He raised his palms, “It will never be proven.” He pointed inland, “They also have an infirmary for children.”

Without words, Chandler and Arrison gazed into each other’s eyes, grateful for what they had. She struggled to remind herself they were survivors. They’d had no exposure to the afflictions of such remote worlds. These people’s challenges were only footnotes in any published news.

She halted her thoughts with a frown. This revelation had nothing to do with the Nikto’s menacing vocation –until he spoke again.

“For patients in chronic or acute pain, opioids are an absolute godsend,” Nikto declared.

Arrison turned to him. She had to recalibrate her thoughts to digest his words.

He spoke almost clinically, “Opium drugs force brain cells to release neurotransmitter chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin. They are key to our pain management system.”

Her brows flexed, trying to fit his words to the circumstance.

“Opium-based drugs can be used to treat almost every type of pain,” Nikto shrugged. “From headaches to the havoc of cancer.”

One of the handmaidens approached from the hut. She dipped her head with a meek nod to Nikto and spoke in a soft voice. “Sewaa is resting.” She turned to Arrison, “She wanted you to have this. From one leader to another.” She extended a hand holding an ornamental necklace.

With sincere gratitude, Arrison took the jewelry. “Thank you...” The indigenous necklace appeared to be a cord of leather, decorated with quartz beads, shells and mother of pearl.

“Sewaa says you are also a leader.” The maiden smiled at her, “It will bring you strength and enlightenment.” She turned to Nikto, “Our offerings to you will be loaded on your boats.”

“*Medaase,”* Nikto placed his hands together in praise. “Thank you.” He bowed his head, “Unfortunately it is time for us to depart.”

Nikto turned to Arrison and Chandler. “I will meet you at the skiffs. I’m going to say farewell to Sewaa.”

“Will she be okay?” Arrison asked, fully aware of the answer.

Nikto’s eyes were misty. “This is the last time she and I will meet.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight – Sunset Beach & Grill

Arrison and Chandler stood on the shore while Nikto’s men loaded the skiffs with stuffed burlap sacks.

Chandler looked south to see Mohamé’s scattered tombstones. They were now just ten or fifteen feet from the surf. Some had to be hundreds of years old, sandstone with edges rounded by age. A few were still upright; others tilted in their return back to earth. He wondered how much longer Mohamé’s people had before their entire existence would be erased.

When Chandler inhaled, there was a sulfuric stench from rotted seaweed. He wrinkled his nose, seeing the place for what it was. What had been a mysterious and enthralling African coast, was now immersed in decay and despair. Because of his deep compassion for their hardships, Chandler felt guilty that he just wanted to leave.

Captain Nikto ordered everyone back onto the skiffs. After a flurry of good-byes in two languages, they headed seaward. Nikto was again with Chandler and Arrison in the lead boat.

Arrison held her necklace in the lashing wind. It was a tangible memento of the place and people she’d encountered. If village elders were considered spiritual or mystical, perhaps it would truly empower her with enlightenment. She gave a somber grin at her own fantasies.

The three rafts were loaded with a variety of the area’s crops. Large bags were labeled yams, corn, sugarcane or cocoa beans. Nikto stated Ghana was one of the world’s largest producers of cocoa. They’d also loaded several large bunches of bananas that were still green. It was no longer a mystery where the Naumtsev’s galley got its terrestrial ingredients.

*Is it payment for what Nikto gave them?* Arrison considered. That didn’t seem commensurate. *Heroin for groceries?* Her shoulders tensed at the reminder that she still needed answers. No longer intimidated by the captain, she leaned close to talk to him.

“So you supplied that town with stolen *narcotics*?” She made the word revolting.

Nikto nodded, unshaken. “Not just a town, but an entire region of similar villages.”

Arrison winced at the hazy response. “Thousands of kilos of *opiates* to help people in pain? At infirmaries..?” She gave an animated shrug. “You had enough to supply… Florida.”

He flashed an ill-timed smirk at her comment. “There are two opioid crises in the world.” He looked at her, “One is the plague of abuse, which is truly abhorrent. The other is how the world’s poorest nations have no access to morphine for pain and for the dying. The U.S., Canada and Europe consume ninety percent of the drugs like candy. In poor nations, terminal patients with just weeks to live cannot access opioids for their tormenting pain.”

Nikto paused to tell the pilot to proceed on their course. He then kneeled beside Arrison with sober eyes.

“Not all is for the sick,” he conceded. “In the world’s poorest nations, narcotics are treated as *gold...* Those kilos may as well have been stacked bars of gold bullion.”

Her eyes fluttered at the perspective. “But it’s still…drugs. How could you with children everywhere?”

“Granted,” Nikto nodded, “I will not see the poor souls who may succumb to abuse.” He lifted a finger, “But I did see the faces of the children we just fed. Do you realize that load was enough to purchase medication, clothing, shoes and nourishment for *thousands?”*

She slumped at the concept, “Thousands..?”

“Not just here,” Nikto pointed south and east, “Angola, Namibia, Mozambique… Some of the poorest nations on the entire globe.”

Arrison blinked into space, “This isn’t the only place you’ve gone…”

Instead of a reply, Nikto stood to give a final, outstretched wave to the children onshore.

Chandler clutched his mother’s shoulder. When she turned, he pointed in front of the boat. It was the Naumtsev surfacing, and it was indeed startling. From within a churn of foam, its serrated snout and green porthole eyes lurked at their arrival like a gigantic crocodile’s head.

The crewmen threw ropes to men standing on the Naumtsev’s hull. The rafts were tied in place, and a procession of men began to unload the provisions like a relay.

Arrison and Chandler sat on the hull to watch the men, and to absorb the last precious moments of open sky and warm sunlight.

She just watched Nikto. Standing with his men, smiling and giving orders in each of their languages. She wasn’t convinced yet of the man’s integrity. As an academic, she condemned any sort of drug trafficking. *But he’s helping children and the sick?* She debated herself, *maybe thousands..?* The locals had embraced him like a savior.

Having heard Nikto’s entire speech, Chandler was mute on the matter, undoubtedly weighing all scenarios.

“Remember that documentary about Pablo Escobar?” Chandler asked close to her ear.

She almost choked, “The Colombian *drug lord*..?”

“He built schools, hospitals… Even churches for the poor,” Chandler replied. “Locals loved him.”

“He was a sociopath and a killer!” Arrison snapped. “Escobar did those things to buy respect.” She lowered her voice, “Nikto told us *drug lords* took someone he loved… He ran *away* from them.” She looked towards Nikto with his men. “I think they did something horrible to him,” she mused. “Something terrified him…”

Before Chandler could respond, the captain approached with a white smile.

“Enough sorrow for one day.” Nikto shouted with outstretched arms, “Let us now celebrate life.” He turned to his men to announce, “A steel beach with all the food the crew can eat!”

The men applauded and cheered his name.

As the gilded sun neared the horizon, the Naumtsev’s crew was spread across its hull. Shirtless and wearing shorts, the men howled and dove into the sea. Some half-climbed the aft rudder to do flips from fifteen feet. A joyous clamor of Spanish and Russian voices filled the air.

Arrison had watched two men attach stainless steel grills to the deck. A chef was preparing thick steaks of tuna and split lobster tails the size of footballs.

Wearing a t-shirt and borrowed men’s boxers, Arrison sat on the hull’s incline with her feet in the water. The grill hissed with steam as the chef painted the tails with butter. She inhaled the sweet fragrance of grilled seafood.

A blender whirred to her right. A man was dropping fresh bananas in a large industrial blender with a bottle of *Tapanga* rum from South Africa. He shouted, “*Daiquiris de plátano!*” The scent, sounds and mild breeze were sublime.

Arrison turned to her left to locate the captain. He was standing at the base of the sail with his crew around him as if telling them a story. Nikto wore a black tank top that revealed a lean body, more chiseled than she’d imagined. She had never seen the captain so jovial or relaxed.

The men burst out with laughter at some punchline. Nikto slapped them on their backs and lifted a bottle of vodka. He shouted a toast in Russian, “*Dlya zdorov'ya!*” He took a deep swig and passed the bottle to the next man.

Was this finally the real Nikto? Arrison could tell he was happy, perhaps satisfied a crucial mission had been completed. Was this the equivalent of sailors coming into port for rest and recuperation?

*If that’s the case,* Arrison’s eyes gleamed, *where to next?* She recognized a new sensation: she was no longer anxious about their fate.

As she looked towards the stern with a faraway gaze, Nikto captured her glance. When she realized their eyes were locked, he smiled.

She paused, then waved with a demure smile.

“Where’d everyone go..?” Landa grumbled to himself. Whatever they were doing topside, he needed the time to finish his objective.

He’d walked straight to his quarters from the moon well. After he closed the door, he pulled a folded paper from his pants. He opened it to study his artwork. In pencil, he’d sketched a detailed schematic of a C-Buoy. While in the torpedo room, he’d disassembled the damaged communication buoy to see what made it tick. He’d been methodical when opening and reassembling the orb so no one would know it had been disturbed.

Aside from tamper-proof security screws –which he was able to tamper with– dissecting its guts had almost been fun. He’d heard of similar buoys used for underwater mapping and tsunami forecasting. In addition to having air chambers so it would float, the ball had two components: an antenna to connect to satellites for communication; and a mechanism for self-destruction.

Landa found its simplicity fascinating. The buoy was designed to perform its function –in this case communication– then scuttle itself to remove any evidence of its existence. A trio of sharp barbs would spring up to puncture the orb. When water entered the buoy, it sank. The saltwater even destroyed the batteries to avoid emitting any traceable signal.

Reviewing his drawing, Landa studied four dry-cell batteries located in the center of the C-Buoy. They powered an accelerometer that converted electronic signals, and then provided power to the self-destruction barbs.

Landa sat back and crossed his arms. *How can I use this to my advantage?* He was an armaments expert, not a techy. He didn’t know anything about reprogramming communication circuits, nor did he have the tools. He couldn’t just transmit “help” to some satellite.

His scribbled notes and crisscrossing lines were almost overwhelming. *Where do I even start?* Landa ran his hands through his hair.

As he was about to refold the paper, his eyes were drawn to the center of the sketch. *The batteries*… Everything required power to function. Aside from the intricate circuitry, a battery was also needed for the spring motor that triggered the puncture barbs. Landa squinted closer to his own drawing –sure enough, a single wire led to the motor. *Occam’s razor*…. The simplest solution is usually the best.

Landa smirked. All he’d need was old-fashioned wire cutters.

Chandler stepped away from his mother and Nikto. They were seated, talking about every archeological marine myth on the planet as they ate lobster and skewers of grilled prawns. Chandler had plans to mend his own relationship.

He meandered through crewman waiting in the chow line. He gave a few bashful nods as he proceeded towards the bow. He looked up at the sail and back down at the deck to estimate a specific location several decks below. *I’m now center ship,* he established. He stomped forward with four-foot steps. *Fifty feet would be twelve paces*… He counted as he walked.

Pavlo had tipped him off that Pilar was reading alone in the parlor. He hadn’t seen her since their quarrel, and he truly missed being anywhere in her general vicinity.

When Chandler believed he found the precise location, he gazed down at the hull. *Would she be on the starboard of port side?* He had a fifty-fifty chance, so he faced left to the port side. He took off his t-shirt, took a deep breath, crouched and dove into the clear water.

Pilar was sprawled on a rug, propped on an elbow to read. Draped in green silk pajamas, she wanted nothing more of the day. She relished her peace and had no desire to be with the sweaty crew splashing like imbeciles. However, she was wondering about one particular young man.

She was only upset with Chandler because he’d had the courage to call her out. And he’d been right; she was complicit in her dilemma. She should be fighting her captor with all her might, but she wasn’t. She traveled the seas in luxurious comfort, with free rein of the vessel.

*Why don’t I hate Nikto?* She fumed with conflicted emotions. Her brows softened at a possibility. *Perhaps his actions were right…* Her fate would have been much worse if she’d stayed with her father. He was a criminal with lethal enemies.

*But not my mother...* Pilar’s heart fluttered. She could see her mother’s luminous face. Her likeness would remain the same age forever, because she’d never see her again. If her mother ever searched for her, it could lead the *real* enemies to the Naumtsev. *The true evil…*

Pilar shook off a sudden chill and looked down at her book. The Iris window provided a tranquil light. She was lying three feet from the glass like a cat curled in front of a fireplace. Curious fish fluttered by to see what she was reading.

She was enjoying Frank Herbert’s *Dune* for the fourth time. A saga set on arid, dry land. No seas, boats, kelp or sharks anywhere in sight. She had a rotating library of science fiction and American westerns, anything without oceans or drug crimes. Desperately-needed escapism from the ugly facets of her youth.

As Pilar turned a page, she flinched at something beyond the book. She looked up to see a figure descending outside the window. *A seal? A porpoise..?* Her brain raced through possibilities in a blink of an eye. Then she saw him.

Chandler was outside the window, upside down and grasping the glass like a tree frog. He flailed his arms to reach the center of the window. His cheeks were puffed and his eyes were the size of quarters. With cupped hands, he pressed his face to the glass.

Pilar stood with a brilliant smile. Though he wouldn’t hear her, she shouted, “Hello!”

Chandler waved at her. With a spurt of bubbles, he thrashed back towards the surface.

Pilar covered her mouth with a laugh –then she got an idea.

Chandler stood alone in the parlor, wet and clutching a robe around him. With an eager grin, he waited in front of the same window.

Minutes earlier, he’d hopped out of the water, clambered up the hull and jogged to the parlor in record time. People who saw him probably guessed he had a personal emergency.

He panted to catch his breath. The parlor was cold and being wet didn’t help. He pulled the robe tighter –and there she was.

Pilar appeared outside the window, still in silk pajamas. Unlike him, she was slow and graceful. She seemed to float upside down, with her long hair suspended around her face. Her eyes were open and her motions were elegant, with no indication she required oxygen.

Chandler was entranced. In the past weeks he’d witnessed rare sea creatures, pirates and even Atlantis. But there was one fabled being he still yearned to see. *A mermaid…*

Pilar’s green silk flowed around her feet like a tail. She slid down the opposite side of the glass with a serene smile. With fluid motions, she twirled upright so their faces were aligned.

He was drawn to her, spellbound. Pilar placed her supple lips on the window. He closed his eyes and kissed the opposite side of the seven-inch glass.

After an eternal moment, he opened his eyes to see her gone. *Was it a dream..?* In a stupor, he looked up to see a glimpse of the mermaid’s tail swimming towards the surface.

Part Five

CASTING THE NET

“The problem when you cast your net that wide

is you inevitably catch something you do not want to catch.”

Edward Felton, Deputy U.S. Chief Technology Officer

Chapter Thirty-Nine – What Makes it Go

NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT

At less than eleven square miles –half of which is water– New London was one of the smallest cities in Connecticut.

Located at the mouth of the Thames River, it was a seaport city on the northeast coast of the United States. In the early 19th century, it had been one of the world's busiest whaling ports, along with Nantucket and New Bedford, Massachusetts. Much of the city’s wealth and architecture had originally come from whaling money. Times had changed.

“Why do you *have* to go to New London?” Officer Engel’s boss, Commander Gregory, asked while smoothing his shirt.

“How else do I get to Naval Sub Base New London?” Engel replied with veiled sarcasm.

“In your role…” Gregory scrolled through his phone as he spoke, “travel should be infrequent. Have you attempted Skype or Zoom or whatever?”

Engel huffed and sat on the edge of his desk. “Captain Ross received my memo –*with color images*– over twenty-four hours ago. I haven’t heard a peep. I need to present this *in person*.” Her voice underscored the words.

Irked by his inattention, Engel said his first name, “Larry…” He looked at her. “I can get there in six hours. I’m offering to drive there myself.”

“Alright…” Commander Gregory wiped his face with a hand. “But no pool car. You can expense a rental –and no meal per diem!”

“Thank you, sir.” Engel turned with a triumphant grin.

“Listen, Engel…” Gregory called out. He rubbed his chin, more pensive than she’d seen. “I haven’t fully wrapped my head around what you’ve found. Please report to me right away what the captain and his men propose.”

“Will do.”

He shouted to add, “–And please watch that that matter-of-fact sarcasm thing.”

Engel left her house at 4:00 a.m. in order to be at the Naval Submarine Base by 10:00 a.m. If she was fortunate enough to get an hour of their time, she’d be back home for dinner with Chuck and Sean. She’d emailed Chuck a recipe, with his promise to make dinner two nights a week.

Engel had never been to the base, but she’d read about it. SUBASE New London was technically in Groton, across the Thames River from its namesake city. Though in a tiny, unassuming town with a green bank along its river, the base was the U.S. Navy's primary East Coast submarine base. Some called it the "Home of the Submarine Force"

The rural track of land had received its first submarine as early as 1915, with more submarines the following year, creating the Navy's first submarine base. SUBASE New London was now the home to sixteen attack submarines and the Navy’s Basic Enlisted Sub School, an eight-week program that taught sailors about the rigors of undersea life.

Engel couldn’t imagine being cooped up on a claustrophobic submarine, with zero comforts, no windows and terrible food.

“Tom, believe me…” implored the silver-haired captain, “We *want* to do a July Fourth barbecue. But in this day and age, there are *so* many horseshit rules about booze.”

“Captain,” A lean Commander Lawson lifted a hand to interject, “I promise we’ll get back to the barbecue…” He motioned to Engel seated beside him, “We have one more agenda item. Officer Engel here. The analyst who drove all the way from D.C., so…” He raised his brows as if apologizing for her inclusion.

It was a dreary government-issue conference room –trapped somewhere in the mid-nineties– with an American and Navy flag shoved in the corner. Ten officers were seated around the conference table. They studied their guest with vacant gazes, then turned back to the captain.

“Ah yes, Officer Engel...” The striking, sixtyish Captain Ross clasped his hands together. “Thank you ma’am for driving up. I understand you have something for our ‘urban myths’ folder.” A few chuckled, kissing up to their boss as they passed a box of Entenmann’s donuts.

Engel bobbed her head with a smile. It wasn’t the first time she’d been snubbed in front of others. Based on recent events, she was ready. As her daddy used to say about duck hunting, “There’s no better ammunition than being punctual and prepared.”

“I know you’ve all read my report,” Engel waived a paper copy in the air. “When I emailed it, the return receipts all said ‘*read*.’” She grinned, “Not to be redundant, but I’ll summarize for anyone who might’ve missed a few words.”

On an old-school television monitor, Engel displayed a satellite image of a port.

“This is Buenaventura, Colombia.” She remained behind her laptop. “This image was captured four years ago on July 8th. In the center you can see an object that appears to be a submarine.” The object was long and black, pulled alongside a pier. “But no known subs were on the roster that day. We checked with Customs and the port captain. No submarine from any nation was on any lists or manifests.”

She allowed a moment for the men to study the image. They were quieter and stopped passing the donuts.

“It’s *nine* *times* larger than any narco sub.” Engel zoomed to focus on the long, narrow object. “I don’t need to tell you gentlemen it has the exact contours as a Russian Akula.”

Captain Ross’s forehead creased, “How did no one catch this four years ago?”

“Satellite imagery flows nonstop, 24/7,” Engel replied. “Our government has 154 satellites taking photos of everything, every day. The private sector has hundreds more. But no one looks at every picture.” Engel removed her glasses. “So I went back to search precise dates based on calls between a cartel and a Russian broker. I found this on the week of July 8th.”

The officers all sat a little taller in their seats.

Engel gained an ounce of confidence. “Out of fifteen built Akulas, only *five* are said to still be operational. If any are dismantled, the U.N. has no process to confirm.” She zoomed even closer to the black sub. “This seems to document one was in a port operated by a Colombian cartel four years ago. Completely off the books.”

The men blinked at the table for a moment as if solving equations in their heads.

“Even if that were *remotely* true…” Commander Lawson asked with a crooked grin, “How’s some narco scumbag going to pilot a 48,000-ton Russian sub?”

On cue, Engel projected a chart with a dozen black and white photos. “There have been twenty-five Russian sub captains since the Cold War.” The image showed grainy photos of twelve men. “These twelve captains are either missing, reportedly went down with their vessels, or AWOL. The Federation doesn’t have resources to keep tabs on all their former officers.”

The men squinted to study the portraits. They were all of stern white men between forty and sixty years old. Aside from any facial hair, they all looked roughly the same.

“Anything new since four years ago?” Ross shrugged.

Engle pursed her lips with a nod. “There have been reported sightings that match. From various coast guards, all chalked-up as nonsense.” She began typing. “But when I cross-reference the dates and times to satellite images…”

The screen filled with a Google Earth-type image of a dark cigar shape under the water.

“Thirty-one days ago,” Engel narrated. “A shape was reported by a boater twenty-six miles south of Key West. Thanks to clear water, that shape is estimated at over 350 feet.”

Before anyone could interject, she projected another satellite photo. Beside a small moon-shaped island was a long, dark shape with a white trail.

“Just over a week ago. Reported by fishermen to Haiti’s Coast Guard responding to a sinking vessel. The victims gave a farfetched account of a monster-sized object. The authorities didn’t believe them, but I pulled the satellite.” She looked up at the image. “You can see a white plume behind the shape that appears to be a wake, versus some natural discoloration.”

A few of the men took notes with brooding frowns. Engel closed her laptop and folded her hands. When all eyes were upon her, she continued.

“We have an Intel Department at Guantanamo Naval Station.” Engle half-grinned as she spoke. “Last week, we intercepted a transmission that Cuba fired a torpedo at an unidentified submarine –and missed. Our hydrophones picked up the blast, south of *Cienfuegos* which support the claim.”

“We don’t have any subs in Cuba,” Lawson exclaimed with a chuckle.

“Exactly,” Engel snapped. “And Cuba only has one, a seventy-foot Delfin. The rest of their navy is a hodgepodge of old Soviet equipment.

“Why can’t we just ask Russia if it’s theirs?” Captain Ross raised his palms.

Engel almost chuckled, “Why would a communist nation fire at a Russian submarine?” She smirked despite the man’s rank. “Russia would never tell us the truth anyway.”

The captain’s face drooped like a hound.

“If a country ever ‘loses’ a submaring, such as Argentina’s missing sub in 2017, they ask for international help.” Engel added, “No one’s declaring this one.”

She displayed a map of the Atlantic with multiple highlighted dots. “With the attacks off Florida and the satellite sightings, we have *nine* points…” Engel turned to the men with drama, “Something –belonging to ‘no one’– is in *your* Atlantic.”

After a second of silence, Captain Ross blinked. “Jesus H…” He studied the map, then looked at Lawson. “Tom: order the Atlantic fleet to employ passive sonar?”

Lawson gave a measured nod. “If we spread out the sonar, it *will* hear anything propelled with a screw or engine…”

Ross jerked his head to Engle with concern. “Do any of the unaccounted Russian subs still have weaponry?”

The men all murmured and looked at Engel.

She packed reports into her briefcase and shrugged, “Does that even matter?”

Everyone winced, bewildered by her glib response.

Engel stood. “Akulas use *highly-enriched uranium* for power, HEU.” she explained as if addressing students. “Not the low-grade stuff found in power plants. HEU is what’s used to create nuclear weapons. The fuel from just one Akula could create thirty nuclear weapons.”

A terminal hush fell over the room. The men’s eyes plead for more direction.

Engel smiled, “I’ll let you get back to your barbecue.”

The image of the twelve missing Russian submarine captains remained on the monitor. Unbeknownst to anyone in the room, a slender bearded man in the center of the third row now went by the name “Nikto*.*”

Captain *No One.*

Chapter Forty – The Court of King Neptune

THE GULF OF GUINEA

With a gorgeous copper dawn, 1,900 nautical miles west of Namibia, a small C-buoy bobbed to the surface. Its nub antenna instantly connected to the iridium satellite constellation, a collection of sixty-six satellites circling at a low orbit of just 485 miles over the Atlantic.

Within minutes, the Naumtsev would download days of valuable information. The satellites were mostly used for cellphone data, including that for GPS navigation and internet for news and weather. The buoy could then connect to the antiquated Russian *Luch* Satellite Data Relay Network, to read military hacks into U.S. and international intelligence. That information, however, would require extra time to decrypt.

At times –and as a special treat– Nikto would allow the C-Buoy to link to broadcast satellites to download movies and television for the crew’s library.

Dmitri monitored the influx of data from his comm station. As for the speed of the transmissions, he explained in layman’s terms it was the speed of light minus time needed for processing. Priding himself as an expert *khaker*, he had explained to Nikto how satellites were absurdly easy to infiltrate.

Most satellites were old, still running on obsolete systems such as Windows 95. To the owning nations, it was more expensive to take down old satellites than just leaving them up. If a satellite were ever hacked, there was no clear path for the countries to take action without upsetting international relations. It was even harder to discern if there *had* been an attack, versus a rusty system that had malfunctioned. The nations couldn’t just send repairmen into space to diagnose the problem.

After a three-minute a data dump to the vessel, containing more information than it could ever use for two or three days, barbs sprang up to rupture the buoy. It filled with water and sunk without a trace.

Twenty meters below, the Naumtsev cruised on.

Chandler was in bed, still reeling from the night before. And it had nothing to do with Africa.

Before midnight, he and his mother had been roused from their beds with blinding flashlights and earsplitting air horns. Chandler thought it was a nuclear emergency.

When his eyes had adjusted, he saw his mother equally frightened. They were surrounded by a half-dozen crewmen with enraged scowls.

“You are to be on trial!” shouted a six-foot Russian.

With barely time to dress, Chandler and Arrison were shoved together and ushered down the passageway. They were steered so quickly, neither could ask what was happening.

He looked at his mom. She shook her head. *On trial..? For what?* Chandler tried to imagine what they’d done. He’d spent most of the evening with Pilar. Had he broken one of the captain’s rules?

Chandler noticed Nikto wasn’t there, nor Dmitri or even Pavlo. Just Colombian and Russian crewmen. *What if this is a mutiny?* His heart quickened.

They continued on the same deck, into a less-hospitable corridor. The lead man, a huge Russian in a tank top, kicked open a door that led to the crew’s mess hall. The mob pushed Chandler and Arrison into the dark room and entered behind them.

The tables had been folded against the walls. He and his mother were in the center of an open space. The men slammed the door behind them and stood along the walls.

At the far end of the room, a row of men faced them like a firing squad. But they were seated in chairs. When a light turned on, Chandler was bewildered by what he saw. The men were wearing odd costumes or white wigs like criminal barristers. Was this some judge and jury?

The row of men stood. It took a second to realize Captain Nikto was in the center –dressed in a cheap “King Neptune” costume. As if it were a feverish dream, Nikto scowled, wearing a phony white beard, a gold crown, blue satin and a cape. He held an upright trident in one hand. His chair was painted gold like a throne.

To Nikto’s right, Dmitri was dressed like the devil in what looked like a vintage Halloween costume. A red hood on his head had horns and he held a pitchfork.

Pavlo stood to Nikto’s left wearing a bear costume. Its brown fuzz appeared old and matted. All the outfits were frayed, as if they’d been heavily used. Waking to the abrupt scene, with the retro costumes, was disturbing and made no sense.

“Why are we here?” Dr. Arrison shouted. She darted her head at the scene, terrified.

Chandler didn’t like seeing his mother distressed. He added, “What’s happening?”

Some of the men behind them chuckled.

“You will not speak!” roared Nikto, gripping his trident like a sea god. The room was silenced. From his throne, he eyed Arrison and Chandler as if they were felons.

“You believe you are worthy…” Nikto leaned forward to growl, “You arrogantly believe you are seaworthy? To cross the prime meridian at precisely zero-degrees longitude and zero-degrees latitude?”

Chandler and Arrison went stiff, even more baffled. The nightmare was getting weirder.

“You are nothing more the *pollywogs*!” Nikto almost smirked saying the absurd word. “You only dream to be *shellbacks*!” His face contorted as if restraining a laugh.

Something triggered a memory. *Pollywogs? Shellbacks?* Chandler knew those words. *Zero-degrees latitude is the…*” He then saw Ned Landa in the corner. The man was grinning ear-to-ear with his arms crossed. More of the crew began to laugh.

Chandler released a heavy sigh. This wasn’t a dream and they weren’t in any trouble.

Nikto burst into laughter. He pointed at them, and the men began to applaud.

Arrison looked at Chandler as it dawned on her as well. She covered her face with a grin.

This was an equator-crossing ceremony.

From the sides of the room, corks were popped on bottles of champagne. They spewed Arrison and Chandler like fire hoses. With a wide smile, Pilar entered to turn on speakers playing electronic Colombian dance music.

The celebration had had just begun.

While hazed on champagne, Chandler reconciled his memories while talking to Nikto. The “line-crossing” ritual was a tradition from as far back as the 17th century to commemorate a person’s first crossing of the equator. Depending on who you ask, it was created to either boost morale or as a test for hardened sailors to confirm new shipmates could endure rough seas.

The term “pollywog” –which is usually a tadpole– was used for anyone who’d never crossed the equator. A sailor who finally achieved the feat earned the name “shellback.” The costumes and court, including King Neptune as judge, had been part of the tradition in almost every maritime culture.

It made sense to Chandler, considering the Naumtsev’s position. Nikto had said they were 650 miles west of the Republic of Congo –the exact coordinates for the prime meridian, *zero-degrees latitude*. The equator was 300 miles south of Ghana. His eyes widened with a delayed reaction: they had just crossed the equator at precisely zero-degrees latitude *and* longitude.

A month earlier, while studying alone in FSU’s Strozier Library, he’d had no clue in weeks he’d be crossing the planet at 0, 0 degrees, in the Gulf of Guinea –while twenty meters underwater. He looked up to see her, *with a beautiful lady now asking me to dance…*

In his euphoric state, he felt like a new person.

At 6:00 a.m. GMT (Greenwich Meridian Time) Dmitri plopped in his seat with a second cup of coffee to review the C-Buoy data. Today’s brew was an Ethiopian *Harrar* they’d picked up in Africa. It was spicy and full-bodied with an almost wine-like texture. He sipped with eyes closed behind glasses fogged by steam.

He studied his monitors, deciphering the influx of information on three screens. Scouring the news for keywords such as “Russian submarine,” revealed no mainstream news or sightings of their existence. International news appeared mundane; nations squabbling over borders or mocking America’s leadership. A new tropical depression had formed on the other side of the globe. No new pandemics. Some reality-show celebrity he’d never heard of mocked the singing skills of a singer he’d never heard of. In other words, no published news to cause any alarm.

When Dmitri checked the data from the Russian satellites, he halted his lighter before it touched his cigarette. It appeared U.S. Navy systems had been infiltrated. He squinted within inches of the screen to read the decrypted code.

His jaw fell and his cigarette tumbled to the deck.

In his study, Nikto slouched behind his desk. His sanctuary to begin and end his days. Whether to chart destinations, or grieve any past or present losses.

Smoking his pipe gave him comfort. It was an heirloom made of scrimshaw, carved whale bone. This morning he’d chosen a sweet pipe tobacco from his last visit to the Aegean islands off Greece, an area of excellent tobacco that few knew.

Despite a gnawing headache, he smiled. The line-crossing ceremony had been fun. He liked seeing joy on his guests’ faces –as well as his crew’s. He blew smoke at the ceiling, realizing joy was something that was less and less frequent. *Patrice Arrison brings me joy…*

He felt a twinge of guilt thinking about Patrice. He truly enjoyed her company; her intellect and passion. She was the first female who shared his desire for their alternate *undersea* world. He felt guilty because Kana’s portrait was staring at him. With her haunting smile, black silk hair and astute eyes. A photo he had taken himself while dining at a favorite café near Buenaventura’s port. *During the Naumtsev’s renovations…*

*Would Kana approve of Dr. Arrison?* Nikto mused. They were both scientists; both beautiful and scholarly. They would have enjoyed discussing her innovations for exploration.

A slow scowl creased his face like an imminent storm. Kana wasn’t with him now because of him. *Gone because of our shared desires*… Don Ricardo Salazar hadn’t trusted Nikto *because* of their relationship. *So he took her from this world and it was my fault…*

Then came the *true* terror his dreams could never elude. He squeezed his eyes closed. At least in the Naumtsev, he could escape them all for an eternity. *Until every mile of the sea has been crossed.*

He dabbed a tear with a sleeve. With a sudden knock on his door, he sat upright. He applied a thin smile and shouted, “*Voyditye!*”

Dmitri entered like a whirlwind. He closed the door behind him and turned, panting. “I received data from the *Luch* Relay…” He took a breath and continued in Russian, “I read an order from the American Navy… From a full day ago!”

Knowing Dmitri’s flair for the dramatic, Nikto remained calm. “What is the crisis?”

Dmitri stepped closer, “Sub Force Atlantic has ordered its fleet to listen for a ‘rogue submarine.’” He accented the term. “If that were my job, I would use passive sonar.” He became animated, “Captain, if their entire fleet is actively listening–”

“–Settle yourself...” Nikto interjected, smoothing his sweater. “How certain is the data?”

Dmitri laughed, “U.S. encryption is over a decade old…” He shrugged at the simplicity. “If they employ passive sonar, they *will* hear any signature... Any engine, propeller or pump noise from any vessel that crosses their path.”

Nikto leaned his chair back on two legs with hands behind his head. “*Demetrios…* Do you realize the Atlantic Ocean is over forty-one *million* square miles?”

“*Kapitan*…” Dmitri straightened his glasses. “At last count their Atlantic fleet had *thirty-two* submarines.”

Nikto’s chair dropped upright. He squinted in a futile effort to calculate the probability of being heard by one of thirty-two vessels, spread within a definable space. After a pause, he reached for a brass globe on his desk. He touched the South Atlantic with a finger.

“As I see it, there is only one solution to avoid the Atlantic fleet,” Nikto slid his finger down the globe. “We go to the Pacific.”

Chapter Forty-One – When Things Go South

TROPIC OF CAPRICORN

“Who said we’re going to the Pacific?” Arrison hissed in a low voice. “The captain never discusses destinations.”

The three guests stood together, encircled by an Iris window. After breakfast –a welcomed change of Ghana’s oats and brown sugar– Landa had joined Arrison and Chandler in the parlor. The Arrisons had been guessing their location by types of fish. From the compass in the center of the parlor, they knew the Naumtsev was heading south-south-west, 191.5 degrees off north.

Landa looked back to ensure they were alone. “I was working in the torpedo room…” he explained in a gruff whisper. “Two Colombians were yammering about news from rollcall. The crew ignores me anyway –and they don’t know I speak Spanish.” Landa bent closer to their faces,” They were told we’re heading to the Pacific ‘*as fast as we can*.’”

“The Pacific?” Arrison scrunched her face, “Why the rush?”

Landa chuckled, “There’s only one reason a fish jumps from one pond to another. If it’s fleeing something…big.” He crossed his arms. “I think there’s a hunt for a hostile sub.”

Arrison blinked at the ceiling. “The Pacific will take a week...”

“What about the Panama Canal?” Chandler countered. “That’s why it was built.”

“Too shallow to stay submerged,” Landa shook his head. “Parts of the canal are just forty feet. This sub’s seven-stories tall, including the ridiculous sail-fin.”

Chandler’s forehead creased, “So we have to go south of Argentina…” He turned to his mother, “That means we’re entering the Tropic of Capricorn –that’s just 1,500 miles below the equator. Maybe there’ll be another celebration.”

Landa recoiled at the boy’s excitement. He had missed the point entirely. Landa considered the news a *bad* thing. It created a diminished chance of being found.

Arrison’s eyes blossomed, “You think we’ll see Antarctica..?” She spun to Chandler, “At forty knots, that’d only be… three more days.”

Landa was confounded by their behavior. Despite their backgrounds, they had once been peers, all prisoners of this *Nikto*. Now the Arrisons were celebrating the chance for more adventures?

As the professor and her son jabbered about the possibilities, Landa knew it was time to return to the torpedo room. *More precisely, the C-Buoy rack…*

Captain Nikto played the symphony *Scheherazade* by Russian composer *Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov* through the ship’s speakers. He explained *Scheherazade* was the beautiful bride of a King in the Arabic stories, *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the tale, she told her husband one story per night, but to sustain his interest, she wouldn’t finish the story until the following night. She continued to do so, hence the *1,001 nights.*

As the music played on, the formidable Naumtsev whooshed by forty meters beneath the surface. The silhouettes of the three guests remained at the bright Iris window.

As the suite’s 1st Movement played, “The Sea and Sinbad's Ship,” the music fit the mood; their stories were being doled out, one long day at a time. Left on the edges of their seats, to await the destination of the following day. And the day after that.

Arrison used the time to write in her journal. Though she wasn’t an artist, she attempted her best sketches of Atlantis. The Grecian-style columns, pediments laced with fish, the towering statue of a female ruler, the circular symbols. With no cameras, the drawings would have to do. With no coordinates, she wrote, “Approximately two hundred miles west of the Bay of Pigs…”

She then penned a heart wrenching account of her experience in *Mohamé*. The condition of their water, the children, and the dying without medication. As for its location, she again had to guess, even more nebulous, “*Côte d'Ivoire*, yet closer to the Ghana border…”

Arrison paused at the Middle Eastern influences in the exotic symphony. Would she ever have the opportunity to prove her visits to such places? *Perhaps I want to see more places…*

Chandler and Pilar sat close, legs touching, on the torpedo room floor. They spent their days cooing, laughing and joking with each other, away from the humorless others.

“*Pasa la botella, por favor*,” Chandler asked in near-perfect Spanish. Pilar’s daily lessons were paying off.

“*Muy bien…*” she smiled with perfect teeth. She handed him the champagne bottle.

Today’s torpedo tube discoveries included a case of *Louis Roederer Cristal Brut* 2008, Manchego cheese from Spain, *Le Gruyère* Swiss cheese, *La Panzanella* crackers, and more Cuban cigars.

They enjoyed a virtual picnic on the torpedo room floor. Though the deck was cold steel, Pilar told stories of the green rolling hills of Colombia, with a promise to show Chandler one day.

He swigged the champagne, envisioning her world, “Sounds beautiful…”

Pilar blew cigar smoke and wiped her lips with a finger. She took the bottle out of his hand and placed it on the deck. She then straddled his slender waist.

Before he could mumble, “*What are–*” she clasped his face by his ears. She pulled him close for an intense, passionate kiss.

By either the effects of the champagne, her spicy fragrance or her warm, soft lips, Chandler didn’t want to be anywhere else on the globe.

Arrison was shocked how much more Nikto revealed of their coordinates. He’d invited her to his study to see his navigational charts. Though the Naumtsev used electronic navigation, he said he enjoyed the feel and smell of paper, unfurled on his desk like ancient treasure maps.

“We are here,” Nikto tapped a coordinate. They both stood over the chart, bent at their waists. “Eight hundred nautical miles east of Rio de Janeiro.”

Arrison studied the chart. They were well beyond the map’s center of the South Atlantic. They’d cruised a straight line towards Brazil from Ghana. South of Brazil was Uruguay, and then Argentina, supporting Chandler’s guess at the Naumtsev’s track.

“We will remain in international water,” Nikto pointed to a blue line

-Nikto and Arrison stand over a navigation chart. He places his hand on her back as he explains a course south of Argentina.

-Pilar’s head rests on Chandler’s shoulder. They smile out a window as ORCA KILLER WHALES swim alongside the vessel.

-Landa works on a C-Buoy. He studies the barbs that self-destruct the device. He pauses with an epiphany. He opens a panel on the buoy and studies its circuits. He snips a wire.

-Tchaikovsky’s piano concerto concludes, Nikto playing the grand piano in his parlor.

Use Tropic of Capricorn?

EXT. SKY OVER THE SEA – DAY

A Navy Boeing P-8 Poseidon flies over the Atlantic.

INT. P-8 POSEIDON – CONTINUOUS

A young RADAR OPERATOR with headphones perks up.

RADAR OPERATOR

Commander: I got something… a heat stain. Metallic. Approximately… sixty meters.

INT. CAPTAIN ROSS’S OFFICE – DAY

In his antiquated nautical office, Ross frowns into his PHONE.

CAPTAIN ROSS

A “heat stain”..?

INTERCUT: ENGEL ON HER CELL – CONTINUOUS

She sits upright in a lawn chair at a youth BASEBALL GAME.

ENGEL (ON PHONE)

A hydroacoustic anomaly. Same way they found Argentina’s sub in 2017.

ON ROSS: eyes grasping the information.

ENGEL’S VOICE (V.O.)

Sometimes it’s whales or magma flow… There are volcanos under Antarctica.

ON ENGEL: at the baseball game.

ENGEL (CONT’D)

But this one sounds mechanical.

(stands to shout)

COME ON, ROBBIE! Baseball ready!

(back to phone)

Let’s just say all ears should be on your hydrophones.

CAPTAIN ROSS (V.O.)

If we ID anything, it’s my job to alert NATO Submarine Command.

ENGEL

That’s right. It is your job.

EXT. ARGENTINIAN FISHING BOAT – SOUTH ATLANTIC – DAY

The old boat’s stern states it’s from USHUAIA, ARGENTINA.

INT. FISHING BOAT – CONTINUOUS

FISHERMEN empty a net. Confused, they see a basketball-sized orb with a small antenna. They’ve caught a C-Buoy.

INT. NAUMTSEV - NIKTO’S OFFICE – DAY

Landa sits with Nikto as he pours two shots of Russian VODKA. From their glossy eyes, they’ve had a few.

NIKTO (TONGUE TIED)

Is drinking… Russian vodka a cliché?

(frowns to consider)

Can something true be a cliché?

He shrugs and tosses his drink back. Landa does as well.

LANDA

Easy on the good stuff. I’m guessing we’re a few miles from another port.

Nikto wipes his face and considers this.

NIKTO

Japan, during the war… Deep in the center of the Pacific, they planned to create underwater sub stations…

Landa winces, skeptical. Nikto explains with his hands.

NIKTO (CONT’D)

Sunken cargo containers… Twenty-foot-diameter steel pipes. Connected and pressurized. Like a city…

He lavishly shrugs and pours another round. A pause to drink.

LANDA

Captain… Arrison told me about the narcotics you gave that village…

NIKTO

My altruism shocks you? I also have recipients in Mozambique, Liberia and Bangladesh.

LANDA (CHUCKLES)

I mean, it not a stellar résumé: You steal a $2 billion sub from your own country to give to drug dealers. Then you double-cross them…

Nikto smiles with a cold gaze.

NIKTO

Assumptions. I presumed you were a coward. I was mistaken. What if I am keeping the Naumtsev safe from parties much worse than I--

Dmiti’s VOICE interrupts from a speaker, in quick RUSSIAN.

DMITI’S VOICE (SUBTITLES)

--Captain: a Navy sub-hunter claims they detected our heat signature.

Nikto sighs. Landa frowns, not understanding their words.

NIKTO (SUBTITLES)

The best place to cloak heat is… beneath ice.

On an antique globe, he slides a finger down to Antarctica.

INT. PARLOR – DUSK

From their poker game, Arrison, Chandler and Pilar rush to a window. Outside, the jagged bottoms of enormous ICEBERGS.

CHANDLER (AWED)

Like upside-down mountains…

ARRISON

Only 10% of icebergs are above water.

The bergs are iridescent white, blue and green. As the Naumtsev steers though a daring passage, they gasp at a close call.

NIKTO (O.S.)

Navigation has improved since the Titanic.

They turn to see Nikto, as if he’d been there all along.

ARRISON

Where exactly are we?

NIKTO

Under Thwaites glacier.

They gaze up. Sunset has illuminated a ceiling of ice.

NIKTO (CONT’D)

Climate change is melting a cavity under the ice the size of Manhattan. Deep as the Eifel tower.

With wide eyes, Chandler unashamedly argues.

CHANDLER

I believe it’s geothermal heat from volcanic activity warming the water.

Arrison grins. Nikto stands cozily close to her. As the ship plunges deeper, spotlights aim to light their view.

Pilar has her nose to the window –then suddenly LEAPS BACK.

PILAR (SHOUTS)

Ay! Calamar gigante!

An enormous PURPLE SQUID appears. Its golden eye is a foot in diameter. Chandler chivalrously holds her. Arrison beams.

ARRISON

Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni. A colossal squid. Over… forty feet…!

Its thick, long TENTACLES swish by. Chandler and Arrison run to the opposite window to see it skim that one.

NIKTO

Not so large to effect this vessel.

Pilar cuddles up to Chandler, nuzzling into his shirt.

PILAR (WHISPERS)

Can we play somewhere warmer?

INT. CONTROL ROOM – NIGHT

Nikto enters to approach Dmiti.

NIKTO

More aircraft?

DMITI’S

I identified two turbo props before the glacier.

NIKTO

Cut non-essential engines. Anchor until this subsides.

INT. MOON WELL – NIGHT

The door opens to the dark chamber. Landa enters. Blowing into his hands, his breath is visible. He turns on all lights.

Pilar’s eyes bug from inside the window of the hanging Cyclops.

INT. CYCLOPS SUB – CONTINUOUS

Pilar and Chandler are inside the minisub, lying in a Dmititic embrace. Their steam has slightly fogged the dome. She gasps.

PILAR (WHISPERS)

Silencio! Landa está aquí!

Chandler stretches his neck to peek.

CHANDLER (WHISPERS)

Now he decides to fix stuff?

They see Landa proceeding to a tool desk. Pilar uncurls a grin.

PILAR (WHISPERS)

Let’s see how quiet we can be.

He looks at her, conflicted.

INT. CONTROL ROOM – NIGHT

As Nikto leads his crew, Dmitri’s ANXIOUS VOICE announces.

DMITRI’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Captain: there is a short circuit. Water leaked through ventilation to the battery compartment.

NIKTO

Which circuits?

DMITRI’S VOICE (V.O.)

Lower level. Heating and some doors. The anchor winch has no power.

Nikto exhales, rubs his forehead.

NIKTO

Pochini eto! No one is in the Moon Well or lower level, correct?

INT. PARLOR – NIGHT

Nikto enters the parlor to see Arrison writing in her journal. He brings her a wool trench coat like his.

Iceland it’s pretty damn cold except in the engineering spaces where all the steam piping is. I used to spend my non-rack time in the engine room so I could stay warm. I once made a bed out of Kimwipes under the deck plates between the condenser boots

NIKTO

Lower levels may become cold.

He helps with her coat. She smiles and turns to the Iris.

HER POV: They’re anchored twenty feet above the sea floor. Spotlights reveal a beautiful yet haunting landscape, like another planet. Purple and blue flower-like life forms.

NIKTO (O.S.)

Biodiversity thrives under the ice.

ARRISON (O.S.)

It’s the hypothermal vents. A lost world of unknown species…

Radiant volcanic vents have created mineral towers, like sculptures, spewing bubbles. Spindly orange SEA SPIDERS scurry.

ARRISON (REPELLED)

Arctic sea spiders are enormous.

The spiders are the size of a man’s hand. A spotlight reveals a small octopus, eerily-white, like a ghost with black eyes.

ARRISON

Fascinating. The octopus has no need for camouflage in the dark…

Her breath is visible, she shivers. Nikto steps to the P.A.

NIKTO

Dmitri: Update? It’s growing colder.

DMITRI’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Two hours. Ivan was our electrical engineer…

INT. MOON WELL – NIGHT

The door’s sealed. Landa struggles to pry it open.

NIKTO’S VOICE (P.A.)

Mr. Landa: you are in the Moon Well?

LANDA

Yes. The door’s locked. I think the--

NIKTO (INTERRUPTS)

--Repairs are underway. The pipes to the reactor could freeze –we will freeze- unless we pull anchor.

From above, Pilar and Chandler gawk from the Cyclops.

NIKTO (CONT’D)

But the anchor winch is inoperable. We are trapped, unless--

Landa pinches the bridge of his nose.

LANDA

--Unless we cut the anchor’s chain…

NIKTO’S VOICE (V.O.)

Correct. Perhaps a diver with an acetylene torch. It seems you are the only man there…

Landa’s eyes proclaim shit…

INT. CONTROL ROOM – NIGHT

Dr. Arrison stands with Nikto as they watch the monitors.

NIKTO (INTO RADIO)

The anchor is beneath the bow.

A fuzzy MONITOR displays a view of the DIVE PLATFORM lowering.

EXT. SEA FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

In his full ADS dive suit, Landa stands alone on the platform. He carries a torch with a small tank of gas.

LANDA (FILTERED)

Copy. Please aim your floodlights…

HIS POV: His BREATHING ECHOES. He gazes forward; it looks like the moon landing, but with odd flurrying life forms.

LANDA

I see the chain, thirty yards.

In the daunting blackness, he sees a mushroom-shaped anchor in the silt. From it, the anchor chain connects to the sub.

The floodlights flicker off. In the darkness, flurrying life forms glow around Landa –then the lights resume.

LANDA

Jesus..! Steady those lights!

His BREATHING escalates. He approaches the anchor chain with eight-inch links. He ignites the acetylene torch. Its tip spews bubbles with a blinding arc. He begins burning into a link.

INTERCUT WITH: CONTROL ROOM

All lean forward, their breath visible, engrossed.

NIKTO

Steady… Focus on that one link…

LANDA’S VOICE (V.O.)

Never micDmitiage your only volunteer.

Arrison points to the monitor.

ARRISON

Look -what is that..?

Dmiti zooms. Two sea spiders are climbing up Landa’s leg.

NIKTO (INTO RADIO)

Landa: your legs –you may have stepped into a nest.

BACK TO: SEA FLOOR

Landa looks down and drops his torch. A third and fourth spider climb his legs and torso. He jumps and SHOUTS.

LANDA

A nest..?! What the fuc..!

Panicked, he flails his arms and legs to get the spiders off. On the sea floor, a trail of spiders are scurrying closer.

ARRISON’S VOICE (V.O.)

They should be harmless, Ned…

LANDA (SHOUTS)

Wanna’ trade chores?!

He struggles in the awkward suit. Nikto’s voice becomes curt.

NIKTO’S VOICE (V.O.)

Mr Landa: your suit is forged aluminum. Focus on your task.

Landa closes his eyes. He lifts the torch to resume. Every time the floodlights flicker, tiny eyes and glowing creatures loom.

The searing torch finally severs the thick link.

LANDA

It’s released. I’m outta’ here!

Landa treads in slow motion, still covered in a dozen spiders. He marches ahead, with RAPID BREATHS. He pants to speak.

LANDA

If I can see… I won’t freak…

A white octopus lands on his helmet, the size of a kitten.

LANDA (SHOUTS)

What the Fuc..!? A ghost?

NIKTO’S VOICE (V.O.)

Just an octopus, harmless.

He’s unable to grasp it. He swirls his helmet, trying to shake it off. Then a second and third octopus attach to his dome.

HIS POV: Closed-in by white tentacles. Their suckers are BIOLUMINESCENT. Their small BEAKS tap against the glass.

ARRISON’S VOICE (V.O.)

Maybe they’re trying to eat the spiders… Or attracted to your light…

He SCREAMS, struggling to pull them off. His HEARTBEAT throbs.

INT. CYCLOPS MINISUB – CONTINUOUS

Horrified, Chandler and Pilar follow along on a monitor.

PILAR

He’s running the wrong way!

ON MONITOR: Landa staggers away, into the blackness.

NIKTO’S VOICE (V.O.)

He’s panicking –or narcosis.

The lights flicker outside. Chandler looks at Pilar.

CHANDLER

You can operate this thing?

She nods at the controls. Chandler fumbles with the RADIO.

CHANDLER (ABRUPT)

Captain Nikto: This is Chandler. We’re in the Moon Well.

BACK TO: CONTROL ROOM

CHANDLER’S VOICE (CONT’D)

I’m with Pilar… We can take the Cyclops to help Mr. Landa.

Arrison’s floored by her son’s offer. Nikto pauses, pondering.

NIKTO

Agreed. Pilar knows the Cyclops.

BACK TO: INT. CYCLOPS

The craft abruptly DROPS. Water covers its dome, then darkness.

PILAR (O.S.)

Towards the bow… He went west.

CHANDLER (O.S.)

How do you know west?

EXT. SEA FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

The Cyclops detaches. It engages its lights and zooms forward. Bioluminescent life forms swarm the sub, curious.

BACK TO: INT. CYCLOPS

Pilar and Chandler scowl to focus. She grips joysticks.

CHANDLER

Look: a cloud of sand -his trail!

BACK TO: SEA FLOOR

Following a path of disturbed sand, they find Landa flailing on the ground, covered in spiders and octopuses on his helmet.

LANDA’S VOICE (BREATHLESS)

Anyone… I can’t…

The Cyclops’ mechanical arms spring forward.

PILAR’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Mr. Landa, we are here…

Landa angles his head toward the LIGHT. He lifts a hand. The sub’s mechanical arm gingerly opens its CLAW towards him. Landa must reach… Stretch… to finally grip the claw.

CHANDLER’S VOICE (V.O.)

Got him! Full reverse!

The minisub maneuvers backwards. Grasping both claws, Landa pulls himself closer to the dome. Several spiders flurry off.

BACK TO: INT. CYCLOPS

They sigh with relief. At the base of the dome, they see Landa cradled in the arms like a child. A last octopus pulsates off.

They FLINCH -the COLOSSAL SQUID is back, covering the dome. Pilar SCREAMS, Chandler lunges for the controls. The squid’s thick purple tentacles slither. Its black beak taps the glass.

ARRISON’S VOICE (V.O.)

It thinks you’re another squid! Follow our lights!

Donut-sized suction cups pulsate on the side portholes.

EXT. CYCLOPS – CONTINUOUS

The squid’s head is the size of the sub. Its arms wrap around the vessel. One tentacle pushes the rudder; the sub zigzags. Landa hangs on below the dome with one arm.

The squid grips tighter. The Cyclops barely maneuvers over the dive platform. Landa drops to the platform and hits a switch.

INT. MOON WELL – CONTINUOUS

A winch pulls the platform up into the vessel. The squid remains on the sub, thrashing it’s thirty-foot tentacles.

The door OPENS. Nikto and three CREWMEN enter. They attack the squid with electric prods. Men are thrown. Landa grasps a harpoon. He plunges it into the squid’s eye -black fluid spews.

The squid slides off the Cyclops, splashing in the well below. Nikto hits a control; the well closes, severing several legs.

The Cyclops’ hatch opens. Pilar and Chandler exit, breathless. Arrison rushes into the room to instantly hug her son, tight. He reciprocates, smiling at her startling show of emotion.

Panting, he sees the severed tentacles wriggling on the deck.

CHANDLER

Please don’t say… calamari tonight…

INT. NATO MARITIME COMMAND – DAY

An inspiring brick building with flags of twenty-nine nations.

SUPER: MARCOM Headquarters, NATO Maritime Command. Middlesex, UK

INT. MARCOM HQ – DAY

Engel’s greeted by an enthusiastic British COMMANDER WEBSTER.

COMMANDER WEBSTER

I’m Webster, Commander of NATO Subs. Thank you so much for coming.

She’s incredulous how he’s actually pleased to see her.

COMMANDER WEBSTER (CONT’D)

We are astounded with your discovery. May I get you tea..? Biscuits..?

INT. LARGE MARCOM CONFERENCE ROOM – DAY

(The meeting rooms seem to escalate in size and importance.) Fifty UNIFORMED OFFICERS. From a podium, she humbly begins.

ENGEL

This is my first time across the pond, as they say… And I wish it were under better circumstances.

She proceeds with a large projection of a communication buoy.

ENGEL (CONT’D)

A communication buoy, for covert sub transmissions. This is a Russian design -found off southern Argentina.

She pauses, realizing the room of high-ranking faces.

ENGEL (CONT’D)

Beacons transmit on 406MHz which is detectable by satellite and 121.5MHz so emergency services can hone the beacon with special search and rescue equipment.

Knowing its signature, I’ve identified transmissions from six other buoys. Creating a path.

ONSCREEN: Six points form a PATH with a sweeping curve, south to Argentina, then looping northwest of Antarctica.

CAPTAIN ROSS

What does Russia say?

ENGEL

They deny any subs in the area. Nor do they admit to losing any. It’d make them look… incompetent.

(shrugs)

However… They did say if we find one, they want it back.

The officers in the room scoff.

COMMANDER WEBSTER

The GCC reports an Iranian Fateh–class sub heading east from the Gulf of Oman. Any connection?

Engel winces at the unexpected question.

ENGEL

Not unless they’re following the same intel we are. Iran has no duty to report their patrols.

She motions back to her chart.

ENGEL (CONT’D)

As for our rogue, we can project its trajectory into the South Pacific.

Webster is austere as he turns to his peers.

COMMANDER WEBSTER

A rogue nuclear-armed vessel –by definition- is a global terror threat. Our partner nations can deploy subs and ships immediately.

Engel brazenly interjects.

ENGEL

Commander, with no disrespect… I have reason to believe it’s holding hostages who have sent signals.

The room grimaces. Onscreen she shows an electronic panel.

ENGEL (CONT’D)

C-Buoys are designed to self-destruct. Wires in this buoy were manually cut. To not self-destruct.

Dissent around the room. A JAPANESE CAPTAIN lifts a hand.

JAPANESE CAPTAIN

Do we know the captain’s motives?

ENGEL

We have a witness now in protective custody in D.C. She’s ready to talk.

INT. LOCKHEED P-3 ORION – DAY

An AIR OFFICER operates a rack of SONOBUOYS, the size of wine bottles. A bottom fuselage door opens. The sonobuoys drop.

EXT. LOCKHEED P-3 – CONTINUOUS

Tiny parachutes expel from the devices as they fall to the sea…

INT. NAUMTSEV – PARLOR – DAY

Dr. Arrison and Nikto are playing chess on an elegant set.

ARRISON

No, knight takes queen, see?

Nikto squints at the pieces, vexed.

NIKTO

Touché. Again. Who could have predicted I’d meet another scientist who is also the perfect… Supruga.

ARRISON

Su…pruga..?

He elaborately spreads his hands to translate.

NIKTO

It is like a… partner, a spouse.

She recoils at his words.

ARRISON

Let’s not overestimate our acquaintanceship.

He tenses, humor drained.

NIKTO

There are no accidents in nature.

I lose Kana, a scientist most dear to me. Then fate delivers you -quite literally- onto my vessel.

She glares, toe-to-toe.

ARRISON

Along with my son and a soldier because you nearly killed us--

NIKTO

--You call me a killer after what I’ve shown you? The opportunities--

ARRISON (HEATED)

--Archeology and rare species I can never tell anyone about? And you’re encouraging Pilar and Chandler so he’ll want to stay--

NIKTO

--That is not true, Patrice…

She raises her voice to correct.

ARRISON

Dr. Arrison. Your endless promises: the Sao Miguel pyramid, Cleopatra’s lost kingdom… Crossing the seven seas for the rest of our lives.

They both stand. Through clenched teeth he utters.

NIKTO

There is a reason I keep moving.

ARRISON

Sins catching up to you?

The tension’s severed by DMITI’S VOICE from the speaker.

DMITI’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Captain: we need you. Immediately.

INT. CONTROL ROOM – DAY

Nikto enters with a scowl; Arrison doggedly follows.

NIKTO

What is the calamity?

Dmiti looks up with his headset, grave.

DMITI

I detected a plane making a pattern of drops. I believe sonobuoys.

ARRISON

What are sonobuoys?

They both frown at her. Nikto responds, irritated.

NIKTO

Hydrophones. Listening devices.

Pavlo blurts in RUSSIAN from his station.

PAVLO (SUBTITLES)

Even if we go deeper, it won’t escape their sonar.

Nikto glowers at his cowardice. He retorts in English.

NIKTO

Mind your radar. Is the cyclone still shifting towards Polynesia?

Pavlo turns to his monitor.

PAVLO

Yes Captain… Typhoon Dakkar is 700 miles northwest of Tahiti--

NIKTO

--Plot a course to Tahiti, forty knots.

Arrison exclaims.

ARRISON

Towards a typhoon?

NIKTO

We will be under the cyclone. They’d be insane to follow.

Dmiti catches Nikto’s gaze to add in RUSSIAN.

DMITI (SUBTITLES)

There is something else…

INT. MOON WELL – DAY

The doors open. Landa turns from his workbench to see Nikto enter with Arrison and a GUARD, holding an opened C-buoy.

NIKTO

Mr. Landa: you are a saboteur and a traitor. Why am I not shocked?

Landa stands upright, silent. Arrison’s frustrated.

ARRISON

What’s going on?

NIKTO

Your friend has created a virtual path to our vessel.

(glares at her)

Are you his accomplice?

INT. DEPT. OF JUSTICE – DAY

SUPER: Department of Justice, Washington D.C.

Engel walks briskly beside a hurried attorney BRONSTEIN.

BRONSTEIN

Cindy, why does a traitor’s motive from four years ago even matter?

ENGEL (SCOFFS)

Wouldn’t you want to know, Dave?

BRONSTEIN

They’re 99% sure they’ve found it. The reason why this “No-One Nikto” took it doesn’t change anything.

(he stops)

You didn’t hear it from me. But the U.N. Security Council has created a task force. They’re going to annihilate this thing either way.

Her jaw drops, assessing. She pleas, sincere.

ENGEL

This is for me. I wrote Kayla a sorority letter and gave her like a thousand service hours. Give me just thirty minutes with Salazar. Before she’s whisked off to work in some… Whole Foods in Paducah.

He half-grins in resignation.

EXT. U.N. HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK – DAY

SUPER: United Nations Headquarters, New York

The iconic building with the flags of its 193 member states.

INT. U.N. ASSEMBLY HALL – DAY

The cavernous room has seats in a large circle. At the head is the stern Secretary-General FARRAGUT, speaking to a FULL HOUSE.

FARRAGUT

…With the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Counterterrorism, we’ve initiated “Operation Argonaut.”

The sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in 2010 reminds us that even a rudimentary submarine can be a devastatingly effective weapon if it has surprise on its side. The Cheonan was literally broken in half by a torpedo believed to have been fired from a North Korean submarine. And submarines are designed for surprise.

WE SEE the vessels as Farragut announces them.

EXT. PORT OF SHIMIZU, JAPAN – DAY

With Mount Fuji in the background, a DESTROYER and SUB depart.

FARRAGUT (V.O. CONT’D)

…To search from the east, Japan has offered the JS Ōryū attack sub, and a Kongo-class destroyer…

EXT. BUSAN NAVAL BASE, SOUTH KOREA – DAY

A large DESTROYER cruises seaward from the base.

FARRAGUT (V.O. CONT’D)

From the Republic of Korea Navy: the ROKS Kang destroyer…

EXT. CAIRNS NAVAL BASE, AUSTRALIA - DAY

A DESTROYER departs Trinity Inlet with nearby mountains.

FARRAGUT (V.O. CONT’D)

From Cairns Naval Base in Australia: the destroyer, HMAS Hobart…

EXT. COAST OF NEW ZEALAND – DAY

A large FRIGATE speeds with a backdrop of scenic landscape.

FARRAGUT (V.O. CONT’D)

The frigate Wellington from the Royal New Zealand Navy…

EXT. PEARL HARBOR - DAY

A large SUBMARINE and DESTROYER exit the iconic Hawaiian port.

FARRUGUT (V.O. CONT’D)

Leading the Pacific Fleet –the world’s largest covering 100 million square miles- will be the assault ship USS Wasp and a Virginia-class sub, USS Missouri.

BACK TO: U.N. ASSEMBLY HALL – CONTINUOUS

FARRAGUT (CONT’D)

If a nuclear vessel belonging to “no one” is anywhere between Antarctica and the Arctic Circle, it will be tracked, surrounded and neutralized.

INT. NAUMTSEV – ARRISON’S CABIN - DAY

The steel door closes. The CLINK of its lock. Stuffed in the room are Arrison, Chandler and Landa. Chandler checks the door.

CHANDLER

They locked it.

Landa sits, seething.

LANDA

Another cell… Hoping the inmates talk so he can listen.

ARRISON

Maybe for our safety? He said we’re heading into a category-four typhoon.

LANDA

Subs don’t feel cyclones at 100 meters. I hope Nikto is listening.

(stands to SHOUT)

You reject the laws of society. So we’re supposed to follow yours?

Arrison and Chandler pause at his outburst.

CHANDLER

Is it true? You sent signals?

LANDA

How are my actions any different than his? He retaliates against his enemies. He’s my enemy.

INT. NIKTO’S OFFICE - DAY

Slumped at his desk, he holds a portrait of Kana, with a glass in the other hand. Tearful, he utters RUSSIAN to the photo.

NIKTO

Oni ne ponimayut moyu lyubov' k tebe… YA skuchayu po tebe…

(gulps the shot)

I am sorry. I am so very sorry--

Pilar bursts through the door, livid.

PILAR

--What did you do to them?

NIKTO

They cannot be trusted--

PILAR (HEATED)

--For revealing your existence? The world needs to know!

Seeing the portrait of Kana in his hand, she mocks him.

PILAR (CONT’D)

Poor Nikto. They take your wife, so you kidnap me. Steal their vessel. You just react and imprison.

This strikes a chord. He shouts.

NIKTO

You think they simply took Kana? Your father killed her!

Silence. He stands, tall and hostile. She shrinks.

NIKTO

She had asthma. His savages didn’t know she needed medication. They watched her suffocate and die in a soiled cell. All so I would transport their precious drugs!

Her eyes widen. He drops into his seat, drunken.

NIKTO (CONT’D)

I did take you. To protect you from that life. The very same savages.

PILAR (STAMMERS)

My father was… arrested. His operation gone. Who is left?

He sloppily pours a drink. He glares at her, ominous.

NIKTO

The beasts who tried to buy this vessel in Russia. The same men your father was going to sell it to.

She freezes, confused.

INT. BRIDGE – USS WASP, ASSAULT SHIP – DAY

The bridge is alive with Navy OFFICERS. A young DECK OFFICER approaches an intense CAPTAIN CUNARD.

DECK OFFICER

Captain: there’s a magnetic anomaly.

The captain leans to study an electronic map.

CAPTAIN CUNARD

It’s advancing in a steady line…

DECK OFFICER

And it confirms the sonobuoys’ track. North-northeast. That’s bad.

The captain looks at her.

DECK OFFICER (CONT’D)

They’re 500 miles south of Tahiti. Heading directly into the typhoon.

The captain sharpens his eyes.

CAPTAIN CUNARD

Track ‘em as long as we can. Our subs will have to do the rest.

INT. NIKTO’S OFFICE – DAY

CLOSE ON Nikto’s desk monitor. It flashes with Pavlo’s face.

PAVLO (ONSCREEN)

Captain: Dakkar is now a category-five typhoon. Kapitan..?

Nikto’s head is on his desk, passed out. His decanter’s empty. A shot glass in one hand, Kana’s photo in the other.

A glimpse of Pilar stealthily exiting his office.

INT. ARRISON’S CABIN – DAY

In hushed tones, the three tensely debate.

CHANDLER (TO LANDA)

Escape? How do you propose--

ARRISON

--We’re sealed 300 feet underwater. In the middle of the largest ocean.

They halt at the CLANK and SQUEAK of their door. Pilar appears.

PILAR

Nikto doesn’t know I’m here. He won’t be out for long.

EXT. TYPHOON DAKKAR – DAY

The vast SWIRLING HURRICANE over the Pacific. Forty-foot waves, LIGHTNING and THUNDER. We pull higher to see the islands of French Polynesia in its track.

Even higher, it morphs into a SATELLITE IMAGE of the cyclone…

INT. “JS ŌRYŪ” ATTACK SUB – CONTROL ROOM - DAY

The satellite image is studied by Japanese CAPTAIN SATO.

CAPTAIN SATO (SUBTITLES)

Dive 100 meters to avoid the churn.

A young SONAR TECHNICIAN shouts.

SONAR TECH (SUBTITLES)

Captain: we identified a Fateh-class sub. Eleven miles southwest.

The captain frowns to deliberate.

CAPTAIN SATO (SUBTITLES)

Fateh? Who invited Iran?

INT. ARRISON’S CABIN – DAY

The three guests surround Pilar. She’s quick, frazzled.

PILAR

He is despondent. At least six vessels are on our trail. He’d rather go down with his ship.

LANDA

We need out.

PILAR

He removed all escape pods.

CHANDLER

What about the Cyclops?

They all turn to him at the novel idea.

PILAR

It can’t be launched at forty knots. The well door won’t open.

ARRISON

Do we really have to leave Nikto? Maybe we can convince him to--

LANDA

--We can’t. He smart enough to know he’s a global criminal.

Pilar locks eyes with him. She’s staunch.

PILAR

You’re wrong. He believes he’s a savior. Protecting the Naumtsev from others much worse…

LANDA (SCOFFS)

Who..?

INT. WITNESS ROOM - DEPT. OF JUSTICE – DAY

Engel sits in a small room opposite Mirta Salazar.

ENGEL

This is the last time we’ll meet. You have a new life… So what are you still frightened of?

Mirta pauses, expressive.

MIRTA

The reason Nikto seized the sub was the precise reason why I chose to testify against my husband.

Engel frowns, perplexed.

MIRTA (CONT’D)

Ricardo was approached by very dangerous people…

ENGEL

No disrespect Mrs. Salazar, but your husband was a top-ten narco.

Mirta frowns, offended.

MIRTA

What people are worse than narcos?

INTERCUT: PILAR AND MIRTA, separately as they explain.

ON PILAR: responding to the three guests.

PILAR

They were trying to buy this sub through the Russian black market.

LANDA

They who..?

PILAR

Terroristas. Iranian terrorists.

ON MIRTA SALAZAR: explaining to a riveted Engel.

MIRTA

Bought through corrupt Russian officials. So Nikto stole it first.

(tense beat)

The Iranians then approached my husband. They offered him triple his price. When he agreed, I decided to run. Same as Nikto. It was too much.

ON PILAR: gazing as she recounts.

PILAR

Nikto said the world’s greatest threat is not underpaid scientists selling their skills to enemies. More lethal is the nuclear black market. Radioactive material. All cash.

ON MIRTA: facing an astounded Engel.

ENGEL

It was narco-terrorism… Smuggling to finance terrorist activities…

MIRTA

It wasn’t for funding. The Iranians wanted a nuclear submarine.

ON PILAR: as Chandler shrugs, confused.

CHANDLER

But Nikto discarded all the weapons…

PILAR

Do you realize what powers this vessel? Enough weapons-grade uranium to arm three nuclear warheads.

Landa muses aloud.

LANDA

Untraceable, from a vanished sub…

Arrison pieces it together.

ARRISON

Nikto… Is keeping this vessel away from terrorists?

CHANDLER

That’s why he keeps moving…

ON MIRTA SALAZAR: A tear rolls down her cheek.

MIRTA

Nikto took my daughter. Pilar. So my husband would never help them find it. And never try to destroy it…

She looks at Engel, hopeful.

MIRTA (CONT’D)

The U.N. has a mission to find them?

Engel swallows, distressed.

ENGEL

They’re tracking it now. I don’t know of a plan to take survivors.

INT. ARRISON’S CABIN - CONTINUOUS

LANDA

Despite any noble… intents, I’m not going down with him.

ARRISON

Can we slow the ship enough to launch the Cyclops?

PILAR

I have no access to navigation.

Chandler’s eyes widen with an idea.

CHANDLER

You have access to Engineering. What about a nuclear warning alarm?

Landa’s eyes ignite at the notion.

LANDA

The reactor’s SCRAM switch. They’d slow the sub as a precaution.

They sway as the vessel lists to the side. Arrison gasps.

ARRISON

You said we can’t feel a typhoon.

LANDA

We can still feel a tsunami swell. We need to move, now.

INT. BRIDGE OF USS WASP – DAY

RAIN lashes at the windows. Captain Cunard grips the radio.

CUNARD

Warning: Thirty-foot seas. Only subs can proceed: JS Ōryū, USS Missouri.

FARRAGUT’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Copy. We’re tracking a sub heading east from the Coral Sea. Fateh-class. Seems Iran now has an interest.

CUNARD

Iran? Should we confront?

FARRAGUT’S VOICE (FILTERED)

No time for diplomacy. We need to catch the rogue first.

INT. NAUMTSEV – CORRIDORS – DAY

Pilar leads the three through the halls. Fast-paced.

PILAR

Engineering’s this way.

LANDA (TO PILAR)

You and I will go.

(to Arrison and Chandler)

Meet us at the Moon Well.

They SWAY against the wall as the vessel tilts again.

INT. ENGINEERING LEVEL – DAY

Pilar and Landa climb down a ladder. A hatch requires her badge. She swipes once –nothing. Then again. It opens.

LANDA

Look for the switch. Do you know the radiation hazard symbol?

The walls are covered with HUNDREDS of indecipherable switches.

INT. BERTHING LEVEL – CONTINUOUS

Arrison and Chandler rush. She pauses by an ajar door.

CHANDLER

Nikto’s office?

She looks at him, conflicted.

ARRISON

What if we can change his mind?

They flinch as a disheveled Nikto opens the door with a scowl.

NIKTO

Change my mind?

INT. BRIDGE OF USS WASP – DAY

The bridge SWAYS in the seas. Captain Cunard stands over a sonar monitor with his Deck Officer.

CUNARD (RE: SONAR)

The subs are closing in.

MONITOR: the ROGUE SUB (Naumtsev) is closer to the CYCLONE. Another SUB approaches from the north (U.S.) Another from the northwest (Japan) and one from due-west (Iran.)

DECK OFFICER

Plan for any hostages?

CUNARD

Anti-sub warfare does not produce survivors.

INT. NIKTO’S OFFICE – DAY

Unsteady, Nikto drops into his chair. Chandler and Arrison remain at his door, wary of the belligerent man.

NIKTO

Right! I was guarding the world from devastation. But you were never content with the wonders I offered.

He swirls a bottle, it’s empty. Chandler pleas, heartfelt.

CHANDLER

Captain… You can surrender. What if you received… amnesty for the safe return of the uranium..?

Nikto slurs, animated.

NIKTO

So they can create more weapons? More, more, bol'she, bol’she!

Arrison steps closer, imploring.

ARRISON

You’re a man of science… all your discoveries… Atlantis… Countless new species. You’d be an academic… hero.

NIKTO

I discovered nothing. All of it has been there. No one cared to look.

He throws the empty decanter, shattering on a bulkhead.

NIKTO (FIERCE)

You could have been my queen… Amphitrite, the goddess of the seas.

The room sways, antiques tumble to the floor. Nikto SHOUTS.

NIKTO

Control: What is happening?

DMITI’S VOICE (FILTERED)

Izvinite Kapitan. Pilar said you were not to be disturbed--

NIKTO (SHOUTS)

--UPDATE!

DMITI’S VOICE (FILTERED)

The destroyers can no longer approach. But the subs are closer. Forty miles. Kapitan: there is a third sub, from Iran.

He wipes his face and chuckles, defeated.

NIKTO

Sent by the very radicals I’ve been fleeing… I am on the way.

He struggles to stand.

ARRISON

You won’t surrender?

He squints an eye with a menacing leer.

NIKTO

I will plunge this vessel to the seafloor myself before I resign it to another nation.

INT. CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

As they exit, Arrison touches Nikto’s arm, cunning.

ARRISON

Would it be safer if we remain in our quarters?

He takes the bait, struggling to appear in control.

NIKTO

Yes! Remain in your quarters.

He dashes away. Arrison wistfully watches him go; it’s the last time she’ll see him… She takes Chandler’s hand to flee.

INT. ENGINEERING – CONTINUOUS

Pilar and Landa creep, scanning walls. Two CREWMEN approach.

CREWMAN (SPANISH)

Qué estás haciendo aquí?

Landa flexes to react. Pilar halts him and barks at the men.

PILAR (SUBTITLES)

Nikto ordered radio silence. He needs you in the mess hall. Now!

Bewildered, the crewmen exit. Landa reacts, impressed.

INT. “FATEH” IRANIAN SUBMARINE – DAY

SUPER: “Fateh,” Submarine of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Their CONTROL ROOM is archaic, red lights, claustrophobic.

IRANIAN CREWMAN (SUBTITLES)

Sonar confirms it is an Akula.

The IRANIAN CAPTAIN uncurls a foreboding grin.

IRANIAN CAPTAIN (SUBTITLES)

It is the target. Attempt communication –and lock torpedoes.

INT. NAUMTSEV – CONTROL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The crew’s fixated as the SHIP SWAYS. Nikto noisily enters.

NIKTO

Obnovit'?

DMITI

The Iranian sub is west, two miles.

NIKTO

Looming like a vulture. To harvest my uranium from the sea floor…

DMITI (DIRE)

Kapitan, I detect they’ve locked torpedoes. Perhaps it is time?

Nikto stands tall, assessing. He then nods, in RUSSIAN.

NIKTO (SUBTITLES)

Arm the fallback…

INT. NAUMTSEV TORPEDO ROOM – MOMENTS LATER

CREWMEN reach to the ceiling to grasp an AIR DUCT, 10-feet long, 14-inch diameter. They use a WINCH to lower the duct. Ripping off its sheath, the duct has been a disguised torpedo.

They open a hatch and guide the torpedo into the shaft.

CREWMAN

Flood the tube.

He hits a button with a WATER SYMBOL on it.

INT. CORRIDOR OUTSIDE OF PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

Chandler pulls his mom by the hand. She halts by the parlor.

CHANDLER

The well’s down here--

ARRISON

--Please, one last look.

INT. PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

They enter. A chandelier’s swinging. Antiques and books have fallen. CREAKS and GROANS. She steps to a window to gaze out mournfully, the last time she’ll look out of it. She locates her journal on the floor; she takes it.

CHANDLER

Mom, we need to be in the well.

ARRISON (PENSIVE)

I don’t think he’s beyond saving…

INT. ENGINE ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Landa and Pilar scan a wall. She sees the international RADIATION HAZARD SYMBOL on a switch. She shouts to Landa.

PILAR

The switch is here.

Landa pulls it down, instantly triggering ALARMS and LIGHTS.

BACK TO: CONTROL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Pavlo reacts to his monitor.

PAVLO

The emergency reactor system –but no one is responding.

Nikto gnashes his teeth, overwhelmed. He shouts.

NIKTO

Slow to ten knots. Is the torpedo ready?

PAVLO

But if it is a leak, we must surface.

Nikto gives him a derisive grin.

NIKTO

You coward. Surface? In a typhoon?

INT. FATEH IRANIAN SUBMARINE – DAY

IRANIAN CREWMAN (SUBTITLES)

The Akula is not responding.

IRANIAN CAPTAIN (SUBTITLES)

Prepare to fire. Target the stern to preserve its reactor.

BACK TO: PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

As Arrison and Chandler exit, Landa and Pilar appear, rushed.

LANDA (SHOUTS)

Let’s go! The ship’s slowing--

The room pitches forward almost forty-degrees. They tumble.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE NAUMTSEV – CONTINUOUS

The sub dives as Iran’s TORPEDO speeds towards them. The Naumtsev launches countermeasures, spewing bubbles.

BACK TO: PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

The three struggle to stand.

LANDA

Countermeasures. Someone fired--

A MUFFLED BOOM ECHOES overhead. The lights FLICKER. Arrison’s jaw drops at what they see out the window.

THEIR POV: An EXPLOSION pulses underwater, a hundred yards away. Blasts make the Iranian sub visible. A direct hit.

CHANDLER (O.S.)

We shot a sub--

LANDA (O.S.)

--He lied about weapons…?

BLASTS illuminate the enemy sub, breaking in half and sinking.

No one blinks. Arrison is crestfallen. There’s no saving Nikto.

ARRISON

Let’s go.

INT. BRIDGE OF USS WASP – CONTINUOUS

The crew holds the rails. Cunard SHOUTS in a radio.

CUNARD

A confirmed torpedo blast. Not one of ours. Missouri and Ōryū: stand-down until we clarify. Over.

He shouts to the Deck Officer.

CUNARD (CONT’D)

Broadcast our demand for surrender. All three languages.

INT. NAUMTSEV - CONTROL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

DMITI

The other subs have stopped.

Nikto just gazes, perspiring. Pavlo looks at him.

PAVLO

Kapitan, what about the reactor..?

Nikto’s eyes swim, almost absent. He mumbles in RUSSIAN.

NIKTO (SUBTITLES)

Dmiti, you have the conn. I will be in my parlor. Alone.

The remaining men glance at each other, perplexed.

IN. MOON WELL – MOMENTS LATER

ALARMS WAIL. Arrison, Chandler and Pilar approach the Cyclops. Landa opens a control panel near the well door.

LANDA

Get in! I’ll get the door open.

No time to debate. The three climb into the minisub’s hatch.

LANDA (RE: PANEL)

Damnit..! The ship’s not slow enough. I have to manually override.

Chandler peers down.

CHANDLER

From out there? We need you--

LANDA (SHOUTS)

--Get in, seal the hatch!

BACK TO: CONTROL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The crew’s tense. The sub lists, ALARMS resound.

PAVLO (SUBTITLES)

Do we slow? Or dive?

Dmiti darts his head. He SHOUTS.

DMITI (SUBTITLES)

Engineers to the reactor! Periscope depth in case we must vent.

BACK TO: MOON WELL – CONTINUOUS

The crane lowers the Cyclops. At the panel, Landa grips two WIRES to override. The well door opens and water floods in. He stretches to kick a lever. The Cyclops DROPS to the water.

INT. CYLOPS SUB – CONTINUOUS

Pilar, Arrison and Chandler huddle in the cramped sub.

ARRISON

Don’t disengage ‘til we have Landa!

Through the dome, they see him. He staunchly shakes his head.

LANDA’S VOICE (FILTERED)

If I let go, the well closes.

INT. MOON WELL – CONTINUOUS

Water’s rising to Landa’s knees. Holding the wires, he SHOUTS.

LANDA

Disengage! JUST GO!

He sees an EMERGENCY RELEASE six feet away. He gives a wistful smile at their faces through the dome. He then lunges forward to hit the release. The Cyclops sinks into the well. Gone.

INT. CONTROL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Stomach-churning. Panicked shouting in RUSSIAN.

PAVLO (SUBTITLES)

Flooding in the well!

The room is thrust to the side, forty degrees. Dmiti looks up.

DMITI (SUBTITLES)

A tsunami swell –we’re too shallow!

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN – DAY

Fifty-foot seas, SCREAMING WINDS and lightning. The Naumtsev’s sail and rudder appear, recovering from a SIXTY-FOOT WAVE. The sub breaches and arcs back under like a whale.

INT. USS WASP – CONTINUOUS

The crew rides the waves like a roller coaster.

DECK OFFICER (SHOUTS)

Captain: the target has surfaced. Repeat, the rogue has breached.

CUNARD (INTO RADIO)

Attention Missouri and ŌRYŪ: halt torpedoes. They may be surrendering.

EXT. CYCLOPS – UNDERWATER – DAY

The Cyclops tumbles in the churn like a barrel. It levels.

INT. CYCLOPS – CONTINUOUS

Clammy and scared, the three squeeze in tight.

ARRISON

What about Landa..?

Chandler holds her shoulder.

CHANDLER

Mom, he stayed. For us…

Pilar grips the joysticks.

PILAR

Storm’s going west. I’ll try south. Unsure how much oxygen…

INT. NAUMTSEV – CORRIDORS – CONTINUOUS

A garbled RECORDING repeats WARNINGS in unintelligible RUSSIAN. ALARMS flash as Landa rushes up a passage like hiking uphill.

He enters the TORPEDO ROOM. In a compartment he finds a CANVASS BUNDLE the size of a large duffle. He opens a TORPEDO HATCH. He looks up as a PIANO begins playing over the speakers.

INT. PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

Nikto sits at the piano, playing RACHMANINOFF’S “THE ISLE OF THE DEAD.” Fixtures ironically tumble around him as he plays, lost in his own world. He gazes up at a portrait of Kana.

BACK TO: TORPEDO ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The ballad plays incongruously with the RUSSIAN WARNINGS. Landa finds a switch with a water symbol. He types 00:10 on a timer.

He shoves the bundle into a tube. He then climbs into the tube. He pulls the hatch closed. The clock begins to COUNT DOWN.

INT. TORPEDO TUBE – CONTINUOUS

Water floods the claustrophobic tube. Landa’s BREATHING accelerates. He pushes fingers into his ears and squeezes his eyes closed as if praying. Water covers his head.

EXT. NAUMTSEV’S HULL – CONTINUOUS

A circular “MUZZLE” DOOR opens on the forward hull. Landa’s canvass bundle is pushed out -it instantly inflates and rapidly ascends, pulling Landa behind it, gripping a cord.

EXT. OCEAN SURFACE – CONTINUOUS

Landa’s RAFT emerges. The Naumtsev’s rudder continues forward, flailing within the immense swells.

INT. BRIDGE OF USS WASP – DAY

The Deck Officer shouts.

DECK OFFICER

An emergency beacon! Nineteen miles south -the vicinity of the rogue.

The captain blinks, stunned.

CUNARD

Ready the Seahawk for search-rescue.

EXT. USS WASP DECK – MOMENTS LATER

Despite the seas, the rotors of an SH-60 SEAHAWK HELICOPTER turn. It unsteadily takes off through the rain and sheer.

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN – DAY

The Naumtsev is heaved to the surface by mountainous waves. The unrelenting sea rotates the sub clockwise like a toy in a massive, yawning 100-yard WHIRLPOOL.

INT. NAUMTSEV PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

Nikto’s piano skids. Furniture is thrust to one wall with the centrifugal force. He looks up at the slanting chandelier, snapped out of his reverie, realizing what’s happening.

INT. LANDA’S RAFT – DAY

In the small enclosed raft, Landa pukes out of a flap. He squints up at the DRONE of a helicopter.

EXT. SH-60 SEAHAWK – CONTINUOUS

Fighting winds, the chopper hovers over the raft. Ahead is the sail and rudder of the NAUMTSEV swirling in the vast whirlpool.

SEAHAWK PILOT (V.O.)

A maelstrom… The rogue’s caught in a vortex. Lower the basket!

EXT. LANDA’S RAFT – SECONDS LATER

Racing against time, the raft’s being drawn to the tendrils of the whirlpool. Landa REACHES for the swinging RESCUE BASKET.

He finally grabs it as his raft’s sucked away from him. Swinging like a pendulum, the basket’s raised to the Seahawk.

INT. SEAHAWK’S CABIN – CONTINUOUS

Landa’s ushered in. The PILOTS gawk out at the Naumtsev. The enormous vessel swirls like a slow-churning fan blade.

The Naumtsev astoundingly turns vertical. Its bayonet nose points skyward like an enormous upright swordfish.

INT. NAUMTSEV’S PARLOR – CONTINUOUS

Nikto plummets to a bulkhead among shattered fixtures. He gasps and then pounds an intercom.

NIKTO

Flood the ballast tanks! Privet..? This is Nikto! Zatopit' tanki..!

BACK TO: SEAHAWK’S CABIN – CONTINUOUS

Landa and the pilots witness the Naumtsev swirl, and then SINK, straight down. Gone within the eye of the maelstrom…

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN – DAWN

The Cyclops bobs to the surface. Its hatch FLIPS OPEN. Chandler and Pilar peek out like prairie dogs. They look up, stunned.

THEIR POV: Thirty feet above, four SAILORS aim M4 RIFLES. The ship’s bow states, “HMAS Hobart” from Australia. The sailors relax, bewildered, lowering their weapons.

Pilar pauses, then beams a poignant smile…

EXT. TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA – DAY

SUPER: Tallahassee, Florida

Old-southern grounds, blossoming trees. A noble sign reads FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY.

At historic Westcott Hall, a large BANNER is hung: “Welcome Back to Life Dr. Arrison -and Chandler!”

At the Biological Sciences building a sign announces: “Hidden Wonders of the Seven Seas by Dr. Patrice Arrison.”

EXT. SMALL TOWN COFFEE SHOP – DAY

SUPER: Paducah, Kentucky

INT. SMALL COFFEE SHOP – DAY

Officer Engel arrives to join Mirta Salazar. A friendly hug and coffee. As they chat, Engel pauses to smile over her shoulder.

Mirta turns to see Pilar. Their eyes lock; they rush to each other and embrace, heartfelt. Pilar pulls back with a smile. She wipes an eye to introduce a meek, smiling Chandler.

Engel remains seated, beaming at the reunion. A job well done.

INT. FSU LECTURE HALL – DAY

Standing at a podium before a full house, Arrison concludes:

ARRISON

…we did not discover these things. They were already there. We just have to want to explore. Thank you.

The audience APPLAUDS. A STUDENT raises a hand.

STUDENT

Dr. Arrison, is there any tangible evidence you can share?

Her smile fades.

ARRISON

Regrettably no…

EXT. ARRISON’S SMALL HOME - DAY

Her response continues as she returns home. Going through her mail, she’s puzzled to find a PACKAGE from “Ned Landa.”

ARRISON (V.O.)

…Any evidence or proof was unfortunately lost with the sub.

She opens the package to find a DIVE GLOVE. Handwritten on a CARD is: “Looking forward to seeing you on Spring Break, Ned.”

The glove JINGLES. She shifts it to see ATLANTIS COINS slide out. Gold with the swirling symbol. Her eyes double in size…

STINGER:

INT. SMALL WITNESS ROOM – DAY

Landa sits with Officer Engel and Secretary-General Farragut.

FARRAGUT

You need to appreciate how you’re among very few witnesses.

ENGEL

Are you confident you saw the rogue, Typhoon-class submarine sink?

Landa rubs his face, exhausted with the examination.

LANDA

Again… The sub was taking on water. It was caught in the vortex and it sank. Straight down. Like a rock.

Engel nods to Farragut.

ENGEL

Sonar lost track at 1,400 feet.

LANDA

Is there a plan to recover it? At least the uranium? I can help.

Farragut closes a file with finality.

FARRAGUT

This matter is closed. The sea provides infinite reactor cooling. It would dilute any unsafe material.

ENGEL

It’s actually the best place for the vessel to remain. Deep in the center of the Pacific…

At those words, Landa’s eyes widen with an epiphany. He can hear Captain Nikto’s own voice:

NIKTO’S VOICE (V.O.)

…Deep in the center of the Pacific, they planned to create underwater sub stations…

In his mind’s eye, he can see a ghostly Naumtsev. Cruising beyond a collection of STRUCTURES on the seafloor…

NIKTO’S VOICE (CONT’D)

…Sunken cargo containers… Twenty-foot-diameter steel pipes. Connected and pressurized. Like a city…

FADE OUT

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/10/30/fbi-spy-planes-used-thermal-imaging-tech-in-flights-over-baltimore-after-freddie-gray-unrest/>

Future titles:

* Trying to square the circle

Catching smoke (Maybe Chasing smoke?”)

* Will o’-the-Wisp
* Fool’s Fire
* Ultima Thule (farthest place in the habitable world according to ancient geographers…)

About sonobuoys and a photo of a rack: <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/32584/russian-submarines-getting-electronic-warfare-buoys-that-jam-sonobuoys-dropped-by-enemy-aircraft>

THE END

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