

# CLIVE CUSSLER

WITH PAUL KEMPRECOS

## Medusa

*A novel from the Numa Files*

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Medusa  
by  
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# PROLOGUE

## THE PACIFIC OCEAN, 1848

IN ALL HIS YEARS SAILING THE WORLD'S OCEANS, CAPTAIN Horatio Dobbs had never known the sea to be so barren. The captain paced the quarterdeck of the New Bedford whaling ship *Princess*, gray eyes darting like twin lighthouse beams to every point of the compass. The Pacific was a disk-shaped blue desert. No spouts feathered the horizon. No grinning porpoises danced off the bow. No flying fish skittered above the wave tops. It was as if life in the sea had ceased to exist.

Dobbs was considered a prince in the New Bedford whaling hierarchy. In the waterfront bars where hard-eyed harpooners gathered, or in the parlors of the rich Quaker shipowners on Johnny Cake Hill, it was said that Dobbs could sniff out a sperm whale at fifty miles. But only the rank smell of a simmering mutiny had filled the captain's nostrils of late.

Dobbs had come to dread having to record each day of failure in the ship's logbook. The entry he had penned in his log the night before summed up the troubles he faced. He had written:

*March 27, 1848. Fresh breeze, SW. Not a whale in sight. Hard luck hangs over voyage like a stinking fog. No oil in all of Pacific Ocean for poor ship Princess. Trouble brewing in the fo'c'sle.*

Dobbs had a clear view of the length of the ship from the elevated quarterdeck, and he would have had to be blind not to see the averted gazes and the furtive glances from his crewmen. The ship's officers had reported with alarm that the usual grumbling among the forecandle crew had become more frequent and vehement. The captain had instructed his mates to keep pistols ready and never to leave the deck unattended. No hand had yet been lifted in mutiny, but in the dark and dingy forecandle, the cramped living quarters located where the bow narrowed, men were heard to whisper that the ship's luck might change if the captain were to meet with an accident.

Dobbs was six foot four and had a profile like a cliff. He was confident he could put down a mutiny, but that was the least of his worries. A captain who returned to port without a profitable cargo of oil had committed the unpardonable sin of costing the ship's owners their investment. No crew worth its salt would ever ship out with him. Reputation, career, and fortune could rise or fall on a single voyage.

The longer a ship spent at sea, the greater the chance of failure. Supplies ran short. Scurvy and disease became more likely. The ship's physical condition deteriorated and the crew lost its edge. Putting into port for repairs and supplies was risky. Men might jump ship to sign on to a more successful vessel.

The whaling expedition had gone downhill since the crisp autumn day when the gleaming new ship had pulled away from the bustling wharf to a roaring send-off. Dobbs was bewildered

by the change in the ship's fortunes. No ship could have been better prepared for its maiden voyage. The *Princess* carried an experienced captain, a handpicked crew, and newly forged, razor-sharp harpoons.

The three-hundred-ton *Princess* was built by one of the most reputable shipyards in New Bedford. Just over a hundred feet long, the ship had a beam of nearly thirty feet that gave her room to store three thousand casks that could hold ninety thousand gallons of oil in her hold. She was built of sturdy live oak that could withstand the toughest seas. Four whaleboats rested in wooden davits that overhung the deck rails. Other mariners scorned the wide-bodied and square-ended New England whaling ships, but the rugged craft could sail for years through nasty conditions that would have had their sleeker counterparts leaking at the seams.

As the *Princess* left the dock, a spanking breeze had filled the great square sails that hung from the three masts, and the helmsman steered a course east out of the Acushnet River and into the Atlantic Ocean. Pushed by steady winds, the *Princess* had made a fast ocean crossing to the Azores. After a brief stop in Fayal to load up on fruit that would ward off scurvy, the vessel had pointed its bow toward the southern tip of Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope with no mishaps.

But in the weeks that followed, the *Princess* had zigzagged across the Pacific without seeing a single whale. Dobbs knew that finding whales had more to do with a solid knowledge of weather and migratory patterns than luck, but as he scanned the distant skyline in desperation, he began to wonder if his ship was cursed. He pushed the dangerous thought from his mind, strode over to the ship's cook, who was cleaning his stove, and said, "Play us a song with your fiddle."

Hoping to lift morale, the captain had urged the cook to play his fiddle at sunset every day, but the jolly music only seemed to highlight the sour mood aboard ship.

"I usually wait 'til sundown," the cook said glumly.

"Not today, cook. See if you can fiddle up a whale."

The cook put his cleaning rag aside and reluctantly unwrapped the cloth protecting his weather-beaten violin. Tucking the fiddle under his jowls, he took up the frayed bow and sawed away without tuning the instrument. He knew from their sullen looks that the crew thought his fiddling scared the whales away, and each time the cook played he feared, with good reason, that someone might toss him overboard. On top of that, he was down to two strings and his repertoire was limited, so he played the same songs the crew had heard a dozen times before.

As the cook sawed away, the captain ordered the first mate to take charge of the quarterdeck. He climbed down the narrow companionway to his cabin, tossed his weathered top hat onto his bunk, and sat down at his desk. He scanned his charts, but he had tried all the usual whaling grounds with nothing to show for his efforts. He sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and let his chin drop to his chest. He had only dozed off for a few minutes before the wonderful words he hadn't heard in months penetrated his veil of sleep.

"She *blows!*" a voice repeated. "Thar she blows."

The captain's eyes snapped wide open, and he came out of his chair like a catapulted projectile, grabbed his hat, and vaulted up the ladder to the deck. He squinted against the bright sunlight at the main masthead a hundred feet above the deck. Three mastheads were manned in two-hour shifts, with the lookouts standing inside iron hoops on small platforms.

"Where away?" the captain shouted to the mainmast lookout.

“Starboard quarter, sir.” The lookout pointed off the bow. “*There*. She breaches.”

A huge hammer-shaped head rose from the sea a quarter of a mile away and splashed down in an explosion of spray. *Sperm whale*. Dobbs barked at the helmsman to steer for the breaching whale. Deckhands scrambled into the rigging with the agility of monkeys and unfurled every square inch of canvas.

As the ship came slowly around, a second lookout shouted down from his perch.

“*Another*, Captain!” The lookout’s voice was hoarse with excitement. “By God, *another*.”

Dobbs peered through his spyglass at a shiny gray back mounding from the sea. The spout was low and bushy, angled forward forty-five degrees. He moved the telescope to the right and then to the left. *More* spouts. A whole pod of whales. He let forth with a deep whooping laugh. He was looking at a potential fortune in oil.

The cook had stopped playing at the first sighting. He stood on the deck dumbfounded, his fiddle hanging limply at his side.

“You *did* it, cook!” the captain shouted. “You fiddled up enough *spermaceti* to fill our hold to the decks. Keep on playing, damnit.”

The cook gave the captain a gap-toothed grin and drew his bow across the violin strings, playing a jaunty sea chantey, as the helmsman brought the ship up into the wind. The sails were trimmed. The ship plowed to a stop.

“Clear away the larboard boats!” the captain roared with a gusto that had been pent up during the long whale drought. “Move smartly, men, if you like money.”

Dobbs ordered three boats launched. Each thirty-foot-long whaleboat was under the command of a mate who acted as boat

officer and steersman. A skeleton crew stayed on board the *Princess* to sail the ship, if necessary. The captain held the fourth whaleboat in reserve.

The entire launch took slightly longer than a minute. The slender boats splashed into the sea almost simultaneously. The boat crews clambered down the side of the ship, took their places on the benches, and dug their oars in. As soon as each whaleboat cleared the ship, its crew quickly hoisted a sail to gain another few knots of speed.

Dobbs watched the boats fly like a flight of arrows toward their targets.

“Easy does it, boys,” he murmured. “Give ’er another pull, steady as she goes.”

“How many, Captain?” the cook called out.

“More than enough for you to burn a ten-pound steak for every man on board. You can heave the salt pork over the side,” Dobbs yelled.

The captain’s laughter roared across the deck like a full gale.

CALEB NYE ROWED FOR all he was worth in the lead boat. His palms were raw and bleeding and his shoulders ached. Sweat poured down his forehead, but he didn’t dare lift his hand off his oar to wipe his eyes.

Caleb was eighteen, a wiry, good-natured farm youth from Concord, Massachusetts, on his first sea voyage. His 1/210 share, or “lay,” put him at the bottom of the pay scale. He knew he’d be lucky to break even, but he had signed on anyhow, drawn by the prospect of adventure and the lure of exotic lands.

The eager lad reminded the captain of his own first whaling voyage. Dobbs had told the young farmer that he would do well

if he jumped to orders, worked hard, and kept his nose clean. His willingness to bend to every task and to shrug off jibes had gained him the respect of the tough whalemens who treated him as a mascot.

The boat was under the command of the first mate, a scarred veteran of many whaling voyages. Rowers were constantly reminded to stay focused on the mate, but, as the ship's green hand, Caleb bore the brunt of the officer's nonstop patter.

"Come be lively, Caleb me boy," the mate cajoled. "Put your back into it, lad, you're not pulling a cow's teat. And keep your eyes on my pretty face—I'll look out for mermaids."

The mate, who was the only one allowed to face forward, was watching a big bull whale swimming on a collision course with the boat. Sunlight glinted off the shiny black skin. The mate issued a quiet order to the harpooner.

"Stand and face."

Two seven-foot-long harpoons rested in bow cradles. Their razor-sharp barbs were made to swivel at right angles to the shank. The deadly feature made it almost impossible for a harpoon to come free once it had been embedded in the whale's flesh.

The bowman stood and shipped his oar, then grabbed a harpoon from its cradle. He removed the sheath that covered the barb. He unsheathed the second harpoon as well.

Eighteen hundred feet of line ran from each harpoon through a V-shaped groove in the bow to a box where the rope had been coiled with exquisite care. From there the line ran down the length of the boat to the stern, where it was given a turn or two around a short post called a loggerhead, then was run forward to a tub.

The mate swung the tiller and pointed the bow at the whale's left side, placing the right-handed harpooner in position to make

the throw. When the whale was about twenty feet away from the boat, the mate yelled an order at the harpooner.

“*Give it to him!*”

Bracing his knee against the inside of the boat, the harpooner pitched the spear like a javelin and the barb sunk into the whale’s side several inches behind its eye. Then he snatched up the second harpoon and planted it a foot behind the first.

“Stern away!” the mate shouted.

The oars dug into the water, and the boat shot back several yards.

The whale huffed steam through its blowhole, raised its great flukes high in the air, and brought them down with a thunderous clap, slapping the water where the boat had been seconds before. The whale lifted its tail in the air a second time, buried its head in the sea, and dove. A diving sperm whale can descend to a thousand feet at a speed of twenty-five knots. The line flew out of its tub in a blur. The tubman splashed seawater on the rope to cool it down, but the harpoon line smoked from friction as it rounded the loggerhead despite his best efforts.

The boat skimmed over the wave tops in a mad dash that whalers called a Nantucket sleigh ride. A cheer burst from the oarsmen, but they tensed when the boat stopped moving; the whale was on its way back up. Then the huge mammal surfaced in a tremendous explosion of foam and thrashed around like a trout caught on a lure, only to plunge once more to the depths, surfacing again after twenty minutes. The routine was repeated over and over. With each cycle, more line was hauled in and the distance shortened, until only a hundred feet or so separated the whale and boat.

The whale’s great blunt head swung around toward its tormenter. The mate saw the aggressive behavior and knew it was the prelude to an attack. He yelled at the harpooner to move aft.

The two men exchanged places in the rocking boat, tripping over oars, oarsmen, and lines in a scramble that would have been comical if not for the potentially fatal consequences.

The mate grabbed the lance, a long wooden shaft tipped with a sharp-edged, spoon-shaped point, and stood in the bow like a matador ready to dispatch a fighting bull. The mate expected the creature to roll on its side, a maneuver that would allow the whale to use the sharp teeth lining its tubular lower jaw to their best advantage.

The harpooner swung the tiller over. Whale and boat passed each other only yards apart. The whale began its roll, exposing its vulnerable side. The mate plunged the lance into the whale with all his strength. He churned the shaft until the point was six feet into the animal's flesh, penetrating its heart. He yelled at the crew to reverse direction. *Too late.* In its death throes, the whale clamped the midsection of the slow-moving boat between its jaws.

The panicked rowers fell over each other trying to escape the sharp teeth. The whale shook the boat like a dog with a bone, then the jaws opened, the mammal pulled away, and the great tail thrashed the water. A geyser of blood-tinged steam issued from the spout.

"Fire in the hole!" an oarsman shouted.

The lance had done its deadly work. The whale thrashed for another minute before it disappeared below the surface, leaving behind a scarlet pool of blood.

The rowers lashed their oars across the gunwales to stabilize the sinking craft and plugged the holes with their shirts. Despite their efforts, the boat was barely afloat by the time the dead whale surfaced and rolled onto its side with a fin in the air.

"Good work, boys!" the mate roared. "Settled his hash. One more fish like this and we'll be heading for New Bedford to buy

candy for our sweethearts.” He pointed to the approaching *Princess*. “See, boys, the old man’s coming to pick us up and tuck you into bed. Everyone’s all right, I see.”

“Not *everyone*,” the harpooner called out in a hoarse voice. “Caleb’s gone.”

THE SHIP DROPPED ANCHOR a short distance away and launched the reserve boat. After the rescue crew conducted a fruitless search for Caleb in the bloodstained water, the damaged whale-boat was towed back to the ship.

“Where’s the green hand?” the captain asked as the bedraggled crew climbed back on board the *Princess*.

The first mate shook his head. “The poor lad went over when the whale struck.”

The captain’s eyes were shadowed in sadness, but death and whaling were no strangers. He turned his attention to the task at hand. He ordered his men to maneuver the whale’s body until it was under a staging on the ship’s starboard side. Using hooks, they rolled the carcass over and hoisted it to a vertical position. They cut the head off, and, before starting to strip off the blubber, used an iron hook to extract the whale’s innards and haul them onto the deck to examine them for ambergris, the valuable perfume base that can form in the stomach of a sick whale.

Something was moving inside the big stomach pouch. A deckhand assumed it was a giant squid, a favorite meal of sperm whales. He used his sharp spade to cut into the pouch, but, instead of tentacles, a human leg flopped out through the opening. He peeled back the stomach walls to reveal a man curled up in a fetal position. The cutter and another deckhand grabbed the man’s ankles and pulled the limp form out onto the deck. An opaque,

slimy substance enveloped the man's head. The first mate came over and washed away the slime with a bucket of water.

"It's *Caleb!*" the mate shouted. "It's the green hand."

Caleb's lips moved, but they made no sound.

Dobbs had been supervising the removal of blubber from the whale. He strode over and stared at Caleb for a moment before he ordered the mates to carry the green hand to his cabin. They stretched the youth out on the captain's bunk, stripped off his slime-coated clothes, and wrapped him in blankets.

"Lord, I've never seen anything like it," the first mate muttered.

The handsome farm boy of eighteen had been transformed into a wizened old man of eighty. His skin was bleached ghostly white. A lacework of wrinkles puckered the skin of his hands and face as if they had been soaked in water for days. His hair was like strands on a cottonweed.

Dobbs laid a hand on Caleb's arm, expecting him to be as icy cold as the corpse he resembled.

"He's on fire," he murmured.

Assuming his role as the ship's doctor, Dobbs placed wet towels over Caleb's body to bring down the fever. From a black leather medicine case he produced a vial of patent medicine containing a heavy dose of opium and got a few drops down Caleb's throat. The youth rambled for a few minutes before slipping into a deep sleep. He slept for more than twenty-four hours. When Caleb's eyelids finally fluttered open, he saw the captain sitting at his desk writing in the log.

"Where am I?" he mumbled through dry, crusted lips.

"In my bunk," Dobbs growled. "And I'm getting damned sick of it."

"Sorry, sir." Caleb furrowed his brow. "I dreamed I died and went to hell."

“No such luck, lad. Seems the *spermaceti* had a taste for farm boys. We pulled you out of his belly.”

Caleb remembered the whale’s round eye, then being tossed into the air, arms and legs spinning like a pinwheel, and the shock of hitting the water. He recalled moving along a dark, yielding passage, gagging for breath in the heavy, moist air. The heat had been almost unbearable. He had quickly passed out.

A horrified look came to his pale, wrinkled face. “The whale *et me!*”

The captain nodded. “I’ll get cook to fetch you some soup. Then it’s back to the fo’c’sle with you.”

The captain relented and let Caleb stay in his cabin until all the blubber had been rendered into oil and stored in barrels, then he summoned the forecandle hands on deck. He praised them for their hard work, and said:

“You all know that a whale ate the green hand like Jonah in the Bible. I’m happy to say that young Caleb will soon be back at his work. I’m cutting his pay for time lost. The only one on this ship who’s allowed to shirk his job is a dead man.”

The comment brought a few eyes and grins from the assembled hands.

Dobbs continued. “Now, men, I must tell you that young Caleb looks different than you remember him. The foul juices of the whale’s innards have bleached him whiter than a boiled turnip.” He cast a stern eye on the crew. “I’ll allow no one on this ship to make light of another man’s misfortune. That’s all.”

The ship’s officers helped Caleb climb onto the deck. The captain asked Caleb to remove a square of cloth that covered his head, shadowing his face like a monk’s cowl. A collective gasp came from the crew.

“Take a good look at our Jonah and you’ll have something to tell your grandchildren,” the captain said. “He’s no different

from the rest of us under that white skin. Now, let's get us some whales."

The captain had purposely called Caleb a *Jonah*, a seaman's name for a sailor who attracted bad luck. Maybe if he made light of it he'd suck the wind out of the sails of unfavorable comparisons to the biblical character who'd been swallowed by a great fish. A few hands quietly suggested heaving Caleb over the side. Fortunately, everyone was too busy for mischief. The sea that had been so barren now teemed with whales. There was no doubt that the ship's fortunes had changed for the better. It was as if the *Princess* had become a magnet for every whale in the ocean.

Every day, the boats were launched after cries from the lookout. The cast-iron try-pots bubbled like witches' cauldrons. An oily pall of black smoke hid the stars and sun and turned the sails a dark gray. The cook sawed away on his fiddle. Within months of Caleb's encounter with the whale, the ship's hold was filled to capacity.

Before the long voyage home, the ship had to be resupplied and the weary crew given shore leave. Dobbs put into Pohnpei, a lush island known for its handsome men, beautiful women, and their willingness to provide services and goods to visiting whalers. Whaling vessels from every part of the world crowded the harbor.

Dobbs was Quaker by upbringing and didn't indulge in spirits or native women, but his religious beliefs took second place to his sailing orders: maintain harmony among his men and bring home a shipload of oil. How he accomplished these tasks was left up to him. He laughed heartily as boatloads of drunken and raucous crewmen stumbled back on board or were fished out of the water into which they'd fallen.

Caleb stayed on board and watched the comings and goings of his fellow hands with a benign smile. The captain was relieved

that Caleb showed no interest in shore leave. The natives were friendly enough, but Caleb's bleached hair and skin might cause problems with the superstitious islanders.

Dobbs paid a courtesy call to the American consul, a fellow New Englander. During the visit the consul was notified that a tropical sickness had struck the island. Dobbs cut his men's shore leave short. In his log he wrote:

*Last day of shore leave. Captain visits U.S. Consul A. Markham, who conducted tour of ancient city named Nan Madol. Upon return, Consul advised of sickness on island. Ended liberty and left island in a hurry.*

The remnants of the crew stumbled back onto the ship and promptly fell into a rum-soaked snooze. The captain ordered the sobered-up hands to raise the anchor and set sail. By the time the cherry-eyed men were roused from their bunks and ordered back to work, the ship was well at sea. With a steady breeze, Dobbs and his men would be sleeping in their own beds in a few months time.

The sickness struck the *Princess* less than twenty-four hours after it left the port.

A forecastle hand named Stokes awakened around two in the morning and raced to the rail to purge his stomach. Several hours later, he developed a fever and a vivid rash over much of his body. Brownish red spots appeared on his face and grew in size until his features looked as if they were carved in mahogany.

The captain treated Stokes with wet towels and sips of bottled medicine. Dobbs had him moved to the foredeck and placed under a makeshift tent. The forecastle was a pesthole in the best of circumstances. Fresh air and sunlight might help the man, and isolation could possibly prevent the spread of his illness.

But the disease spread through the foremast hands like a windblown brush fire. Men crumpled to the deck. A rigger fell from a yardarm onto a pile of sails, which fortunately broke his fall. An impromptu infirmary was set up on the foredeck. The captain emptied his medicine kit. He feared that it would only be a matter of hours before he and the officers fell ill. The *Princess* would become a phantom ship, drifting at the mercy of wind and currents until it rotted.

The captain checked his chart. The nearest landfall was called Trouble Island. Whalers normally shunned the place. A whaling crew had burned a village and killed some natives there after an argument over a stolen cask of nails, and the inhabitants had attacked several whalers since the incident. There was no choice. Dobbs took the helm and put the ship on a straight course for the island.

The *Princess* soon limped into a cove lined with white sand beaches, and the ship's anchor splashed into the clear green water with a rattle of chain. The island was dominated by a volcanic peak. Wisps of smoke could be seen playing around its summit. Dobbs and the first mate took a small boat ashore to replenish freshwater while they could. They found a spring a short distance inland and were on their way back to the ship when they came across a ruined temple. The captain gazed at the temple's walls, overgrown with vines, and said, "This place reminds me of Nan Madol."

"Pardon me, sir?" the first mate said.

The captain shook his head. "Never mind. We'd best get back to the ship while we can still walk."

Not long after dusk, the mates fell sick, and Dobbs, too, succumbed to the disease. With Caleb's help, the captain dragged his mattress onto the quarterdeck. He told the green hand to carry on as best he could.

Caleb somehow remained untouched by the plague. He carried buckets of water to the foredeck to cure the terrible thirst of his crewmates and kept an eye on Dobbs and the officers. Dobbs alternated between shivers and sweats. He lost consciousness, and, when he awakened, he saw torches moving about the deck. One torch came closer, and its flickering flame illuminated the garishly tattooed face of a man, one of a dozen or so natives armed with spears and cutting tools used to strip blubber.

“Hello?” said the islander, who had high cheekbones and long black hair.

“You speak English?” Dobbs managed.

The man lifted his spear. “Good harpoon man.”

Dobbs saw a ray of hope. In spite of his savage appearance, the native was a fellow whaler. “My men are sick. Can you help?”

“*Sure*,” the native said. “We got good medicine. Fix you up. You from New Bedford?”

Dobbs nodded.

“Too bad,” the native said. “New Bedford men take me. I jump ship. Come home.” He smiled, showing pointed teeth. “No medicine. We watch you burn up from fire sickness.”

A quiet voice said, “Are you all right, Captain?”

Caleb had emerged from the shadows and now stood on the deck in the glare of torchlight.

The native leader’s eyes widened and he spat out a single word.

“*Atua!*”

The captain had picked up a smattering of Oceanic and knew that *’atua* was the islanders’ word for “a bad ghost.” Rising onto his elbows, Dobbs said, “Yes. This is my *’atua*. Do what he says or he will curse you and everyone on your island.”

Caleb had sized up the situation and went along with the captain's bluff.

Lifting his arms wide above his head for dramatic effect, he said, "Put your weapons down or I will use my power."

The native leader said something in his language and the other men dropped their killing tools to the deck.

"You said you could do something about the fire sickness," the captain said. "You have medicine. Help my men or the *'atua* will be angry."

The islander seemed unsure of what to do, but his doubts vanished when Caleb removed his hat and the silky white hair caught the tropical breeze. The islander issued a curt order to the others.

The captain blacked out again. His slumber was filled with weird dreams, including one in which he felt a cold, wet sensation and a sting on his chest. When he blinked his eyes open, it was daytime, and crewmen were moving around the deck. The ship was rigged with full sail against a clear blue sky, and waves slapped the hull. White-plumed birds wheeled overhead.

The first mate saw Dobbs struggling to sit up and came over with a jug of water. "Feeling better, Captain?"

"Aye," the captain croaked between sips of water. The fever had gone, and his stomach felt normal except for a gnawing hunger. "Help me to my feet."

The captain stood on wobbly legs, with the mate holding an arm to steady him. The ship was on the open sea with no island in view.

"How long have we been under way?"

"Five hours," the mate said. "It's a miracle. The men came out of their fever. Rashes disappeared. Cook made soup, and they got the ship moving."

The captain felt an itch on his chest and lifted his shirt. The rash was gone, replaced by a small red spot and a circle of irritation a few inches above his navel.

“What about the natives?” Dobbs said.

“*Natives?* We saw no natives.”

Dobbs shook his head. Did he dream it all in his delirium? He told the mate to fetch Caleb. The green hand made his way to the quarterdeck. He wore a straw hat to protect his bleached skin from the sunlight. A smile crossed his pale, wrinkled face when he saw the captain had recovered.

“What happened last night?” Dobbs said.

Caleb told the captain that after Dobbs had passed out, the natives had left the ship and returned carrying wooden buckets that emitted a pale blue luminescence. The natives went from man to man. He couldn’t see what they were doing. Then the natives left. Soon after, the crew started waking up. The captain asked Caleb to help him down to his cabin. He eased into his chair and opened the ship’s log.

“*A strange business,*” the captain started. Although his hands were still shaking, he wrote down every detail as he remembered it. Then he gazed with longing at a miniature portrait of his pretty young wife, and he finished his entry with a single declaration: “*Going home!*”

#### FAIRHAVEN, MASSACHUSETTS, 1878

The French mansard-roofed mansion known to the townspeople as the Ghost House stood back from a secluded street behind a screen of dark-leaved beech trees. Guarding the long driveway were the bleached jawbones of a sperm whale, placed upright in the ground so their tapering tips met in a Gothic arch.

On a golden October day, two boys stood under the whalebone arch, daring each other to sneak up the driveway and look in the windows. Neither youngster would take the first step; they were still trading taunts when a shiny black horse-drawn carriage clattered up to the gate.

The driver was a heavysset man whose expensive russet suit and matching derby hat failed to cloak his villainous looks. His rough-hewn features had been sculpted by the hard knuckles of the opponents he had faced back in his prizefighting days. Age had not been kind to the misshapen nose, the cauliflower ears, and the eyes squeezed to nailheads by scar tissue.

The man leaned over the reins and glared down at the boys. "What're you lads doing here?" he growled like the old pit bull he resembled. "Up to no good, I suppose."

"Nothin'," one boy said with averted eyes.

"Is that a fact?" the man sneered. "Well, I wouldn't be hanging around here if I was you. There's a mean ghost lives in that house."

"See," said the other boy. "*Told* you so."

"Listen to your friend. Ghost is seven feet tall. Hands like pitchforks," the man said, injecting a tremor into his voice. "Got fangs that could rip boys like you in half just so he could suck out your guts." He pointed his whip toward the house and his mouth dropped open in horror. "He's *coming!* By God, he's coming. *Run!* Run for your lives!"

The man roared with laughter as the boys raced off like startled rabbits. He gave the reins a flick and urged the horse through the whalebone gate. He tied up in front of the big house, which resembled an octagonal wedding cake layered with red and yellow frosting. He was still chuckling to himself as he climbed the porch steps and announced his arrival using the brass door knocker shaped like a whale's tail.

Footsteps approached. A man opened the door, and a smile crossed his pallid face.

“*Strater*, what a pleasant surprise,” Caleb Nye said.

“Good to see you too, Caleb. Been meaning to stop by, but you know how it is.”

“Of course,” Caleb said. He stepped aside. “Come in, come in.”

Caleb’s skin had grown even whiter over the years. Age had added wrinkles to skin that looked like parchment to begin with, but, despite his premature aging, he still retained the boyish smile and puppy-dog eagerness that had endeared him to his whaling colleagues.

He led the way to a spacious library lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. The wall sections not devoted to books on the subject of whaling were decorated with large, colorful posters that had the same motif: a man caught in the jaws of a sperm whale.

Strater went up to one particularly lurid poster. The artist had made liberal use of crimson paint to depict blood flowing from the harpoon shafts into the water. “We made a bundle of money out of that Philadelphia show.”

Caleb nodded. “Standing room only, night after night, thanks to your skills as a showman.”

“I’d be nothing without my star attraction,” Strater said, turning.

“And I have you to thank for this house and everything I own,” Caleb said.

Strater flashed a gap-toothed grin. “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s putting on a show. The minute I laid eyes on you, I saw the potential for fame and fortune.”

Their partnership had begun a few nights after the *Princess* docked in New Bedford. The oil barrels had been off-loaded,

and the owners tallied the take and calculated the lays. Crewmen who didn't have wives or sweethearts to go home to went off in a raucous mob to celebrate in the waterfront bars that were more than willing to relieve the whalers of their hard-won earnings.

Caleb had stayed on the ship. He was there when the captain came back onto the *Princess* with Caleb's pay and asked if he was going home to his family farm.

"Not like this," Caleb had replied with a sad smile.

The captain handed the young man the pitifully small amount of money he had earned for his years at sea. "You have my permission to stay on board until the ship sails again."

As he walked down the ramp, the captain felt a heavy sorrow for the young man's misfortune, but he soon put it out of his mind as his thoughts shifted to his own promising future.

About the same time, Strater had been contemplating a much bleaker outlook as he sat in a seedy bar a few blocks from the ship. The former carnival pitchman was down on his luck and almost broke. He was nursing a mug of ale when the crewmen from the *Princess* burst into the bar and proceeded to get drunk with all the energy they had devoted to killing whales. Strater perked up his ears and listened with interest to the story of Caleb Nye, the green hand who was swallowed by a whale. The bar patrons greeted the tale with loud skepticism.

"Where's your Jonah now?" a barfly shouted above the din.

"Back at the ship, sittin' in the dark," he was told. "See for yourself."

"The only thing I want to see is another ale," the barfly said.

Strater slipped out of the noisy bar into the quiet night and made his way along a narrow street to the waterfront. He climbed the ramp to the lantern-lit deck of the *Princess*. Caleb had been standing by the rail, staring at the sparkling lights of New Bed-

ford. The young man's features were indistinct, but they seemed to glow with a pale luminosity. Strater's showman juices started flowing.

"I have a proposition for you," Strater told the young man. "If you accept it, I can make you a rich man."

Caleb listened to Strater's proposal and saw the possibilities. Within weeks, flyers and posters were plastered around New Bedford with a blaring headline in circus typeface:

**SWALLOWED BY A WHALE.**  
***A Living Jonah Tells His Tale.***

Strater hired a hall for the first show and had to turn away hundreds. For two hours, Caleb told his thrilling story, standing with harpoon in hand in front of a moving diorama.

With Caleb's whaling earnings, Strater had hired an artist who had painted reasonably accurate pictures on a long strip of canvas several feet high. The backlit canvas was slowly unrolled to reveal pictures of Caleb in the whaleboat, the attack by the whale, and a fanciful depiction of his legs sticking out from between the mammal's jaws. There were images of exotic, palm-studded locales, and their inhabitants as well.

The show played to enthralled audiences, especially in churches and halls in cities and towns along the eastern seaboard. Strater sold story booklets, adding pictures of half-nude dancing native girls to spice up the narrative. After a few years, Strater and Caleb retired from public life as rich as the wealthiest whaling captains.

Strater bought a mansion in New Bedford, and Caleb built his wedding-cake house in the village of Fairhaven across the harbor from the whaling city. From the roof turret, he watched the whaling ships come and go. He rarely went out in daylight.

When he did leave his mansion, he covered his head and shaded his face with a hood.

He became known to his neighbors as the Ghost, and he became a generous benefactor who used his fortune to build schools and libraries for the community. In return, the townspeople protected the privacy of their homegrown Jonah.

Caleb guided Strater into a large chamber that was empty except for a comfortable revolving chair in the center. The diorama from Caleb's show wrapped around the walls. Anyone sitting in the chair could pivot and see the "Living Jonah" story from beginning to end.

"Well, what do you think?" Caleb asked his friend.

Strater shook his head. "It almost makes me want to go on the road with the show again."

"Let's talk about it over a glass of wine," Caleb said.

"I'm afraid we don't have time," Strater said. "I carry a message to you from Nathan Dobbs."

"The captain's oldest son?"

"That's right. His father is dying and would like to see you."

"*Dying!* That's not possible! You have told me yourself that the captain looks as hale and hearty as a young bull."

"It's not an ailment that brought him down, Caleb. There was an accident at one of his mills. A loom fell over and crushed his ribs."

Caleb's old man's face lost its last faint traces of color. "When can I see him?" he asked.

"We must go *now*," Strater replied. "His time is short."

Caleb rose from his chair. "I'll get my coat and hat."

THE ROAD TO THE Dobbs mansion wound around New Bedford Harbor and climbed to County Street. Carriages lined the

driveway and street in front of the Greek Revival mansion. Nathan Dobbs greeted Strater and Caleb at the door and thanked them profusely for coming. He was tall and lanky, the younger image of his father.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father," Caleb said. "How is Captain Dobbs?"

"Not long for this world, I'm afraid. I'll take you to him."

The mansion's spacious parlor and adjoining hallways overflowed with the captain's ten children and countless grandchildren. There was a murmur as Nathan Dobbs entered the parlor with Strater and the strange hooded figure. Nathan asked Strater to make himself comfortable and escorted Caleb to the captain's room.

Captain Dobbs lay in his bed, tended by his wife and family doctor. They had wanted to keep the sickroom dark, as was the medical practice then, but he insisted that the curtains be opened to let in sunlight.

A shaft of honeyed autumn sunlight fell on the captain's craggy face. Although his leonine mane had gone silver-gray, his features were more youthful than would have been expected for a man in his sixties. But his eyes had a far-off look, as if he could see death creeping closer. The captain's wife and doctor withdrew, and Nathan lingered by the door.

Dobbs saw Caleb and managed to crack a smile.

"Thank you for coming, Caleb," the captain said. The voice that once boomed across a ship's decks was a hoarse whisper.

Caleb pushed the hood back from his face. "You told me never to question the captain's orders."

"Aye," Dobbs wheezed. "And I'll give you more good advice, green hand. Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong. Tried to fix a balky loom. Didn't move fast enough when it keeled over."

"I'm sorry for your misfortune, Captain."

"*Don't* be. I have a faithful wife, handsome children, and grandchildren who will carry on my name."

"I wish I could say the same," Caleb said in a wounded voice.

"You've done well, Caleb. I know all about your generosity."

"Generosity is easy when there's no one to share your fortune with."

"You have shared it with your neighbors. And I have heard of your wonderful library of books on the old trade."

"I don't smoke or drink. Books are my only vice. Whaling gave me the life I have. I collect every volume I can on the old trade."

The captain closed his eyes and seemed to drift away, but after a moment his eyelids fluttered open. "I have something I want to share with you."

The captain's son stepped forward and presented Caleb with a mahogany box. Caleb opened the lid. Inside the box was a book. Caleb recognized the worn blue binding.

"The log of the *Princess*, Captain?"

"Aye, and it's yours," the captain said. "For your great library."

Caleb drew back. "I can't take this from you, sir."

"You'll do as your captain says," Dobbs growled. "My family agrees that you should have it. Isn't that right, Nathan?"

The captain's son nodded. "It's the family's wish as well, Mr. Nye. We can think of no person more worthy."

Unexpectedly, the captain raised his hand and placed it on the log. "A strange business," he said. "Something happened on that island of wild men. To this day, I don't know if it was God's work or the Devil's."

The captain closed his eyes. His breathing became labored,

and a rattling sound came from his throat. He called his wife's name.

Nathan gently took Caleb's arm and escorted him from the room. He thanked him again for coming, and then told his mother that the captain's time had come. The loyal family streamed into the bedroom and adjacent hallway, leaving Strater and Caleb alone in the parlor.

"Gone?" Strater said.

"Not yet but soon." Caleb showed Strater the logbook.

"I'd prefer some of the Dobbs fortune," Strater snorted.

"*This* is a treasure to me," Caleb said. "Besides, you have more money than you could spend in a lifetime, my friend."

"Then I'll have to live longer," Strater said with a glance toward the bedroom.

They left the house and climbed into Strater's carriage. Caleb clutched the logbook closer and his mind went back to the remote island and its savage inhabitants, his masquerade as an *'atua*, the sickness, and the strange blue lights. He turned around for a last look at the mansion and recalled the captain's dying words.

Dobbs was right. It had been a strange business indeed.



# CHAPTER 1

## MURMANSK, RUSSIA, PRESENT DAY

AS THE COMMANDER OF ONE OF THE MOST FEARSOME KILLING machines ever devised, Andrei Vasilevich once held in his hands the power to wipe out entire cities and millions of people. If war had ever broken out between the Soviet Union and the United States, the Typhoon-class submarine Vasilevich had commanded would have launched twenty long-range ballistic missiles at the U.S. and sent two hundred nuclear warheads raining down on American soil.

In the years since he had retired from the navy, Vasilevich had often breathed a sigh of relief that he had never been told to unleash a salvo of nuclear death and destruction. As a captain second rank, he would have carried out the orders of his government without question. An order was an order, no matter how evil it was. A nuclear sub commander was an instrument of the state and could have no room for emotions. But as the tough old undersea Cold Warrior said good-bye to his former command, the submarine unofficially known as *Bear*, he could not hold back the sentimental tears that rolled down his plump cheeks.

He stood on the dock overlooking the port of Murmansk, his eyes following the sub as it glided toward the harbor entrance. He raised a silver flask of vodka high in the air in toast before taking a slug, and his thoughts drifted back to those years prowling the North Atlantic in the monster vessel.

With a length of five hundred seventy feet and a seventy-five-foot beam, the Typhoon was the biggest submarine ever built. The long forward deck stretched out from the massive, forty-two-foot-tall conning tower, or *sail*, to make room for twenty large missile tubes arranged in two rows. The design gave the Typhoon a distinctive profile.

The unique hull design extended past its metal exterior. Instead of one pressure hull, as in most submarines, the Typhoon had two parallel ones. This arrangement gave the Typhoon a cargo capacity of fifteen thousand tons and room in the starboard hull for a small gym and a sauna. Escape chambers were located above each hull. The submarine's control room and attack center were both in compartments located under the sail.

The *Bear* was one of six 941 Typhoons commissioned in the 1980s and introduced into the Northern fleet as part of the first flotilla of nuclear submarines based at Nerpichya. Leonid Brezhnev called the new model "the Typhoon" in a speech, and the name stuck. They were deployed as the Russian Akula class, meaning "shark," which was the name the U.S. Navy used for them.

Despite its huge size, the Typhoon clipped along at more than twenty-five knots underwater and around half that speed on the surface. It could turn on a ruble, dive to the ocean depths, and stay down a hundred eighty days, accomplishing these maneuvers with one of the quietest power systems ever designed. The sub carried a crew of more than one hundred sixty. Each hull had

a reactor plant that powered a steam turbine which produced fifty thousand horsepower to drive the two huge propellers. Two propulsion pods allowed the sub to hover and maneuver.

The Typhoon subs eventually outlived their military and political usefulness and were taken out of service in the late 1990s. Someone had suggested that they might be converted to carry cargo under the arctic ice by replacing the missile tubes with cargo space. The word went out that the Typhoons were for sale to the highest bidder.

The captain would have preferred to see the subs scrapped rather than have them turned into undersea cargo scows. What an ignoble end for a fine war machine! In its day, the terrible Typhoon was the subject of books and movies. He had forgotten how many times he had seen *The Hunt for Red October*.

Vasilevich had been hired by the Central Design Bureau for Marine Engineering to oversee the conversion. The nuclear missiles had long been removed as part of a joint treaty with the U.S., which had agreed to scrap its own city busters.

Vasilevich had supervised the removal of the missile silos to create a vast cargo hold. The silos were plugged and modifications were made that would allow easier loading and off-loading of cargo. A crew half the size of the original would deliver the sub to its new owners.

The captain took another shot of vodka and tucked his flask into a pocket. Before leaving the dock, he couldn't resist turning back for one last look. The submarine had cleared the harbor and was on the open sea headed to its unknown fate. The captain pulled his coat closer around him to ward off the damp breeze coming off the water and headed back to his car.

Vasilevich had been around too long to accept things at face value. The submarine supposedly had been sold to an interna-

tional freight company based in Hong Kong, but the details were vague, and the deal was structured like a set of matryoshka nesting dolls.

The captain had his own theories about the sub's future. An undersea vessel with the long range and huge cargo capacity of the Typhoon would be perfect for smuggling goods of every kind. But Vasilevich kept his thoughts to himself. Modern-day Russia could be dangerous for those who knew too much. What the new owners did after taking possession of the Cold War relic was none of his business. This deal had warning signs posted all over it, but the captain knew it was wise not to ask about such things, and even wiser not to know.



## CHAPTER 2

### ANHUI PROVINCE, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

THE HELICOPTER DARTED IN FROM NOWHERE AND CIRCLED above the village like a noisy dragonfly. Dr. Song Lee looked up from the bandage she was applying to a cut on the young boy's arm and watched as the helicopter hovered and then started its vertical descent to a field at the edge of the settlement.

The doctor gave the boy a pat on the head and accepted her payment of half a dozen fresh eggs from his grateful parents. She had treated the wound with soap, hot water, and an herbal poultice, and it was healing nicely. With little in the way of medicine and equipment, the young doctor did the best she could with what she had.

Dr. Lee brought the eggs into the hut and then joined the noisy throng rushing to the field. Excited villagers, including many who had never seen an aircraft up close, completely surrounded the helicopter. Lee saw the government markings on the fuselage and wondered who from the Ministry of Health would be coming to her remote village.

The helicopter door opened and a short, portly man wearing

a business suit and tie stepped out. He took one look at the chattering crowd of villagers and an expression of terror crossed his broad face. He would have retreated into the helicopter if Lee had not eased her way through the mob to greet him.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Huang,” she called out in a strong enough voice to be heard above the babble. “This is quite the surprise.”

The man cast a wary eye over the crowd. “I hadn’t expected such a large reception.”

Dr. Lee laughed. “Don’t worry, Doctor. Most of these people are related to me.” She pointed to a couple whose weathered brown faces were wreathed in smiles. “Those are my parents. As you can see, they’re quite harmless.”

She took Dr. Huang by the hand and led him through the swarm of onlookers. The villagers started to follow, but she waved them off and gently explained that she wished to speak to the gentleman alone.

Back at her hut, she offered her visitor the battered folding chair she sat in to treat patients. Huang mopped the sweat off his bald pate with a handkerchief and scraped the mud from his polished leather shoes. She boiled water for tea on a camp stove and poured a cup for her visitor. Huang took a tentative sip, as if he were unsure it was sanitary.

Lee sat down in the patched-up old dining-room chair that the patients used. “How do you like my open-air treatment room? I see my more modest patients inside the hut. Farm animals, I treat on their own territory.”

“This is a far cry from Harvard Medical School,” Huang said, gazing in fascination at the hut, with its walls of mud and thatched roof.

“This is a far cry from *anywhere*,” Lee said. “There are some advantages. My patients pay me in vegetables and eggs, so I never

go hungry. The traffic is not as bad as in Harvard Square, but it's next to impossible to find a good caramel *caffè latte*."

Huang and Lee had met years before at a mixer for Asian students and faculty at Harvard University. He was a visiting professor from China's National Laboratory of Medical Molecular Biology. She was finishing her graduate studies in virology. The young woman's quick wit and intelligence had impressed Huang immediately, and they had continued their friendship after returning to China, where he had risen to a high position in the ministry.

"It has been a long time since we talked. You must be wondering why I'm here," Huang said.

Dr. Lee liked and respected Huang, but he had been among a number of highly placed colleagues who were conspicuously absent when she needed someone to speak out on her behalf.

"Not at all," Lee said with a note of haughtiness. "I expect that you are probably carrying the apology of the authorities for their heavy-handed treatment of me."

"The state will never admit that it is wrong, Dr. Lee, but you have no idea how many times I have regretted not standing up in your defense."

"I understand the government's tendency to blame everyone but itself, Dr. Huang, but *you* have no idea how many times *I* have regretted that my colleagues failed to come to my defense."

Huang wrung his hands.

"I don't blame you," he said. "My silence was a clear act of cowardice. I cannot speak for my colleagues. I can only offer my most humble apologies for not defending you in public. At the same time, I did work behind the scenes to keep you out of jail."

Dr. Lee resisted the temptation to show the doctor the harsh

conditions in the impoverished village. He would soon learn that a jail didn't need bars. She decided that it would be unfair to pick on Huang. Nothing he could have done would have changed the outcome.

She forced a smile.

"Your apology is accepted, Dr. Huang. I am truly pleased to see you. Since you do not bear the thanks of a grateful nation for my service, what *are* you doing here?"

"I come as the bearer of bad news, I'm afraid." Although they were alone, he lowered his voice. "It has returned," he said in a near whisper.

Lee felt an icy coldness in the pit of her stomach.

"*Where?*" she asked.

"To the north of here." He rattled off the name of a remote province.

"Have there been any other outbreaks?"

"None so far. It is an isolated area, thank goodness."

"Have you isolated the virus to confirm its identity?"

He nodded. "It's a coronavirus, as before."

"When was it first detected? And have you found its source?"

"About three weeks ago. No source yet. The government immediately isolated the victims and quarantined the villages to prevent its spread. They are taking no chances this time. We are working with the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control."

"That's quite different from the last response."

"Our government learned its lesson," Huang said. "Their secrecy regarding the SARS epidemic damaged China's reputation as an emerging world power. Our leaders know that secrecy is not an option this time."

The Chinese government had come under international fire because it kept the first SARS epidemic secret from the world, causing a delay and slowing treatment that could have prevented a number of deaths. Song Lee was working as a teaching physician in a Beijing hospital when the epidemic broke out. She suspected it was serious and assembled the facts to make her case. When she urged her superiors to take action, they warned her to stay silent. But the World Health Organization's outbreak-alert system issued a global warning. Travel came to a halt and quarantines were enforced. An international lab network isolated a virus never before found in humans. The disease was called SARS, short for severe acute respiratory syndrome.

The virus spread to more than two dozen countries on several continents, infecting more than eight thousand people. Almost a thousand died, and a pandemic of worldwide proportions was narrowly averted. The Chinese government imprisoned the doctor who had told the world that the cases were being under-reported and that patients were being driven around in ambulances to keep them away from the World Health Organization. Others who had tried to expose the cover-up also became targets. One of them was Dr. Song Lee.

"Secrecy wasn't an option then, either," she reminded Huang, making no attempt to keep the heat out of her voice. "You still haven't told me what this has to do with me."

"We are assembling a research team and want you to be on it," Huang said.

Lee's anger spilled out.

"What can *I* do?" she asked. "I am simply a country doctor who treats life-threatening diseases with herbs and voodoo."

"I implore you to put your personal feelings aside," Huang said. "You were one of the first to detect the SARS epidemic. We

need you in Beijing. Your combined expertise in virology and epidemiology will be invaluable in developing a response.” Huang folded his hands together as if in prayer. “I will get down on my knees to beg, if you wish.”

She gazed at his anguished face. Huang was brilliant. She could not expect him to be valiant as well. Softening her voice, she said, “It won’t be necessary to beg, Dr. Huang. I will do what I can.”

His round face lit up.

“Mark my words,” he said, “you won’t be sorry for your decision.”

“I *know* I won’t,” Lee said, “especially after you meet my conditions.”

“What do you mean?” Huang asked in a guarded tone.

“I want enough medical supplies to take care of this village for six months . . . No, make that a year, and expand it to encompass the villages around this one.”

“Done,” Huang said.

“I have established a network of midwives, but they need a trained professional to oversee them. I want a family-practice physician flown in here this week to take over my practice.”

“Done,” Huang repeated.

Lee chided herself for not demanding more.

“How soon do you need me?” she asked.

“*Now*,” Huang said. “The helicopter is waiting for you. I would like you to speak at a symposium in Beijing”

She did a quick mental inventory. The hut was on loan. Her belongings could fit into a small valise. She would have to inform only the village elders and bid her aged parents and her patients a quick good-bye. Standing, she extended her hand to seal the bargain.

“*Done*,” she said.



THREE DAYS LATER, Dr. Lee stood on a podium behind a lectern at the Ministry of Health in Beijing, steeling herself to address more than two hundred experts from around the world. The woman on the podium bore no resemblance to the country doctor who had delivered babies and piglets by candlelight. She wore a pin-striped business suit over a blouse of Chinese-flag red, a rose silk scarf encircling her neck. A touch of makeup had lightened the amber complexion that had been darkened by outdoor life. She was grateful that no one could see her callous palms.

Soon after she had arrived in Beijing, Lee had gone on a shopping spree, courtesy of the People's Republic of China. At the first shop, she tossed her cotton jacket and slacks in the trash. With each subsequent purchase, in some of Beijing's most fashionable boutiques, she redeemed a bit of her lost self-respect.

Song Lee was in her mid-thirties, but she looked younger. She was slender, with small hips and breasts, and long legs. While her figure was adequate but unremarkable, it was her face that inevitably turned heads for a second look. Long dark lashes shaded alert, questing eyes, and full lips alternated between a friendly smile and a slight, more serious pucker when she was deep in thought. Working in the country, she had tied her long jet-black hair in a loose ponytail and tucked it under a cap that may have belonged to a foot soldier on Mao's Long March. But now it was styled and cut short.

Since arriving in Beijing, Lee had attended a dizzying schedule of briefings and had been impressed at the swift reaction to the latest outbreak. In contrast to the slow response several years before, hundreds of investigators and support staff had been mobilized around the world.

China was taking the leading role in the fight against the out-

break and had invited experts to Beijing to demonstrate its robust reaction. The speedy response had revealed a silver lining to a serious situation: everyone she talked to seemed confident that basic health practices could contain the SARS outbreak while researchers continued to look for the source and develop a diagnostic test and an appropriate vaccine.

But while the mood was upbeat, Dr. Lee was unable to share their confidence. She was worried that no source of the virus had been found. The civets that had carried the original SARS strain had been wiped out, so maybe the virus had jumped to another host—dogs, chickens, insects—who knew? Also, the Chinese government's uncharacteristic transparency bothered her as well. Bitter experience had taught her that the authorities did not easily give up their secrets. Even so, she might have dismissed these qualms had not the government refused to let her visit the province that had been infected. Too dangerous, she was told, the province was under the strictest quarantine possible.

Dr. Lee had set her suspicions aside for now to focus on the daunting prospect of appearing before an audience of sharp-minded experts. Her heart thumped madly in her chest. She was nervous about speaking in public after spending years among people whose greatest concern was the rice yield. The computer programs now available to chart an epidemic not only baffled her, she was unsure of her own expertise as well. She felt like a Stone Age holdover thawed from a glacier after ten thousand years.

On the other hand, practicing medicine at its most basic level had given her a gut instinct that was more valuable than all the charts and tables in the world. Her intuition was telling her that it was too early to celebrate. As a virologist, she had respect for how fast a virus could adapt to change. As an epidemiologist, she knew from painful experience how an outbreak could quickly

get out of control. But maybe she was just gun-shy. She had gone over the statistics Huang had given her, and the epidemic seemed to be on the road to being contained.

Dr. Lee cleared her throat and looked out at the audience. Some of the people waiting for her to speak were aware of and possibly responsible for her exile, but she swallowed her bitterness.

“To paraphrase the American writer Mark Twain, rumors of my professional demise have been greatly exaggerated,” she said with a straight face.

She let the ripple of laughter roll over her.

“I must admit, I come to you humbled,” she continued. “Since I established my rural practice, great strides have been made in the world of epidemiology. I am impressed at the way the nations of the world have come together to fight this new outbreak. I am proud of the role my country has taken in leading the effort.”

She smiled at the applause. She was learning to play the game. Those wanting angry denunciations of past policy would be disappointed.

“At the same time, I must warn against complacency. Any epidemic contains the seeds of a pandemic. These pandemics have come to us in the past, and human beings have *always* come out the worse for it.”

She talked about the great plagues in history, starting with the first recorded pandemic that struck Athens during its war with Sparta. The Roman pandemic of 251 A.D. had killed five thousand people a day, the Constantinople epidemic of 452 ten thousand a day. Around twenty-five million died in Europe of the Black Death during the 1340s, and forty to fifty million worldwide in the great influenza epidemic of 1918. She repeated her warning against complacency, and repeated how pleased she was at the multinational response to the current epidemic.

Dr. Lee was stunned at the applause that her presentation received. Her acceptance back into the medical community after years of exile was unexpected, and she was overcome with emotion. She left the stage, but instead of returning to her seat she strode to the exit. Tears welled in her eyes, and she needed to compose herself. She walked along the corridor, not sure where she was going.

Someone called her name. It was Dr. Huang, hurrying to catch up to her.

“That was a fine presentation,” he said, breathless from the chase.

“Thank you, Dr. Huang. I’ll return to the auditorium in a few minutes. It was quite an emotional experience for me, as you can imagine. But it was reassuring to hear that a worldwide pandemic is unlikely.”

“On the contrary, Dr. Lee, a pandemic is a *certainty*. And it will kill millions before it runs out of victims.”

Song Lee glanced at the door to the auditorium. “That’s not what I heard in there. Everyone seemed quite optimistic that this epidemic can be contained.”

“That’s because the speakers don’t know all the facts.”

“What *are* the facts, Dr. Huang? Why is this SARS epidemic any different from the last?”

“There is something I must tell you . . . this business about SARS . . . well, it’s a fraud.”

Lee glared at Huang.

“What are you saying?”

“The epidemic we are concerned about is caused by *another* pathogen, a variation of the influenza virus.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this? Why did you let me blather on about SARS?”

“It pained me to do so, but the presentation was intended as

a smoke screen to hide the fact that the pathogen we are dealing with is much more dangerous than SARS.”

“The experts speaking in the auditorium may beg to differ . . .”

“That’s because we have been feeding them misleading information. When they have asked for specimens of the strain to help with their research, we have given them the old SARS virus. We are trying to prevent a panic.”

She felt a dryness in her mouth.

“What is this new pathogen?”

“It is a mutated form of the old influenza strain. It spreads faster, and the mortality rate is much higher. Death comes more quickly and more often. It’s incredibly adaptable.”

Dr. Lee stared in disbelief. “Hasn’t this country learned its lesson about secrecy?”

“We have learned it very well,” Dr. Huang said. “China is working with the United States. We and the Americans have agreed to keep the existence of this new pathogen a secret for now.”

“We saw before that delay in releasing information costs lives,” Lee said.

“We also saw forced quarantine,” Huang said. “Hospitals shuttered, travel and commerce interrupted, people attacked in Chinatowns around the world. We can’t tell the truth now. There’s no way to stop this pathogen until we’ve developed a vaccine.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Don’t take my word for it. The Americans have far more sophisticated computers. They have created models suggesting we can temporarily contain pockets of the disease, but it will eventually break out and we *will* have a worldwide pandemic.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this back in the province?” Lee asked.

"I was afraid you might still think I had betrayed you before and wouldn't believe me," Huang said.

"Why should I believe you now?"

"Because I am telling the truth . . . I swear it."

Dr. Lee was confused and angry, but there was no doubt in her mind that Dr. Huang was being forthright.

"You mentioned a vaccine," she said.

"A number of labs are working on it," he said. "The most promising drug is being developed in the U.S. at the Bonefish Key lab in Florida. They believe a substance derived from ocean biomedicine will produce a vaccine that will stop this pathogen."

"You are saying that *one* lab has the only viable preventative?" Lee almost laughed at the absurdity despite the direness of the situation.

The auditorium doors opened, and people were starting to spill into the corridor. Huang lowered his voice.

"It's still in development," he said, "but, yes, our hopes are high. It might go even faster if you were there as the representative from the People's Republic."

"The government wants me to go to Bonefish Key?" she said. "It seems that I have been 'rehabilitated.' I'm willing to do anything I can. But you are putting everything on this one vaccine. What if it doesn't work?"

A haunted look came to Huang's eyes, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

"Then only divine intervention can help us."



## CHAPTER 3

THE INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918 APPEARED SUDDENLY, striking the world as it was trying to stitch itself back together after the devastating war that had ripped it apart. The epidemic raged through Spain, killing eight million people, and for that accomplishment was dubbed the Spanish flu, though it hit many other countries including America as well. Within months, it had spread around the world. There was no known cure. Victims would sicken in the morning, breaking out in the telltale mahogany-colored rash within hours, and die before nightfall. Millions died; a billion were infected. Before it petered out in 1919, influenza had killed more people than five years of brutal war had. It was worse than the Black Death.

The grim statistics raced through Dr. Song Lee's mind as she covered the last leg before setting foot on Bonefish Key. She had flown into Fort Myers and caught a limo to the Pine Island Marina, where she met a colorful local character named Dooley Greene. He had taken her on his boat through the mangroves to the island. A man was waiting on the dock to greet her.

“Hi, Dr. Lee,” the man said, extending his hand. “My name is Max Kane. Welcome to Fantasy Island. I’m the director of this little speck of paradise.”

In his faded Hawaiian shirt and tattered denim shorts, Kane looked more like a beach bum than the respected ocean microbiologist whose impressive résumé she had perused. A Chinese scientist of his stature would not have been caught dead without his white lab coat.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Dr. Kane,” Lee said, glancing around at the rippling palm trees and a whitewashed building perched on a low, grassy rise a few hundred feet back from the dock. “I’ve never seen a research lab in such a picturesque setting.”

Kane gave her a lopsided grin. “Not half as picturesque as the island’s current inhabitants.” He grabbed her suitcase and headed inland. “C’mon, I’ll show you to your quarters.”

They climbed a stairway cut into the side of the hill and then followed a crushed-shell pathway to a row of neat cabins painted flamingo pink with white trim. Kane opened the door of one cabin and ushered Lee inside. A bed, chair, dresser, and desk had been tucked into the snug space.

“It’s not the Ritz, but it has everything you need,” Kane said.

Lee thought about her one-room shack in the rural countryside. “I’m sure I’ll be very comfortable here.”

Kane placed the suitcase on the bed.

“Glad to hear that, Dr. Lee,” he said. “How was your trip?”

“*Long!*” she said, punctuating her reply with an exaggerated sigh. “But it’s good to be back in the U.S.”

“I understand you spent some time at Harvard,” Kane said. “We appreciate your returning to this country to help us out.”

“How could I *not* come, Dr. Kane?” Lee said. “The world has

been lucky up to now. Despite all our medical advances, we've never developed a vaccine for the original 1918 influenza. We're dealing with a mutant strain of that virus. Very complicated. The outcome will depend on our work here. How soon can I start?"

Max Kane smiled at Song Lee's eagerness.

"Let's get you something cold to drink," he said, "and I'll show you around, if you're up to it."

"I may fall asleep on my feet when the jet lag hits, but I'm fine for now," she said.

They walked back to the patio in front of the resort-style building. While Song rested in an Adirondack chair, Kane went into the building and brought out two glasses of mango and orange juice on ice. Sipping the delicious drink, she let her eyes wander along the shoreline. She had expected that the epicenter of secret research that had worldwide implications would be surrounded by fences and guards, and she couldn't contain her surprise that it didn't.

"It's hard to imagine that there is a lab doing vital work here," she said. "It's so tranquil."

"People would wonder if we put up barbed wire and guard towers. We've worked hard to project the image of a sleepy little research center. We decided that hiding in plain sight was the best strategy. Our website says that this is a private facility and suggests that our work is so boring to most people that no one would want to visit. You probably noticed the PRIVATE signs scattered around the island that say the same thing. We've only had a few requests to visit the center and we managed to put them off."

"Where are the lab buildings?"

"We had to get a little sneakier when it came to the research space. There are three labs farther inland. The labs are pretty well camouflaged. Google Earth would see only trees."

“What about security? I didn’t see any guards.”

“Oh, they’re there, all right,” Kane said with a tight smile. “The kitchen and maintenance staffs are all security people. There’s an electronic-surveillance center that keeps track of anyone coming too close to the island twenty-four/seven. They’ve got cameras all over the place.”

“What about the water-taxi man, Mr. Greene? Is he in on the deception?”

Kane smiled. “Dooley provides a useful cover. He worked for the old resort before Hurricane Charlie drove it into bankruptcy. We transported equipment and personnel here in our own boats when we were setting things up, but we needed someone to run people and supplies between the island and the mainland. Dooley’s never been farther inland than the dock. He’s a bit of a wind-bag, so if he does spout off about something he’s seen out here the people who know him will figure that he’s making it up.”

“He was curious about me. I put him off as best I could.”

“I’m sure everyone on Pine Island will know within hours about your visit, but I doubt anyone will care.”

“That’s good. I must confess that I’m nervous enough at the enormity of the task confronting us and the consequences if we fail.”

He considered her answer and then said, “I’m optimistic from what we have done so far that we will *not* fail.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I would feel more at ease if I knew the scientific basis for your optimism.”

“Skepticism is the lifeblood of scientific inquiry,” Kane said, spreading his hands. “I’ll do my best. Our work is complex but not complicated. We know what we have to do. The toughest part is *doing* it. As you know, nothing is ever certain when you’re dealing with viruses.”

Song Lee nodded.

“With the exception of the human race,” she said, “I don’t think there is a more fascinating entity on the planet. What has your strategy been?”

“Are you up for a leisurely walk? I think better on my feet.”

They struck off along one of the shell paths that laced the island, a holdover from the nature trails cut for guests at the old resort.

“I understand you worked at Harbor Branch,” Lee said. Harbor Branch was a marine lab on Florida’s east coast.

“I was at Harbor Branch for several years,” Kane said. “The ocean biomed field is in its infancy, but they were among the first to recognize the vast potential for pharmaceuticals from marine organisms. They saw that ocean creatures had to develop ingenious natural mechanisms to cope with an extreme environment.”

“How did you end up at Bonefish Key?”

“Harbor Branch was researching a number of different compounds from the sea, but I wanted to concentrate exclusively on antiviral agents, so I left and, with foundation money, established a new lab. Bonefish Key came up at auction after Hurricane Charlie. The foundation bought the island and fixed up the buildings that were left standing.”

“You’ve apparently been successful,” Lee said.

“We were doing pretty well scientifically,” Kane said, “but last year the lab’s funding dried up. The heirs of our prime benefactor challenged the legality of the foundation in court and won their case. I managed to hold things together, but it would have been only a matter of time before we closed. Sorry to say it, but the developments in China saved our butts.”

“No need to apologize,” she said. “We Chinese invented yin

and yang. Opposing forces can create a favorable balance. Tell me, how did Bonefish Key become the center of research on the newest epidemic? I've only heard bits and pieces of the story."

"Pretty much by chance," he said. "I'm chairman of a board that advises the feds about scientific discoveries that have defense or political implications. I had routinely passed along news of a possible breakthrough in antiviral research to the Centers for Disease Control. When the new virus strain was discovered in China, we were recruited to come find a way to fight it. The funds put us on the fast track in our research."

"You said you were optimistic about your progress," Lee said.

"*Guardedly* so. As a virologist, you know the hurdles in developing an antiviral agent."

Lee nodded.

"I am still amazed," she said, "at the complexity of the mechanisms stuffed into what is essentially a submicroscopic bit of nucleic acid wrapped in protein."

Now Kane nodded.

"I've always believed that the lack of fossilized records of viruses was circumstantial evidence that they are an alien life-form from another planet."

"You're not the only one who has posed the theory of an alien invasion," she said, "but we have to fight them with the tools we have available on earth." Lee smiled. "Or, in your case, what you find in the sea. How can I be of help during my time here?"

"We're honing in on a single antiviral chemical. We could use your expertise in virology as we put the stuff through the tests. At the same time," he added, "I'd like you to develop an epidemiological plan on how best to use the vaccine once we have synthesized it."

"How close are you to synthesis?" she asked.

“I wish we were closer, but we’re almost there,” he answered.

Kane turned down a well-worn path that branched off from the main walking trail. After about a hundred feet, the path ended at a cinder-block building. A man was standing there in front of a door of reinforced steel. He wore tan shorts and a blue T-shirt and could have passed for a maintenance man, but instead of tools a sidearm hung from his wide leather belt. The man didn’t look surprised to see them. Song Lee recalled Max Kane saying that there were cameras everywhere on the island.

The man opened the door and stepped aside to allow his visitors in. The interior of the building was cool and dark except for the light coming from dozens of glass tanks that held various types of sea life. There was a low hum from the water-circulation pumps.

As they strolled past the rows of tanks, Kane said, “We had been conducting research on all these organisms but put the work on the back burner after we got the call from the CDC.”

He led Lee to a side door and punched some numbers in the combination lock. The door opened into a smaller chamber that was completely dark except for the cold blue light coming from a vertical, tube-shaped water tank. The glow emanated from a number of undulating circular forms that rose and fell in the tank in a slow-motion dance.

Song Lee was mesmerized by the ghostly figures.

“They’re beautiful,” she said.

“Meet the blue medusa, Dr. Lee,” Kane said. “All our research efforts have been concentrated on this lovely creature. Its venom is one of the most complex chemical compounds I’ve ever come across.”

“Are you saying this jellyfish is the source of the compound you’re trying to synthesize?”

“Uh-huh. The tiniest amount of the medusa’s venom is fatal to humans, but the entire fate of millions of people could rest on the lowly creature in that tank. I can fill you in after you’ve had a chance to rest.”

Dr. Lee’s scientific mind was hungry for details.

“I don’t *need* any rest,” she insisted. “I want to start now.”

Song Lee’s roselike delicateness hid thorns that had been sharpened by her dealings with a stonehearted Chinese bureaucracy. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, Kane couldn’t prevent the faint smile that came to his lips.

“I’ll introduce you to the staff,” he said.

Kane guided Lee through the labs, introducing her to the other talented scientists who were working on the blue medusa project. She was particularly impressed with Lois Mitchell, Kane’s first assistant and project manager. But jet lag eventually caught up with Lee, and she caught a good night’s sleep in her comfortable cabin. When she awoke the next day, she threw herself into her work.

In the days that followed, Dr. Lee rose early and worked late. Her daily kayak paddle through the mangroves was the only recreational break in her ferocious schedule. Then, one day, she and the rest of the scientific staff were asked to attend a meeting in the dining room. To applause, Dr. Kane announced that the compound they had been looking for had been identified. He and a handpicked team of volunteers would go into seclusion to put the final touches on the synthesis at a new lab. He could not say where the lab was located, only that it was nearer to the resource. Lee agreed to stay on at Bonefish Key with a skeleton crew so she could finish her epidemiological analysis and lay out an immunization production and distribution plan.

The quarantine was holding, but Lee knew that it was only a matter of time before the virus got loose. As she analyzed the

clusters of the virus outbreak, she kept China's experience with the SARS virus in the back of her mind. All suspected or probable cases had been placed in negative-pressure rooms, shut off from the outside world by two airtight doors, every breath they took filtered. But the disease still managed to spread, demonstrating the difficulty in sealing off the virus.

In the weeks that followed the exodus of the key scientific staff, reports filtered back to Bonefish Key from the secret lab. The most exciting news was the report that the toxin had been synthesized, the prelude to developing a vaccine.

Spurred on by the successful research, Lee had hurried to develop a plan to administer the antidote and to contain the epidemic before it developed into a pandemic.

Dr. Huang had asked to be kept informed of Dr. Lee's progress. The only place on the island where cell-phone service was available was at the top of an old water tower. Every day after her work, Lee climbed the tower and summarized the progress of the project for her old friend and mentor.

There was no way she could have known that her every word was being relayed to unfriendly ears.



## CHAPTER 4

### BERMUDA, THREE MONTHS LATER

THE TAXI DRIVER WARILY EYEBALLED THE MAN STANDING on the curb outside the arrival gate at Bermuda's L. F. Wade Airport. His potential fare had an unruly ginger beard, and hair pulled back in a short pigtail that was tied with a rubber band. In addition, he wore faded jeans, high-top red sneakers, Elton John sunglasses with white plastic frames, and a rumpled tan linen suit jacket over a T-shirt with a picture on it of Jerry Garcia from the Grateful Dead.

"Please take me to the ship harbor," Max Kane said. He opened the door, threw his duffel bag in the backseat, and then slid in beside it. The driver shrugged and put the taxi in gear. A fare was a fare.

Kane sat back and closed his eyes. His brain was about to explode. His impatience had ballooned with each mile traveled over the past twenty-four hours. The long flight from the Pacific Ocean to North America and the two-hour trip from New York were nothing compared to the dragging minutes it took for the taxi to get to the waterfront.

Kane directed the driver to stop near the gangway of a turquoise-hulled ship. The distinctive color and the letters NUMA emblazoned on the hull below the ship's name, WILLIAM BEEBE, identified the vessel as belonging to the National Underwater and Marine Agency, the largest ocean-study organization in the world.

Kane exited the cab and shoved a wad of bills at the driver, then slung the duffel over his shoulder and briskly climbed up the gangway. A pleasant-faced young woman wearing the uniform of a ship's officer greeted Kane with a warm smile.

"Good afternoon," the woman said. "My name is Marla Hayes. I'm the third mate. May I have your name?"

"Max Kane."

She consulted a clipboard and put a check mark next to Kane's name.

"Welcome to the *Beebe*, Dr. Kane. I'll show you to your cabin and give you a tour of the ship."

"If you don't mind, I've come a long way and I'm anxious to see the B3."

"No problem," Marla said, leading Kane toward the ship's fantail.

The two-hundred-fifty-foot-long search-and-survey ship was the marine equivalent of a professional weight lifter. With its stern-ramp A-frame crane and wide deck, the fantail was the business end of the ship. It bristled with the winches and derricks that scientists used to launch underwater vehicles and devices that probed the depths. Kane's eyes went to a large tangerine-colored globe resting in a steel cradle beneath a tall crane. Three portholes that resembled short-range cannons protruded from the sphere's surface.

"There it is," Marla said. "I'll come by in a little while to see how you're doing."

Kane thanked the young woman and cautiously approached the globe, treading softly as if he expected the strange object to bolt on the four legs attached to the bottom. He walked around to the other side of the sphere and saw a man in a Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts standing in front of a circular opening slightly more than a foot in diameter. The man's head was inside the globe, his right shoulder angled through the hatch as if he were being devoured by a bug-eyed monster. The string of salty curses that echoed from inside the globe sounded as if they were coming from a pirate cave.

Kane set his duffel bag down, and asked, "Tight quarters?"

The man bumped his head as he backed out of the opening, prompting a few more colorful oaths, and brushed away a shock of steel-gray hair from eyes that were the blue of coral under flat water. He had a broad-shouldered frame that was an inch over six feet, and he must have weighed two hundred pounds. He grinned, showing perfect white teeth against features that had been bronzed by years at sea.

"*Very* tight. I'd need a shoehorn and a can of grease to get me into this antiquated refugee from a marine-salvage dump," he said.

A dark-complexioned face poked from the hatch, and its owner said, "Give it up, Kurt. They'd have to baste you with WD-40 and pound you in with a sledgehammer."

The broad-shouldered man made a face at the unpleasant image. He extended his hand in introduction. "I'm Kurt Austin, project director for the Bathysphere 3 expedition."

The man in the sphere wriggled out feetfirst and introduced himself. "Joe Zavala," he said. "I'm the engineer for the B3 project."

"Nice to meet you both. My name is Max Kane." He jerked his thumb at the sphere. "And I'm scheduled to dive a half mile

into the ocean in this antiquated refugee from a marine-salvage dump.”

Austin exchanged a bemused glance with Zavala. “Pleased to meet you, Dr. Kane. Sorry to cast doubt on your sanity.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone accused me of being one beer short of a six-pack. You get used to it when you’re doing pure research.” Kane removed his sunglasses, revealing eyes of Kris Kringle blue. “And please call me Doc.”

Austin gestured toward the orange globe. “Don’t pay any attention to my earlier comment, Doc. I’m nursing a serious case of sour grapes. I’d make the dive in a heartbeat if the bathysphere came in a bigger size. Joe is the best deep-sea guy in the business. He’s made the diving bell as safe as any NUMA submersible.”

Zavala cast an appraising eye on the sphere. “I used technology that wasn’t available back in the thirties, but otherwise it’s the original Beebe-Barton design that set the record by diving 3,028 feet in 1934. The bathysphere was beautiful in its simplicity.”

“The sphere design seems so obvious to us now,” Kane said. “At first, William Beebe thought that a cylinder-shaped bell might work. He was chatting with his friend Teddy Roosevelt years before the actual dive and sketched his idea out on a napkin. Roosevelt disagreed and drew a circle instead, representing his preference for a globe-shaped bell. Later, when Beebe saw the Otis Barton design based on a sphere, he realized that was the only way to deal with the pressure at great depth.”

Zavala had heard the story before. “Beebe saw that the cylinder’s flat ends would cave in,” he picked up the story, “but a sphere would distribute the pressure more evenly around its entire surface.” He squatted next to the globe and ran his hand over the thick skids that the legs rested upon. “I’ve added emergency flotation bags in the runners. There’s more than a little self-preservation involved, Doc. I’ll be making the dive with you.”

Kane rubbed his palms together like a hungry man savoring a juicy steak. "This is a dream come true," he said. "I pulled every string I could to get on the dive list. William Beebe is responsible for my career in marine microbiology. When I was a kid, I read about the glowing, deep-ocean fish that he found. I wanted to share Beebe's adventures."

"My biggest adventure has been trying to stuff myself through that fourteen-inch door," Austin said. "Try it on for size, Doc."

Kane, who was about five foot eight, hung his jacket on the bathysphere's frame, then poured himself headfirst into the sphere, doubled his body with the skill of a contortionist, and poked his head out the circular opening.

"It's roomier in here than it appears from the outside."

"The original bathysphere was four feet nine inches in diameter, and had walls one and a half inches thick made of fine-grade, open-hearth steel," Zavala said. "The divers shared their space with oxygen tanks, filter trays, a searchlight, and telephone wires. We've cheated a little. The portholes are polymer instead of fused quartz. The tether is Kevlar rather than steel, and we've replaced the copper communications link with photo-optic fiber. We miniaturized the bulkier instruments. I would have preferred a titanium sphere, but the costs were higher."

Kane easily exited the sphere and stared at it with near reverence. "You've done an amazing job, Joe. Beebe and Barton were aware they were risking their lives, but their boyish enthusiasm overcame their fears."

"That enthusiasm must have rubbed off on you to come all this distance," Austin said. "I understand you were in the Pacific Ocean."

"Yeah. Contract work for Uncle Sam. Pretty routine stuff. We're about to wrap it up, which is fortunate because there was no way I would have missed this opportunity."

The third mate was making her way across the deck toward the bathysphere accompanied by two men and a woman carrying video cameras, lights, and sound equipment.

“That’s the NUMA film crew,” Austin said to Kane. “They’ll want to interview the intrepid divers on camera.”

A look of horror came over Max Kane’s face. “I must look like crap. *Smell* like it too. Can they wait until I hop into the shower and trim the porcupine quills on my chin?”

“Joe will fill them in while you clean up. I’ll see you in the bridge after you’re done with the interview,” Austin said. “We’ll go over the plans for tomorrow.”

As he headed for the bridge, Austin reflected on how Beebe’s books had stirred his own imagination when he was a boy growing up in Seattle. He recalled one story in particular. Beebe described standing at the edge of an underwater precipice at the limit of his surface air supply, looking down with yearning into the deep water beyond his reach. The scene crystallized Austin’s own tendency to push to his limits.

Born and raised in Seattle, Austin had followed his boyhood dreams, studying systems management at the University of Washington. He also attended a prestigious deepwater diving school, specializing in salvage. He worked a few years on North Sea oil rigs and put in a stint with his father’s ocean-salvage company, but his spirit of adventure needed freer rein. He joined a clandestine underwater-surveillance unit of the CIA that he led until it was disbanded at the end of the Cold War. His father hoped he would return to ocean salvage, but Austin moved over to NUMA to head up a unique team that included Zavala and Paul and Gamay Trout. Admiral Sandecker had seen the need to create the Special Assignments Team to investigate out-of-the-ordinary events above and below the world’s oceans.

After completing the team’s last assignment, the search for a

long-lost Phoenician statue known as the *Navigator*, Austin had heard that the National Geographic Society and the New York Zoological Society were sponsoring a docudrama on Beebe's historic half-mile bathysphere dive of 1934. Actors would play Beebe and Barton, using a prop bathysphere, with much of the action simulated.

Austin persuaded the NUMA brass to let Zavala design a state-of-the-art bathysphere. The diving bell would be launched from the agency's research vessel, *William Beebe*, in conjunction with the docudrama. Like all government agencies, NUMA had to fight for its share of the federal funding pie, and favorable publicity never hurt.

Dirk Pitt had taken over from Sandecker as NUMA's director after Sandecker became the Vice President of the United States, and Pitt was equally interested in creating favorable public awareness of the agency's work. The bathysphere's pressure sphere would be recycled after the expedition as the heart of a new deep-sea submersible. The diving bell was nicknamed the B3 because it was the third pressure hull using the Beebe-Barton design.

Trailed by a cameraman and sound technician, Zavala and a freshly scrubbed Kane climbed to the bridge after being interviewed in front of the bathysphere. Austin introduced Kane to the captain, an experienced NUMA hand named Mike Gannon, who spread a chart out on a table and pointed to Nonsuch Island off the northeast tip of Bermuda.

"We'll anchor as close as possible to Beebe's original position," the captain said. "We'll be about eight miles from land with just over a half mile of water under the ship's keel."

"We decided on a shallower location than the original so we could film the sea bottom," Austin said. "How's the weather looking?"

“There’s a gale expected tonight, but it should blow out before morning,” Gannon said.

Austin turned to Kane. “We’ve been doing all the talking, Doc. What do you hope to get out of this expedition?”

Kane gave the question a moment’s thought.

“Miracles,” he said with a mysterious smile.

“How so?”

“When Beebe reported hauling phosphorescent fish in his trawl nets, his fellow scientists didn’t believe him. Beebe hoped the bathysphere would vindicate his research. He compared it to a paleontologist who could annihilate time and see his fossils alive. Like Beebe, my hope is to dramatize the miracles that lie beneath the surface of the ocean.”

“Biomedicine miracles?” Austin asked.

Kane’s dreamy expression vanished, and he seemed to catch himself.

“What do you mean, biomed?” Kane’s voice had an unexpected edge to it. He glanced at the video camera.

“I Googled Bonefish Key. Your website mentioned a morphine substitute your lab developed from snail venom. I simply wondered if you had come across anything similar in the Pacific Ocean.”

Kane broke into a smile. “I was speaking as an ocean microbiologist . . . *metaphorically*.”

Austin nodded. “Let’s talk miracles and metaphors over dinner, Doc.”

Kane opened his mouth in a yawn.

“I’m about to hit the wall,” he said. “Sorry to be a bother, Captain, but I wonder if I could have a sandwich sent to my cabin. I’d better get some sleep so I can be fresh for tomorrow’s dive.”

Austin said he would see Kane in the morning. He watched

Kane thoughtfully as he left the bridge, wondering at his edgy response to a routine question. Then he turned back to confer with the captain.

THE NEXT MORNING, the NUMA ship followed the course Beebe's expedition had taken, heading out to sea through Castle Roads, passing between high, jagged cliffs and old forts, past Gurnet Rock and into the open sea.

The gale had petered out, leaving a long, heaving swell in its wake. Plowing through low mounding water, the ship traveled for another hour before dropping anchor.

The diving bell had been put through dozens of tank tests, but Zavala wanted an unmanned launch before the main dive. A crane lifted the sealed bathysphere over the water and allowed it to sink to the fifty-foot mark. After fifteen minutes, the B3 was winched back onto the deck, and Zavala inspected the interior.

"Drier than an eye at a miser's funeral," Zavala said.

"Ready to take the plunge, Doc?" Austin asked.

"I've been ready for nearly forty years," Kane said.

Zavala tossed two inflatable cushions and a couple of blankets through the door. "Beebe and Barton sat on cold hard steel," he announced. "I've decided a minimum of comfort will be necessary."

In turn, Kane produced two skullcaps from a bag and handed one to Zavala. "Barton refused to dive unless he wore his lucky hat."

Zavala pulled the cap down on his head. Then he crawled through the bathysphere's hatch, taking care not to snag his fleece-lined jacket and pants on the steel bolts that surrounded it. He curled up next to a control panel. Kane got in next and sat

on the window side. Zavala turned the air supply on and called out to Austin, "Close the door, Kurt, it's drafty in here."

"See you for margaritas in a few hours," Austin gave the order to seal the bathysphere.

A crane lifted the four-hundred-pound hatch cover into place. The launch crew used a torque wrench to screw ten large nuts over the bolts. Kane shook hands with Austin through a four-inch circular opening in the center of the door that allowed instruments to be passed in and out without having to move the cumbersome cover. Then the crew screwed a nut into the hole to seal it.

Austin picked up a microphone connected to the bathysphere's communications system and warned the divers they were about to become airborne. The winch growled and the crane hoisted the B3 off the deck as if the fifty-four-hundred-pound steel globe and its human cargo were made of feathers, swung it over the side, and kept it suspended twenty feet above the heaving ocean surface.

Austin called the bathysphere on the radio and got Zavala's go-ahead to launch.

Through the B3's windows, the divers caught a glimpse of the upturned faces of the launch and film crews and slices of ship and sky before the portholes were awash in green bubbles and froth. The B3 splashed into the crystal clear waters and slipped beneath the surface in the valley between two rolling swells.

The crane lowered the diving bell until it was just under the surface.

Zavala's metallic-sounding voice came over a speaker mounted on a deck stand. "Thanks for the soft landing," he said.

"This crane crew could dunk this doughnut in a cup of coffee," Austin said.

“Don’t mention coffee and other liquids,” Zavala said. “The *baño* is located on the outside of the bathysphere.”

“Sorry. We’ll book you a first-class cabin next time.”

“I appreciate the offer, but my main concern is making sure our feet stay dry. Next stop . . .”

The winch let out fifty feet of cable, and the bathysphere stopped for the final safety inspection. Zavala and Kane checked the bathysphere for moisture, paying close attention to the watertight seals around the door.

Finding no leaks, Zavala made a quick run-through of the B3’s air-supply, circulation, and communications systems. The indicator lights showed that all the bathysphere’s electronic nerves and lungs were working fine. He called up to the support ship.

“Tight as a tick, Kurt. All systems go. Ready, Doc?”

“Lower away!” Kane said.

The sea’s foamy arms embraced the bathysphere like a long-lost denizen, and with only a mound of bubbles to mark its descent the hollow sphere and its two passengers began the half-mile trip to King Neptune’s realm.