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# CLIVE CUSSLER

AND JACK DU BRUL



# DARK WATCH

A NOVEL FROM THE OREGON FILES



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Sacred Stone

by

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# I

The aging Dassault Falcon executive jet drifted smoothly from the sky and touched down at the Sunan International Airfield, twelve miles north of Pyongyang. The MiG that had flown a tight escort from the moment the aircraft entered North Korea's airspace peeled off – twin cones of flame from her engines cutting the night. A truck was sent to lead the Falcon to its hardstand, and in its bed stood a machine gunner who never took his aim off the cockpit windows. The plane taxied to an open expanse of concrete at the far side of the airport complex, and even before its wheels were chocked a squad of fully armed troops had formed a perimeter around it – their AK-47s held ready for the slightest provocation. All this despite the fact that the passengers on board were invited dignitaries and important clients of the reclusive Communist country.

Several minutes after the engines spooled to silence, the passenger door cracked open. The pair of guards positioned closest shifted in anticipation. Then the door was lowered, showing the integrated steps that formed its internal side. A man wearing an olive uniform with a flat cap stood at the doorway. His features were harsh and uncompromising, with near-black eyes and a hooked nose. His skin was the color of weak tea. He stroked a finger along his dense black mustache and cast an unimpressed eye at the ring of soldiers before stepping lightly from the aircraft. He was followed by two more hatchet-faced men, one wearing traditional

Middle Eastern robes and a headscarf, the other in an expensive suit.

A trio of North Korean officers marched through the cordon and approached. The highest ranking officer gave a formal greeting and waited for another, a translator, to render his words into Arabic.

‘General Kim Don Il welcomes you to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Colonel Hourani, and hopes you had an enjoyable flight from Damascus.’

Colonel Hazni Hourani, the deputy head of Syria’s strategic rocket forces, bowed his head in acknowledgment. ‘Thank the general for meeting us personally at this late hour. Tell him our flight was indeed enjoyable since we flew over Afghanistan and were able to dump the contents of the aircraft’s septic system on the American occupiers.’

The Koreans shared a round of laughter once they heard the translation. Hourani continued, speaking to the translator directly, ‘I applaud the skill in which you use our language, but I think our dealings would go smoother if we spoke in English.’ Hourani switched to that language. ‘I understand, General Kim, that we both speak the language of our common enemy.’

The general blinked. ‘Yes, I find it gives me an advantage over the imperialists to know their ways better than they know mine,’ he replied. ‘I also speak some Japanese,’ he added, trying to impress.

‘And I some Hebrew,’ Hourani answered quickly, playing the game of one-upmanship.

‘It seems we are both dedicated to our countries and our cause.’

‘The destruction of America.’

‘The destruction of America,’ General Kim echoed,

sensing in the Arab's intense stare that the same fires burned in his belly, too.

'For too long they have pushed their influence into all corners of the globe. They are slowly smothering the planet by first sending in soldiers and then poisoning the people with their decadence.'

'They have troops on your borders as well as mine. But they fear attacking my country, for they know our retribution would be swift and final.'

'And soon,' Hourani said with an oily smile, 'they will fear *our* retribution as well. With your help, of course.'

Kim's smile matched that of the Syrian. These two men, from different sides of the globe, were kindred spirits, devout haters of all things Western. They were defined by this hate, shaped and molded through years of indoctrination. It didn't matter that one worshiped a bent view of a noble religion and the other a warped faith in the infallibility of the state, the results were the same. They saw beauty in savagery and found inspiration in chaos.

'We have arranged transportation for your delegation to the Munch'on Naval Base near Wosan on the eastern coast,' General Kim told Hourani. 'Will your pilots need accommodations in Pyongyang?'

'That is most generous, General.' Hourani stroked his mustache again. 'But the aircraft is needed back in Damascus as soon as possible. One of the pilots slept most of the way here so he can fly back to Syria. If you could arrange for refueling, I would like them to leave immediately.'

'As you wish.' General Kim spoke to a subaltern, who passed the order to the head of the security detail. As Hourani's two assistants finished unloading their luggage, a fuel tanker arrived and workers began to unreel the hose.

The car was a Chinese-made limousine with at least two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. The seats sagged deep enough to almost swallow the slightly built North Korean general, and the interior reeked of cigarettes and pickled cabbage. The Kumgang Mountain highway linking Pyongyang with Wosan was one of the best in the nation, yet it taxed the limo's suspension to the breaking point as the vehicle ground its way around tight switchbacks and along precarious gorges. There were few guardrails along the highway, and the car's headlamps were little more than dim flashlights. Without the moon's cool glow the drive would have been impossible.

'A couple of years ago,' Kim said as they ascended higher into the mountains that ran like a spine down the length of the country, 'we gave permission for a company in the south to arrange tourist trips into these mountains. Some consider them sacred. We demanded they build the roads and trails as well as the restaurants and the hotels. They even had to construct their own port facility to dock their cruise ships. For a while the company had many people making the trip, but they had to charge five hundred dollars per passenger to recoup their investment. The pool of nostalgia seekers turned out to be a small one, and business quickly dropped off – especially after we posted guards along the routes and harassed the tourists any way we could. They no longer come here, but they are still paying us the one billion dollars they guaranteed our government.'

This elicited a smile from Colonel Hourani, the only Syrian who spoke English.

'The best part,' Kim went on, 'is that their hotel is now an army barracks, and their port is the home to a Najin-class Corvette.'

This time Hourani laughed aloud.

Two hours after leaving the airfield, the limousine finally descended the Kumgang Mountains and crossed the coastal plane, swinging around to the north of Wosan, and arrived at the outer perimeter fence for the Munch'on Naval Base.

Guards saluted the limo through the gate, and the car crawled across the facility, passing several impressive maintenance buildings and over a half mile of wharf space. Four sleek gray patrol craft were tied to the quay, and a single destroyer lay at anchor in the mile-square inner harbor, white smoke from its stack coiling into the night. The driver swung around a rail-mounted derrick and parked alongside a four-hundred-foot cargo ship at the end of the wharf.

'The *Asia Star*,' General Kim announced.

Colonel Hourani checked his watch. It was one in the morning. 'And when do we sail?'

'The tides are mild here in Yonghung-man Bay so you can leave anytime. The ship is loaded, fueled, and provisioned.'

Hourani turned to one of his men and asked in Arabic, 'What do you think?' He listened to the long reply, nodding several times, then turned back to the general, who sat opposite him in the limo. 'Assad Muhammad is our technical expert on the Nodong-1 missile. He would like to take a look at them before we depart.'

Kim's expression didn't change, but it was clear he didn't like the idea of a delay. 'Surely you can accomplish your inspection at sea. I assure you that all ten missiles your country has purchased are aboard.'

'I'm afraid Assad does not do well on boats. He would prefer to inspect the missiles now, because he will likely spend the voyage in his cabin.'

‘Odd that you would have such a man accompany the rockets back to Syria,’ Kim said coolly.

Hourani’s eyes tightened. His country was paying nearly a hundred fifty million sorely needed dollars for the medium-range strategic missiles. Kim had no right to question him. ‘He is here because he knows the rockets. He worked with the Iranians when they purchased their Nodongs from you. That he has trouble on the sea is not your concern. He will inspect all ten, and we will sail at first light.’

General Kim was under orders to stay with the Syrians until the ship departed. He’d told his wife he wouldn’t return to Pyongyang until morning, but by remaining with the Middle Easterners, he would forfeit several hours with his latest mistress. He sighed at the sacrifices he made for the state. ‘Very well, Colonel. I will have the harbor master informed that the *Asia Star* won’t leave until first light. Why don’t we get on board? I will show you to your cabins so you can stow your luggage, then Mr Muhammad can inspect your new toys.’

The driver opened the rear door, and as Kim slid over to exit, Colonel Hourani placed a hand on his uniformed sleeve. Their eyes met. ‘Thank you, General.’

Kim’s smile was genuine. Despite their cultural differences and the inherent suspicion and secrecy surrounding this mission, he felt he really did like the colonel. ‘It is no problem.’

The three Syrians each had their own cabins, but only a minute after being shown their accommodations, they met in the one occupied by Colonel Hourani. Assad Muhammad sat on the bunk with a briefcase beside him while Hourani placed himself at the desk below the room’s single porthole. The oldest of the trio, Professor Walid Khalidi, leaned

against a bulkhead, his arms crossed over his chest. Hourani then did a very strange thing. He touched the corner of his eye and shook his head, then pointed at his ear and nodded in the affirmative. He indicated the ceiling-mounted light fixture in the center of the cabin and the cheap brass-plated lamp attached to the desk.

‘How long do you think the inspection should take, Assad?’ he then asked.

Assad Mohammed had taken a miniature tape recorder from his suit jacket and hit Play. A digitally altered voice, actually that of Hourani himself, since he was the only member of the team who spoke Arabic, replied, ‘I think no more than a few hours. The most time-consuming part is simply removing inspection covers. Testing the circuits is simple.’

By this time Hourani had also drawn a recorder from an inside jacket pocket and set it on the desk. As soon as Assad finished speaking, he, too, hit the Play button, and the conversation continued as the men remained silent. At a predetermined moment in the script, Walid Khalidi added his own recorder to the ruse. Once the three recorders playing altered versions of Hourani’s voice were working, the trio of ‘Syrians’ moved silently to the far corner of the cabin.

‘Only two bugs,’ Max Hanley mused quietly. ‘The Koreans really do trust their Syrian customers.’

Juan Cabrillo, the chairman of the Corporation and the captain of the merchant ship *Oregon*, tore the fake mustache from his upper lip. The skin beneath was lighter than the layers of self-tanning cream he’d used to darken his complexion. ‘Remind me to tell Kevin in the Magic Shop that his appliance glue is worthless.’ He had a bottle of the

suspect glue and reapplied a line to the back of the mustache.

‘You looked like Snidely Whiplash trying to keep that thing in place.’ This from Hali Kasim, the third-generation Lebanese-American who’d been newly promoted as the *Oregon*’s Security and Surveillance director. He was the only member of her crew who didn’t need makeup and latex inserts to pass as Middle Eastern. The only problem was he didn’t speak enough Arabic to order a meal in a restaurant.

‘Just be thankful the Koreans left their translator at the airport,’ Cabrillo said mildly. ‘You mangled the little soliloquy you’d memorized and delivered during the car ride. Your proposed examination of the missiles sounded more proctologic than scientific.’

‘Sorry, boss,’ Kasim said, ‘I never had an ear for languages, and no matter how much I practice, it still sounds like gobbledygook to me.’

‘To any Arabic speakers, too,’ Juan Cabrillo teased.

‘How are we on time?’ Max Hanley asked. Hanley was the Corporation’s president and was in charge of all their ship’s operations, especially her gleaming magnetohydrodynamic engines. While Cabrillo negotiated the contracts the Corporation took on and was responsible for a great deal of their planning, it fell on Max’s capable shoulders to make sure the *Oregon* and her crew were up to the task. While the crew of the *Oregon* were technically mercenaries, they maintained a corporate structure for their outfit. Apart from his duties as the ship’s chief engineer, Hanley handled day-to-day administration and acted as the company’s human resources director.

Under his robes and head scarf, Hanley was a little taller than average, with a slight paunch. His eyes were an alert

brown, and what little hair remained atop his reddened skull was auburn. He had been with Juan since the day the Corporation was founded, and Cabrillo believed that without his number two, he would have gone out of business years ago.

‘We have to assume Tiny Gunderson got the Dassault airborne as soon as he could. He’s probably in Seoul by now,’ Chairman Cabrillo said. ‘Eddie Seng has had two weeks to get into position, so if he’s not alongside this scow in the submersible now, he never will be. He won’t surface until we hit the water, and by then it’ll be too late to abort. Since the Koreans didn’t mention capturing a minisub in the harbor, we can assume he’s ready.’

‘So once we plant the device?’

‘We have fifteen minutes to rendezvous with Eddie and get clear.’

‘This is gonna hurt,’ Hali remarked grimly.

Cabrillo’s eyes hardened. ‘Them more than us.’

This contract, like many the Corporation accepted, had come through back channels from the United States government. While the Corporation was a for-profit enterprise, the men and women who served on the *Oregon* were for the most part ex-U.S. military and tended to take jobs that benefited the United States and her allies, or at the very least, didn’t harm American interests.

With no end in sight in the war on terror, there was a never-ending string of contracts for a team like the one Cabrillo had assembled – black ops specialists without the constraint of the Geneva Convention or congressional oversight. That wasn’t to say the crew were a bunch of cutthroat pirates who took no prisoners. They were deeply conscientious about what they did but understood that

the lines of conflict had blurred in the twenty-first century.

This mission was a perfect example.

North Korea had every right to sell ten single-stage tactical missiles to Syria, and the United States would have begrudgingly let the sale proceed. However, intelligence intercepts had determined the real Colonel Hazni Hourani planned on diverting the *Asia Star* so that two of the Nodongs and a pair of mobile launchers could be off-loaded in Somalia and given to Al-Qaeda, who would launch them hours later at targets in Saudi Arabia, notably the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, in a twisted plot to oust the Saudi royal family. It also appeared, but couldn't be verified, that Hourani was acting with the tacit approval of the Syrian government.

The United States could send a warship to intercept the *Asia Star* in Somalia; however, the vessel's captain would only have to claim that they were diverted for repairs, and the ten missiles would end up in Damascus. The better alternative was to sink the *Star* en route, but if the truth came out, there would be an international outcry and swift retaliation from terrorist cells controlled by Damascus. It was Langston Overholt IV, a high-ranking official in the CIA, who came up with the best alternative: using the Corporation.

Cabrillo had been given just four weeks to plan how to get rid of the problem as quietly and with as little exposure as possible. Cabrillo had intuitively known that the best way to prevent the missiles from reaching their customers, be they legitimate or otherwise, was to stop them from ever leaving North Korea.

Once the *Oregon* was in position off Yonghung-man Bay, Cabrillo, Hanley, and Hali Kasim headed to Bagram

Airbase outside of Kabul, Afghanistan, in a Dassault Falcon identical to the one used by Colonel Hourani.

CIA assets on the ground in Damascus confirmed the flight time for Hourani's trip to Pyongyang, and a dedicated AWACS had tracked the corporate jet as it flew halfway around the world. Once it entered Afghan airspace, an F-22 Raptor stealth fighter that had been flown expressly to the theater for the mission had taken off from Bagram. The Corporation's own Falcon had left a moment later, heading south, away from the Syrians. While the U.S. controlled all of the radar facilities capable of monitoring what was about to happen, it was imperative that there be no evidence of the switch.

In one of the few zones where radar coverage was nonexistent, Tiny Gunderson, the Corporation's chief pilot, began to turn back north. Only this time the Dassault Falcon wasn't alone. She'd been joined by a B-2 stealth bomber from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri. Because the bomber was larger than the Falcon, yet undetectable by radar, Tiny kept his aircraft fifty feet above the flying wing. No ground-based radar on earth could track a B-2, and by shielding the Falcon, the Corporation's jet remained hidden as they began to close on Hourani's plane.

At forty thousand feet, the Syrian Falcon jet was at her maximum ceiling, while the Raptor fast approaching her could have made the intercept four miles farther into the sky. The timing was critical. When the B-2 was a mere half mile behind Hourani's aircraft, the Raptor opened her weapons bay and unleashed a pair of AIM-120C AMRAAM missiles.

Had the Syrian jet carried threat radar, the missiles would have appeared out of nowhere. As it was, the older

French-built aircraft didn't have such a system, so the two missiles impacted the Garrett TFE-731 turbofans without the slightest warning. Even as the Dassault exploded in midair, the pilot of the B-2 dove away from Tiny Gunderson's Falcon. At that altitude anyone on the ground who saw the brief fireball would have assumed it was a shooting star. And anyone watching a radar screen would have noticed the Syrian aircraft suddenly vanish for an instant, then reappear a half mile to the west before continuing on normally. They might have guessed their system had glitched, if they gave the incident any thought at all.

Now that Cabrillo, Hanley, and Kasim were safely aboard the *Asia Star*, all that remained was to plant the bomb, avoid detection getting off the ship, rendezvous with Eddie Seng in the minisub, slip out of the best-protected harbor in North Korea, and reach the *Oregon* before anyone realized the *Star* had been sabotaged.

Not a typical day for members of the Corporation. But not all that atypical either.

A scream woke Victoria Ballinger.

It also saved her life.

Tory was the only female aboard the Royal Geographic Society's research ship *Avalon*, after her cabin mate was transported to a hospital in Japan for acute appendicitis a week ago. Having a cabin to herself also contributed to her salvation.

The ship had been at sea for a month, part of a coordinated international effort to fully map the currents of the Sea of Japan, an area little understood because Japan and Korea fiercely protected their fishing rights and felt any cooperation could jeopardize them.

Unlike her roommate, who'd brought suitcases loaded with clothes and personal items, Tory lived a spartan existence aboard ship. Other than her bedding and a week's worth of jeans and rugby shirts, her cabin was empty.

The scream came from the passageway outside her door, a male cry of agony that snapped her awake. Even as her vision cleared of sleep, she heard muted gunfire. Her senses sharpened, and she heard more automatic weapons fire, more shouts, and more screams.

Everyone on the *Avalon* had been warned that a band of modern-day pirates were preying on ships in the Sea of Japan. They'd attacked four vessels in the past two months, scuttling the merchantmen and leaving any crewmen alive to make their own escape on lifeboats. To date only 15 out of

172 had survived the attacks. Just yesterday they were told that a container ship had simply vanished without a trace. Because of the pirate threat, an arms locker had been placed on the bridge, but the pair of shotguns and the single pistol were no match for the assault rifles cutting through the group of scientists and professional mariners.

The fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, and Tory quickly got to her feet. She wasted two precious seconds making a choice she didn't have. There was no place for her to go. The pirates were somewhere in the corridor outside her cabin, shooting into the rooms, from the sound of it. She'd be gunned down the moment she opened her door. She could not flee, and there was nothing in her room to use as a weapon.

The light of a full moon shining through the porthole fell on the stripped bed opposite Tory's and gave her inspiration. She whipped the blankets and sheets from her bed and bundled them under the frame. Then she pulled her clothes from her locker, making sure to leave its door open, just like her absent roommate's. She didn't think she had the time to empty the bathroom of toiletries. She crawled under the bed, pressing into the deepest corner, and packed her clothes around her body.

She fought to hold her breathing steady as the first wave of panic nibbled at the edge of her mind. Tears leaked from the corners of her blue eyes. She stifled a sob just as her cabin door was thrown open. She saw a flashlight beam slice the room, tracking first across Judy's empty mattress before sweeping her own, pausing for a second on the pair of barren lockers.

The pirate's feet became visible. He wore black combat boots, and she could make out that the cuffs of his black

trousers had been stuffed into them. The pirate crossed to the tiny bathroom, sweeping it with his flashlight. She heard the shower curtain ripple as he checked behind it. He either didn't see Tory's soap, shampoo, and conditioner or didn't think they were important. He slammed the cabin door on his way out, apparently satisfied it was vacant.

Tory remained motionless as the sounds of the struggle faded down the hallway. There were only thirty people on the ship. Most of them were asleep in their cabins because at night the engine room ran on automatic, and only two stood watch on the bridge. Because her cabin was one of the last on the corridor, she was certain that the pirates were about finished with the crew.

The crew. Her friends.

If she wanted to get out of this alive, she couldn't let that thought seep any deeper into her brain. How long would they take to loot the vessel? There was little of value to pirates. All of their expensive equipment, their scientific gear, was too large to steal. The underwater probes were worthless to anyone outside the scientific community. There were a few televisions and some computers, but it hardly seemed worth the effort to take them.

Still, Tory figured the pirates would need a half hour to scavenge the 130-foot *Avalon* before opening the sea cocks and sending her to the bottom. She counted out the minutes by the luminous dots on the men's Rolex she wore, allowing herself to fall into the tiny galaxy of phosphorescent points in order to keep from panicking.

Only fifteen minutes passed before she felt the ship's motion change. The night was calm, and the *Avalon* rolled with the gentle swells, a normally comforting motion that lulled her to sleep each night. Tory began to sense the ship's

sway had changed, slowed – as though she'd become heavier.

The pirates had already opened the sea cocks. They were already sinking the research vessel. She tried to see the logic in their action, but it didn't make sense. They couldn't possibly have ransacked the ship so quickly. They were scuttling the *Avalon* without even robbing her!

She couldn't wait. Tory slithered out from under her bed and bolted for the porthole. On the horizon she could see what at first appeared to be a low island, but she realized it was a huge ship of some kind. There was another smaller vessel near it. It looked as though the two were going to collide, but it had to be a trick of the moonlight. In the foreground she made out the stern and wake of a large inflatable craft. The sound of its outboard engines faded as it raced from the stricken oceanography ship. She imagined the pirates aboard it and felt her anger flare.

Tory whirled away from the porthole and bolted from her cabin. There were no bodies in the passageway, but the deck was littered with spent shell casings, and the air had a raw, chemical stench. She tried not to look at the blood spattered against the long wall. From her orientation when first coming aboard, Tory knew there were survival suits in the Zodiac life raft near the *Avalon's* bow, so she didn't care that she wore only a long T-shirt. Her bare feet slapped against the metal decking as she ran with one arm clamped over her chest to keep her unsupported breasts from bouncing.

She climbed a set of stairs to the main deck. At the end of another corridor was the door leading to the outside. Between her and the exterior hatch was a body. Tory whimpered as she approached. The man lay facedown, a shiny slick of blood dampening his dark shirt and drizzling

onto the deck. She recognized his shape. It was the second engineer, a high-spirited Geordie, whose flirtations she had begun to encourage. She couldn't bring herself to touch him. The volume of blood told her everything she needed to know. She kept herself pressed to the cold corridor wall as she stepped past the corpse. When she reached the end of the hallway, she looked out the hatch's small window, straining to see if anyone remained on the dim foredeck. She saw nothing and cautiously turned the handle. It wouldn't budge. She tightened her grip and tried again, pressing all her weight against the jammed mechanism, but it remained frozen.

Tory kept calm. She told herself that there were four other ways out of the superstructure and that she could always smash the glass in the bridge if the wing doors were also sealed. She first examined the other doors on the main deck before climbing another set of steps to the bridge. She knew she would get out of this, but as she approached the door leading to the command deck, a deep dread welled up. Although they'd killed the entire crew, the pirates had taken the time to seal the ship like a coffin. They wouldn't have left such an obvious means of escape. Her long fingers trembled when she touched the knob. It turned.

Tory pushed against the solid steel door, but it wouldn't open. It didn't even creak. There were no large windows she could crawl through, no porthole big enough for her to wiggle out. She was trapped, and that realization destroyed any composure she'd been able to maintain. She threw her body at the door, slamming her shoulder into it again and again until her arm was bruised down to her elbow. She screamed until her throat was raw, then fell back against the door and allowed herself to slide to the deck. She

sobbed into her hands, her dark hair falling around her face.

The *Avalon* shifted suddenly, and the lights flickered. The water pouring into her lower compartments had found someplace new to flood. The shudder sent a jolt through Tory. She wasn't dead yet, and if she could stop the ship from sinking, she'd have the time to figure a way out. She'd seen a cutting torch in one of the workshops. If she could find it she would burn her way out.

Now as energized as she was in those first desperate seconds when she heard the scream – she was certain now it had been Dr Halverson, a genteel oceanographer nearing seventy – Tory launched herself from the floor and ran back the way she'd come. She passed through the crew's accommodation block and reached a set of stairs that descended into the engineering spaces. She felt the first cold rush of air as she reached the bottom landing. The sound of flooding was like the roar of a waterfall.

She stood in a small antechamber with a single watertight door leading into the engine room. She put her hand to the metal. It was still warm from the big diesels. But when she placed her hand low down, next to the bottom jamb, the steel was icy to the touch. She'd never been to the engine room and didn't know its layout. Still, she had to try.

'Here we go.' Her voice quavered as she undogged the hatch.

Water gushed across her bare feet, and in seconds she was standing knee-deep, with the level rising perceptibly. An open set of steps led down to the floor of the well-lit engine room. Beyond the tangle of pipes, ducts, and conduits, Tory could see that the giant motors, each the size of a minivan, were already half-submerged. Water slogged against a generator housing.

She stepped over the coaming and started down. She gasped when the water reached her chest. It was probably sixty-five degrees, but she began to shiver. At the bottom step she had to get on her toes to keep her head above the flood. Half walking, half swimming, she struck out across the cavernous space with a vague plan to find how the water was entering the ship.

As the *Avalon* continued to sink on a more or less even keel, she still pitched with the waves. That slight motion made it impossible for Tory to feel currents in the water and pinpoint where they were strongest, where she guessed open pipes led to the sea. The water in the flooded engine room seethed like a boiling cauldron. In just a few minutes of frantic searching, her toes lost their tenuous grip with the deck plating. Tory swam fruitlessly for a minute more. There was nothing she could do. Even if she found the sea cocks, she had no idea how they operated.

The lights flickered again, and when they came back on, they were only half as bright. It was the signal for her to leave. She'd never find her way out of the labyrinth-like space in the dark. She cut smooth strokes through the water and swam directly into the antechamber. Getting to her feet, she found the water had risen to the level of her waist. It took all her strength to close the door. She prayed that once it was sealed the ship might remain buoyant enough to stay afloat until another ship passed by.

Cold and shivering, Tory climbed back to the second deck and padded to her cabin. She towed off in the bathroom, bound her shoulder-length hair in a ponytail, and threw on her warmest clothes. The air was markedly chilly. She hadn't noticed, but somewhere in the engine room she'd cut the corner of her mouth. She wiped the watery trickle of blood

from her lip. Under normal circumstances, the sharp planes and angles of her face were arresting, especially with her startlingly blue eyes. Looking at her reflection in the mirror above the sink, what Tory saw was the haunted look of someone on the way to the gallows.

She turned away quickly and went to the porthole. She could no longer see the moon or even its milky glow, nor could she see the pirates' boat or the big ships she'd glimpsed on the horizon. The night had gone completely black, yet she would not turn away from her only window to the outside.

Maybe if she got some grease or cooking fat she could lube her body and squeeze through the porthole. She thought the windows in the mess hall upstairs were a little bigger. It was worth a shot. She was about to turn away when something dark flashed by outside. She peered closer, her eyes watering with the strain.

She thought she saw it again, maybe ten feet from the ship. A bird? It moved like one, but she wasn't sure. And then it loomed in front of her, taking up the entire porthole. Tory stumbled back with a scream. Outside her cabin, a large gray fish stared at her with its mouth agape, water pumping through its gills. The giant sea perch watched her with its yellow eyes for a moment longer, attracted to the light in the cabin, before finning away into the depths.

What Tory Ballinger couldn't see from her cabin low in the hull was that the deck of the research ship *Avalon* was already awash. Waves lapped at the stern and bow cargo hatches. In a few minutes the water would climb the bridge, swamping the ship so her stern-mounted crane would stick from the sea like a spindly arm clawing for rescue. A few

minutes after that, the ocean would close around the top of her single funnel, and the *Avalon* would begin her plunge toward the sea floor nearly two miles down.

When a pair of North Korean agents from the brutal State Safety & Security Agency came to fetch their Syrian clients, two were quietly reading their Korans while the third studied spec sheets for the Nodong missile. A guard made a gesture for the trio to follow that also showed off a pistol in a shoulder holster. Cabrillo and Hali Kasim tucked away their Korans while Hanley slipped the schematics back into his bulky briefcase and thumbed the locks.

They threaded their way through the *Asia Star*, a Panamanian-registered bulk carrier converted to the container trade. While worn, the interior spaces were well maintained, and the bulkheads were glossy with new paint. The ship also appeared deserted except for the pair of spies on escort duty.

At a hatchway below the main deck, one of the guards undogged a hatch. Beyond loomed a darkened steel cavern that smelled faintly of bilgewater and old metal. The man snapped on banks of overhead lights, and the fluorescent glow revealed the ten Nodong missiles settled into special cradles, their outlines blurred by thick plastic sheeting. Each missile was sixty-two feet in length and four feet in diameter and weighed fifteen tons when loaded with liquid fuel. Based on the venerable Russian Scud-D, the Nodong could carry a one-ton payload nearly six hundred miles.

In the dank hold of the freighter, the shrouded rockets didn't lose any of their aura of menace or death. And

knowing what was planned for two of these missiles deepened the resolve of the Corporation members.

The three men descended a set of metal stairs to the cargo hold's floor. Max Hanley, in the guise of the missile expert, stepped boldly to the first rocket. He barked at the government minders holding back at the hatchway and indicated that he wanted the plastic removed from the Nodongs.

General Kim arrived just as Max had removed an access panel from the first missile and was bent over the opening with a circuit tester. 'I see you couldn't wait to inspect your newest weapons.'

'They are formidable,' Cabrillo replied for lack of anything else to say.

'Our experts have greatly improved on the old Soviet design, and the warheads are much more powerful.'

'Which two are to be offloaded in Somalia?'

The North Korean repeated the question to one of the guards, who pointed out a pair of the rockets near the back of the hold. 'Those two under the red plastic. Because of the primitive facilities available in Mogadishu, the warheads have already been mounted. Fuel for those two can be loaded from the tanks in the forward hold in order to meet the tight schedule for firing, provided you don't add the corrosive mixture too soon. Three days from Somalia is soon enough.'

'I think one day is safer,' Juan countered. He knew that Kim's statement had been a test of his knowledge of the missiles. Loading the liquid fuel three days before launch would cause it to dissolve the rocket's thin aluminum tanks and likely blow the *Asia Star* out of the water.

'Where is my head? Forgive me. Any more than one day

would be disastrous.’ There was little warmth in Kim’s apology.

Silently, Cabrillo hoped the general would remain on board when the missiles blew. Max Hanley called him over to see something within the Nodong’s electronic brain. Hali Kasim stood at his other shoulder and for fifteen minutes the three men mutely stared into the tangle of wires and circuits. As they’d intended, they could hear Kim impatiently shifting his weight from foot to foot and muttering to himself. ‘Is there something the matter?’ he finally asked.

‘No, all seems in order,’ Cabrillo answered without turning.

They played the game again for another fifteen minutes. Occasionally Max would consult a detail from the plans he carried, but other than that, the men remained as statues.

‘Is this really necessary, Colonel Hourani?’ Kim asked with ill-disguised impatience.

Cabrillo ran a finger along his false mustache to make sure it was in place before turning. ‘I am sorry, General. Mr Muhammad and Professor Khalidi are very thorough, although I believe once they satisfy themselves that the first missile is in working order, they will be quicker with the others.’

Kim shot a look at his watch. ‘I can take this opportunity to attend to some paperwork in the captain’s cabin. Why don’t you find me when you have completed your inspection. These men will remain with you, should you need anything.’

Juan suppressed a grin. ‘As you wish, General Kim.’

The three members of the Corporation moved on to the second missile ten minutes later. The two guards had sat themselves on the stairs overlooking the hold. One smoked

a continuous chain of cigarettes while the other watched the Arabs without seeming to blink. Both kept their suit jackets opened enough to reach their weapons. Kim might have grown bored with the operation, but the pair of secret policemen maintained their vigilance.

There was no set time to rendezvous with Eddie Seng. If everything had gone according to plan, he would have the minisub positioned a short way from the *Star's* stern, close enough for the craft's sophisticated passive sonar to detect the sound of the three men hitting the water. The time constraint Juan felt came from his desire to get the *Oregon* as far into international waters as he could before first light.

Dawn was three hours away. He calculated the time it would take to board the minisub, make their escape from Yonghung-man Bay, and link up with the *Oregon*. From that point on, it would depend on the ship's magnetohydrodynamic engines, in which Cabrillo placed his full trust. The technology of using free electrons extracted from seawater to power the vessel was still in its experimental stages, but in the two years since taking delivery, the complex system of cryo-cooled magnets that generated power to feed pumps for her four pulse aqua jets had never let him down.

It was time. Cabrillo felt a slight twinge in his stomach, not fear exactly but a tension brought on by his old nemesis, Murphy's Law. It was almost a religion to him. He was a superb tactician and strategist, as well as a master planner, but he also recognized the vagaries of chance, an obstacle that can never be overcome entirely. The operation had gone smoothly to this point, which only increased the possibility of something fouling now.

He had no doubt they could maintain their ruse until the

ship reached Somalia, where they could easily escape. But that would mean failure, another of Cabrillo's old adversaries, one he hated even more than Mr Murphy's famous precept. But he knew that once they committed, there would be no turning back. If the dice fell the wrong way, he and Max and Hali would die. Eddie Seng might stand a chance to escape, but it wasn't likely. However, if Lady Luck held, in a couple of hours ten million dollars would appear in the Corporation's Cayman Island account courtesy of Uncle Sam's black budget.

Cabrillo tapped his watch, their prearranged signal, and suddenly the anxiety vanished. Juan went on automatic, relying on skills first learned in the ROTC, then honed at the CIA's training facility in rural Virginia before being perfected by fifteen years in the field.

Hali shifted his position slightly, blocking the guards' view of Hanley as Max snapped a hidden set of locks in his case. Juan turned from the missile, caught the eye of the guard with the nicotine addiction, and made a universal gesture of wanting to borrow one of his cigarettes. He started across the hold as the North Korean pulled a nearly depleted pack from his coat.

Out of view of the distracted guards, Max Hanley eased the bomb from the false bottom of his valise. The explosive device was smaller than a compact disc case, a marvel of miniaturization that packed the detonative force of a claymore mine.

Five feet from the staircase, the smoker got to his feet and descended to the deck level. Juan had banked on the man remaining seated next to his partner. Damn Murphy. He accepted the proffered cigarette and held it for the guard to light with his prized Zippo.

Juan took a measured drag, held the smoke in his mouth for a second, then exploded in a wrenching cough, as if the tobacco was harsher than he'd anticipated. The guard chuckled at Cabrillo's discomfort and flicked his attention to his partner to make a comment.

He never saw that Cabrillo's coughing fit had allowed him to torque his body like a coiled spring so when Juan threw the punch, it contained every ounce of strength in his six-foot-one-inch frame. The blow landed on the point of the guard's jaw and corkscrewed him to the deck as though he'd been shot. Juan couldn't believe the reflexes of the second guard. He'd anticipated at least two seconds for him to even realize what was happening.

Instead, the man was already up at the top of the short flight of steps and was just reaching into his shoulder holster when Cabrillo dove for him. Juan jumped for the stairs, reaching for the man's ankles. The automatic's barrel had just cleared the holster when Cabrillo's hands closed around the Korean's shins. Cabrillo fell heavily onto the steel steps, gashing his chin on a sharp edge, but his momentum pulled the North Korean off balance, sending him tumbling backward. The gun clattered onto the upper landing.

Cabrillo scrambled to his feet, blood running from his chin, adrenaline surging in his veins. Even if the Korean couldn't aim the pistol, the sound of a single shot would alert Kim and call an army of security guards to the vessel. Behind the grappling men, Max Hanley had raced to the missile destined to blast the holy city of Mecca. He had to set the bomb close enough to the warhead to cause a sympathetic detonation. Hali Kasim pulled a stiletto hidden in the binding of his Koran and ran for the stairs, knowing the

fight would be over before reaching his boss, but making the effort nevertheless.

Juan tried to smash his elbow into the Korean's groin as he clawed his way up the stairs. The blow missed as the lithe guard twisted, and he felt his right arm go numb from the elbow down as it smashed into the deck plate. He cursed and managed to grab the man's right wrist just before his fingers curled around the gun. Even with his superior size and strength, Cabrillo was in an awkward position, and he felt the Korean draw closer to the weapon.

Hali was ten feet from the steps when the guard made a lunge for the pistol. Juan allowed himself to be thrown with the man's desperate grab, and his useless right arm arced like a pendulum into the side of the Korean's head, stunning him for a moment. The guard shook off the blow and kicked at Juan's right leg, slamming it against a railing. What sounded like the crack of broken bone echoed over the labored breathing of the combatants. The guard was sure the Syrian was finished and turned his attention back to getting the weapon. But Cabrillo wasn't even fazed. As the Korean grabbed the barrel of his pistol, Juan grasped his wrist and smashed it repeatedly against the deck. On the third blow the automatic flew from his grip and bounced down the steps. Hali scooped it up, mounted the stairs three at a time, and clipped the guard on the side of the head with the butt. The Korean's eyes fluttered, and he was out.

'You okay, boss?' Kasim asked, helping Cabrillo to his feet.

Max bounded up the stairs with the speed of a man half his age. 'Ask him later. Bomb's ticking, and we have fifteen minutes.'

Familiar with all manner of ships, the three men ran

unerringly to the main deck where they paused for just a moment to make sure there were no guards patrolling the area. They could see the sleek destroyer in the middle of the bay, her turret-mounted 100 mm guns trained on the outer harbor. There was no one on deck, so the three rushed to the railing and unceremoniously tossed themselves overboard.

The water was cold and tasted like kerosene soup. Max spat a mouthful as he slid his robe over his head. Beneath it he wore a pair of swim trunks and a tight thermal top. Juan struggled out of his boots but left his uniform on. He'd grown up in the surf of Southern California and was as comfortable in the water as on dry land. Hali, the youngest of the assault team, shed his jacket and kicked off his brogans, forcing them under the black surface. They swam silently to the ship's fantail and ducked under her curved hull so as not to be spotted from above.

There was a balance between speed and stealth. Eddie could have kept the thirty-two-foot *Discovery 1000* submerged, and the men could have cycled through the airlock, a time-consuming process even in the best circumstance. Juan had decided that Eddie should broach the sub so the men could climb through her topside hatch. They would be visible for no more than thirty seconds, and surfacing near the acoustical clutter of waves striking the *Asia Star's* idle prop and rudder would mask any sounds from Korean detection gear.

The wait was no more than a minute before bubbles erupted directly astern of the *Asia Star*. They were in motion even before the minisub's flat upperworks broke through the waves. Hali reached the sub first and swung himself aboard. He was working the hatch cover as water sluiced off

the sub's matte-black hull. The seal broke with an audible hiss, and he threw himself down into the dark confines of the sub, followed closely by Max and Juan. Cabrillo and Max had the hatch resealed an instant later, working by feel more than sight, since the only light in the *Discovery 1000* came from the faint glow of electronics in the forward cockpit.

Juan hit a switch midway up a bulkhead, and a pair of red blackout lights snapped on. The *Discovery* wasn't designed to dive much below a hundred feet and could operate for no more than twenty-four hours without recharging and replacing the CO<sub>2</sub> filters. For this mission her seating for eight had been removed to make room for racks of batteries, bulky industrial boxes joined with a snaking nest of wiring conduits. Crates of filters were crammed in the other available spaces as well as provisions for Eddie Seng. A chemical toilet sat amid a clutter of empty food cartons. The air was heavy with humidity and carried a locker room funk.

Eddie had been alone on the sub since launching off the *Oregon* fifteen days earlier. With the harbor ringed with underwater listening stations and routinely swept with active sonar, it had taken that long for Seng to drift into the heavily defended port. He had grounded the sub during the slight ebb tide and allowed her to drift when the tidal surge washed into the harbor, only chancing to run the electric motors under the cover of an inbound ship or patrol boat. There was no other way to get the sub into the naval base without being detected.

While there were other sub drivers among the *Oregon* crew, as director of Shore Operations, Eddie wouldn't let anyone else take the risk. Seng was another veteran of the CIA, although Juan hadn't known him when they were in the Agency. He'd spent most of his career working

the Middle East, while Eddie had been attached to the American embassy in Beijing running several successful spy networks. Budget and policy shifts following September 11 had seen him transferred to a stateside desk. Still hungry for what he called ‘the teeth of the trade,’ Seng had joined the Corporation and quickly established himself as an indispensable member.

Cabrillo crawled over batteries and empty crates and slid into the copilot’s seat to Eddie’s right. Eddie’s black hair was lank from going so long without washing, and stubble marred his otherwise sharp features. The emotional and physical strain of the past two weeks had dimmed his normally bright eyes.

‘Hiya, boss.’ Seng grinned. Nothing could diminish his easygoing charm. ‘Welcome aboard.’

‘Thanks,’ Juan said, noting that the sub had already descended to thirty feet. ‘The clock’s ticking, so set a course out of the harbor and punch it. We’ve got eleven minutes.’

The Discovery’s motors ramped up, and the single prop bit into the water. There was nothing they could do about the noise. They had to get as far from the *Asia Star* as possible, because water does not compress, making the coming shock wave doubly brutal.

Cabrillo kept his eyes on the sub’s sonar, and only a minute after they began pulling away from the doomed freighter there was contact. ‘Mr Murphy’s rearing his ugly head.’

‘What do you have?’ Hanley stood just behind Juan and leaned over his shoulder.

The computer analyzed the acoustical signal, and Cabrillo read the grim facts. ‘Sinpo-class patrol boat. Crew of twelve. Armed with a pair of 37 mm autocannons and tilt racks for

depth charges. Top speed is forty knots, and our contact is already churning twenty and headed straight for us.'

Eddie turned to Juan. 'It's routine. They've been doing this ever since I entered the harbor. Every couple of hours a single patrol boat races along the dock. I think they're searching for sailors trying to jump ship.'

'If he maintains his course, he's going to pass right over us.'

'Does that class of boats carry sonar?' Max asked.

Juan checked the computer again. 'Doesn't say.'

'What do you want me to do?' Eddie's voice remained calm and professional. 'Keep running, or settle onto the bottom and let him pass?'

Cabrillo checked his watch again. They'd traveled little more than a quarter mile. Too close. 'Keep going. If he hears us or detects our wake, he's going to have to slow and turn back to try to find us again. We only need six minutes.'

A moment later the four men inside the minisub could hear the thrash of the patrol boat's props through the water, an angry sound that rose in pitch as the craft drew closer. As it roared overhead the din filled the hull, and the men waited expectantly to hear if it would come back for another pass. The moment stretched as time turned elastic. Max and Hali let out their breaths as the patrol boat continued on. Cabrillo kept his eyes glued to the sonar screen.

'They're turning,' he remarked a second later. 'Coming back for another look. Hali, check the radio, see if he's transmitting.' Hali Kasim headed the *Oregon's* communications division and could play radios like a concert pianist.

The communications suite aboard the *Oregon* was sophisticated enough to scan and record a thousand frequencies per second and had a language program that could

translate fast enough for an operator to hold a conversation close enough to real time to fool most listeners. With the Discovery 1000's limited electronics they would be lucky just to pick up a broadcast, and since none of the men spoke Korean, they wouldn't know if the patrol craft was asking permission to depth charge or commenting on the weather.

'I'm not getting anything,' Kasim answered after a few moments.

The North Korean patrol boat crossed over the minisub again, and the men heard her engines throttle back.

'They're pacing us,' Eddie said.

The powerful sonar picked up a pair of splashes too small to be depth charges. Juan knew immediately what was about to happen. 'Brace yourselves!'

The grenades were knockoffs of the Soviet RGD-5, and while they only contained four ounces of high explosives, the water amplified their explosive power. The two grenades went off nearly simultaneously just yards behind the Discovery. The sub pitched up by the stern, knocking Hali Kasim against a bank of batteries. Eddie fought to bring her nose up as the murky bottom suddenly loomed outside the large acrylic view port. With their ears ringing, no one heard a second pair of grenades hit the water. They blew just above the minisub, slamming her into the mud just as Eddie got her on an even keel. Billows of silt exploded around the Discovery, cutting visibility to zero. Electricity arced and snapped from a loose connection in dazzlingly bright flashes that temporarily blinded the men.

Eddie quickly powered down the sub to give Max a chance to fix the connection. By the glow of a miniature flashlight clamped between his teeth, the engineer worked to bypass the affected row of batteries, but the damage had

been done. The flashes of electricity could be seen from the surface through the sub's portholes and looked like an eerie blue glow from the depths.

'They've got us now,' Hali said. 'They're transmitting something. Just a short message, but I think the jig is up.'

'How's it coming, Max?' Cabrillo inquired with no more concern than if he were asking when coffee would be ready.

'Just a few more seconds.'

'Anything from shore yet, Hali?'

'Negative. The brass must be mulling over the report from the patrol boat.'

'Got it,' Max announced. 'Eddie, turn her back on.'

Eddie Seng hit a button, and the display screens lit with their muted glimmer.

'Okay, Eddie, emergency blow. Bring us to the surface.'

'The patrol boat's right above us, boss.'

Cabrillo's response was a dark smile.

'There goes our warranty,' Eddie muttered, then blew ballast from the Discovery's tanks with compressed air. The little sub seemed to launch itself from the bottom. He watched the depth gauge and called out the numbers. When he said there were only five feet of water over the Disco's top deck, all four men instinctively ducked lower in their seats.

The steel hull slammed into the underside of the North Korean craft with a deafening screech. The sub was several tons lighter than the patrol boat, but her upward momentum tipped the Koreans until their starboard rail was in the water. One crewman had his legs crushed when he was pitched over the side by a rolling fuel drum. Juan reached across Eddie and punched the command for a crash dive before the upper deck broke the surface.

High-speed pumps filled the ballast tanks in under fifteen seconds, and the *Discovery* dropped like a stone.

‘That ought to keep ’em busy for a few minutes,’ Max said.

‘We only need a few. Okay everyone, get your earphones on and strap in.’

The men donned bulky headsets that they jacked into a piece of electronics specially installed for the mission. Built by Sound Answers, the experimental noise-canceling device took in sound waves, evaluated their frequency and amplitude, and played back the exact opposite sound, nullifying 99 percent of the decibels. Such devices, once perfected and miniaturized, would soon make it possible for silent vacuum cleaners and end the anxiety of listening to a dentist’s drill.

Aboard the *Asia Star* one of the North Korean spies sent to guard the Syrians had come to. He wasted precious seconds checking on his partner. The lump where he’d been clipped with the pistol was as tight as a drum. The man wouldn’t awaken. The guard knew his duty. He ran from the hold, shouting at the top of his lungs, ignoring the pain it caused in his head. He ran up to the main deck, checking doors along the corridor behind the bridge until he found the captain’s. He considered knocking, but what he had to report was too important. He burst through the door. General Kim was on the telephone.

‘And then what will you do to my little lotus?’ Kim snapped to his feet when the door crashed against the cabin wall. He roared, ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘General,’ the guard panted. ‘The Syrians, they attacked us. I did not see them in the hold. I think they might be trying to escape.’

‘Escape? Escape what?’ Kim no sooner asked those questions when he realized the answer. He cut the connection to his mistress, pounding on the Reset lever to alert the shore operator. ‘Come on, you damned thing,’ he cursed, then addressed the guard. ‘They weren’t Syrians; they were American saboteurs. Search the hold for a bomb.’

Finally a voice sounded in the telephone. Kim knew that even if he died, getting a warning out would make sure the Americans would pay for their treachery. ‘This is General Kim aboard the *Asia Star*—’

At the back corner of the hold, Max’s bomb wound down to zero.

The bomb blast tore through the missile where it had been hidden and an instant later caused a secondary explosion of the warhead. Overpressure built inside the hold until the four-ton hatches blew into the night sky as though a volcano had erupted. The *Star*’s old hull plates split at their welds like peels from an orange as the tons of rocket fuel stored in her forward hold detonated.

The ship disintegrated.

A seven-hundred-foot wedge of the concrete dock shattered, and chunks of it were thrown miles inland. The two massive loading cranes along the wharf toppled into the water, and every window along the harbor was blown to pieces. Then the shock wave spread. Warehouses were blown flat for a quarter mile, and those farther away were stripped of their siding so only their skeletal steel frames remained upright. The concussion stripped the first six feet of water from the bay and piled it into a wave that slammed the destroyer lying at anchor, breaking her keel and capsizing her so fast that none of her harbor watch had time to react.

Night turned to day as the fireball climbed to eleven hundred feet, and sheets of rocket fuel fell like burning rain, setting fires all around the navy yard, while bits of the *Asia Star*'s hull scythed through the base like shrapnel, leveling buildings and wrecking vehicles.

The concussion plucked the floundering patrol boat from the sea and sent it tumbling across the surface of the bay, rolling it like a log down a mountainside. With each revolution more of her upperworks tore free. First it was her fore gun mounts, then the pair of .50 calibers at her stern, and finally her small cabin came apart, leaving just her hull to barrel roll atop the waves.

The noise dampener did its job, but still the concussion wave rang through the *Discovery 1000* as though she was a bell. The whole hull shook as the shock wave passed over and the plucky little sub lurched forward, then ebbed violently, straining the safety straps and scattering loose equipment from storage bins. Eardrums were brutally assaulted by the blast, and had it not been for the counter-frequencies channeled into the headsets, the four men would have been permanently deafened.

As it was, Cabrillo had to shout at the top of his lungs to inquire about his men. Eddie and Hali were unscathed, but Max had taken a bump on the head from a falling battery. The skin hadn't broken, and he hadn't been knocked out. He'd suffer a headache for a while, and it would take days for the knot already forming to subside.

'All right, Eddie, take us home.'

The minisub slipped out of the harbor undetected and was two miles from the coast before they picked up helicopters thundering toward Wonsan. The choppers were flying too high and too fast to be ASW (antisubmarine

warfare) birds. They were most likely rescue helos ferrying medical supplies and personnel to the devastated base.

Like all other coastal nations on earth, North Korea was afforded twelve miles of ocean as sovereign territory. Just to play it safe, Juan Cabrillo had scheduled the rendezvous for twenty miles out, a long slog in the reeking confines of the *Discovery* that took nearly three hours longer than planned. The *Discovery* had to stay deep as dawn approached in case the North Koreans did send out aerial reconnaissance.

At last they came to the spot of ocean, and Eddie eased the craft up from eighty feet where she'd remained hidden. The underside of the *Oregon's* hull was coated with red antifouling paint and loomed over the small sub. Juan noted with pride that the hull was clear of barnacles and looked as new as the day he'd taken possession of her. In order to take advantage of the tremendous power generated by her revolutionary engines, the *Oregon* utilized an MDV design as perfected by high-speed European express ferries. Her monohull, deep V arrangement allowed her to knife through the seas at unheard-of speeds. To maintain stability she sported several retractable T-foils and fins, undersea wings that kept her planing smoothly at up to forty knots. Beyond that speed the wings produced too much drag. They were drawn back to the hull, and the crew had to strap themselves in like offshore hydroplane racers.

Eddie grabbed a device the size and shape of a garage door remote, pointed it up at the *Oregon*, and pressed the single button.

Splitting at the keel, a pair of eighty-foot-long doors hinged downward. Bright light from inside the ship filtered through the water and bathed the underside of the ship in

a green glow. Eddie nudged the thrusters and adjusted the ballast, centering the *Discovery* in the opening. He held station just below the hull as two men in scuba gear jumped from inside the ship and attached lift cables to hardpoints fore and aft. The minisub and its larger sister, a *Nomad 1000* also kept aboard the *Oregon*, could surface directly into the moon pool, but the maneuver was risky and used only in emergencies.

The frogman swam in front of the view port and gave Eddie and Juan a wave, then slashed his hand across his neck. Eddie killed the motors. A second later the sub lurched, then began to rise smoothly into the flooded moon pool. As it cleared the surface, Seng opened valves so the ballast tanks could drain.

Juan spotted Julia Huxley, the *Oregon's* medical officer, standing at the edge of the pool with a pair of orderlies. He shot her a thumbs-up, and her concerned frown turned into a smile. She'd joined the Corporation after a career in the navy, finishing with a four-year stint as the chief medical officer at San Diego Naval Base. Under her lab coat, the five-foot-three-inch Julia was curvaceous without running to fat. He rarely saw her dark hair out of a ponytail, and the only makeup she used was to highlight her soft, dark eyes.

The overhead crane lowered the sub onto a cradle, and a workman clambered on top to crank open the outer hatch. When it finally released, the crew inside heard him gasp. 'Whoa.'

'Try being sealed inside for two weeks,' Eddie called, pulling himself from his seat. He'd already unzipped the front of his jumpsuit in preparation for his first shower in fifteen days. His chest and stomach were so lean that individual muscle fibers were visible. Eddie was built like

famed martial artist Bruce Lee, and like Lee was a master in several Eastern fighting techniques.

Juan allowed his men to precede him out, but as soon as he'd taken his first deep breaths he called to a sailor nearby, 'Get these doors closed, and contact Eric in the control room. Have him set a course due east, say twenty knots. As long as the threat board remains green, there's no need to draw attention to ourselves by opening her up.' Eric Stone was a control room operator, the ship's best, and the only man Juan wanted at the helm during critical operations.

'Aye, sir.'

When the doors were closed, pumps came online to drain the moon pool, and workers laid decking grilles over the hole. Technicians were already assessing the damage caused when the Discovery rammed the patrol boat, while others were bringing gallon jugs of bleach to sanitize the interior.

Julia approached Juan when he came down the ladder from the top of the minisub. 'We heard the explosion out here, so I don't need to ask how it went.'

'You don't sound too happy about it.' Juan stripped off his Colonel Hourani uniform coat.

'Just bored, Mr Chairman. Other than a few strained muscles, I haven't had much to do in months.'

Juan smiled. 'I thought that was a good thing for a doctor.'

'For a doctor, yes; for an employee, it's dullsville.'

'Come on, Julia, you know us. Give it a few days or a week, and we'll get into some sort of trouble.'

Cabrillo would soon regret those words. In just ninety-six hours, Dr Julia Huxley was going to be literally up to her elbows in work.