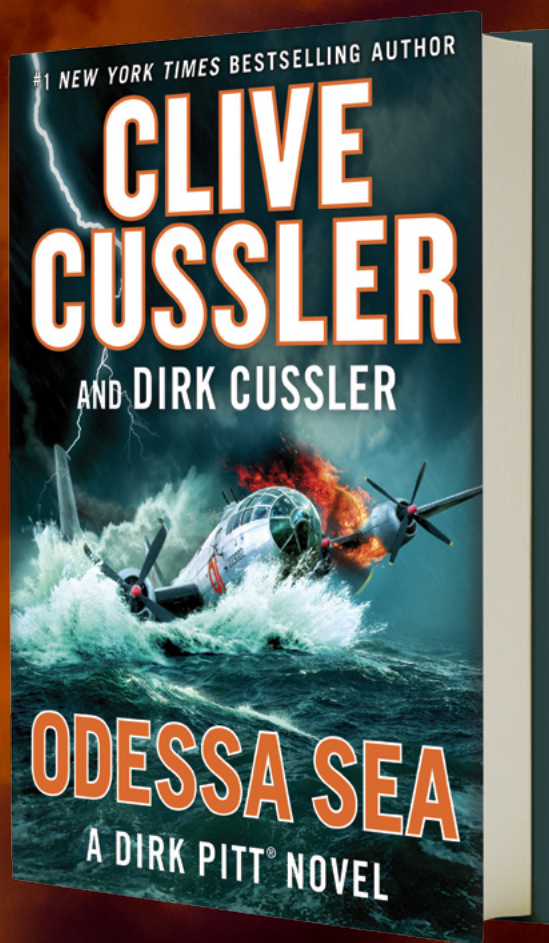


CLIVE CUSSLER

ODESSA SEA



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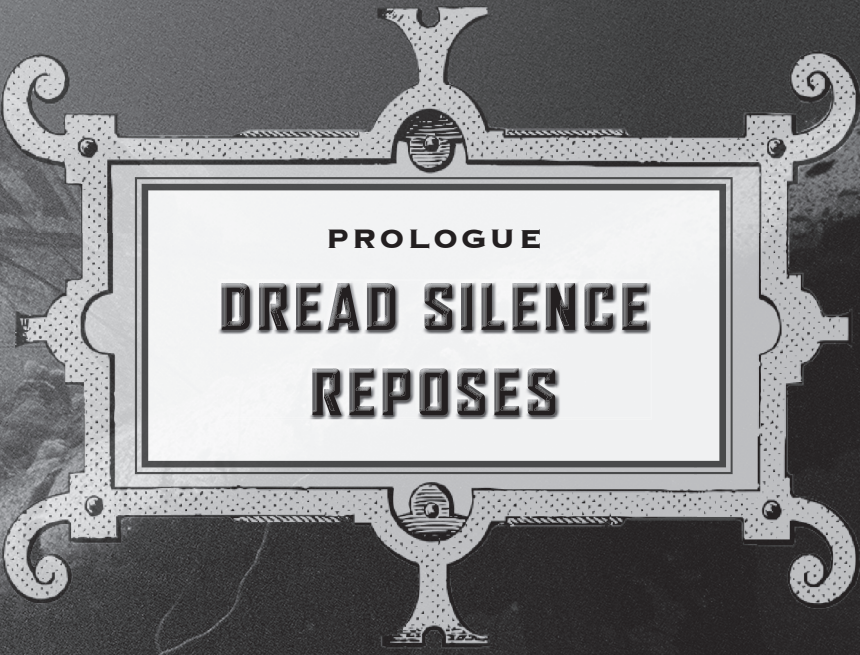
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PROLOGUE

**DREAD SILENCE
REPOSES**

FEBRUARY 1917
THE BLACK SEA



White lights danced on the horizon like beacons of death. Captain Vadim Rostov of the Imperial Russian Navy counted five orbs, each from a separate Ottoman warship standing picket at the entrance to the Bosphorus Strait. His orders on this crisp, cold night were simple. He was to engage the enemy with his destroyer and disrupt the picket line. The task, he knew, was akin to crawling through a den of hungry lions with a slaughtered lamb tied to his back.

He bit tighter on the dry stump of a Turkish cigar between his crooked teeth. The dark, hardened eyes, set in a weather-beaten face, had seen the effects of ill-conceived battle plans before—during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, and again in the Black Sea campaign of the past four years. Rostov was nudging thirty years of service in the Imperial Russian Navy, but all he had known and trusted in those decades was now dissolving. Perhaps it was not so inglorious to end his career in a suicide mission.

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He ordered a young lieutenant to find him a signalman, then turned to the living shadow beside him. The guest was a towering soldier, standing proud in the uniform of a Leib, or Imperial Guard, of the elite Preobrazhensky Regiment.

“The designs of fate will soon be revealed and the futility of our mission confirmed,” Rostov said.

“There will be no deviation of the directive,” the soldier replied.

Rostov had to admire the man. He had stood like a pillar beside him, rifle firm in his grip, since boarding the destroyer with the ship’s orders in Odessa. Orders, the captain noted, that had been personally signed by no less than Admiral Kolchak, the commander of the Imperial Navy. The soldier, Rostov thought, had surely witnessed the upper echelons of power, but he was ignorant of the world at hand. Imperial Russia would soon be nothing more than a memory, vanquished by the forces of revolution. The guard’s place in the universe was about to vanish. Word on the docks of Odessa was that the Bolsheviks had already signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers, including Turkey. Rostov chuckled to himself. Perhaps the Ottoman ships ahead would let them pass—and shower them with wine and figs in the process.

Such notions were dispelled by a faint whistling overhead as a five-inch naval shell proceeded to crash into the sea behind them.

“The Turkish gunners are not as proficient as the Germans,” Rostov said, “but they will find their mark soon enough.”

“The enemy is inferior, and you are an expert tactician,” the soldier said.

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Rostov smiled. “An expert tactician would flee overwhelming odds to fight another day.”

The ship’s signalman appeared, a raw draftee in an ill-fitting uniform. “Sir?” he said.

“Signal our companion. Tell them to proceed on their mission while we try to draw the enemy off to the west. And wish them luck.”

“Yes, sir.” The sailor exited the bridge.

Rostov turned to the guardsman. “Perhaps somebody will wish us luck as well?”

The guard gave the captain a steely look but said nothing.

Rostov stepped to the bridge wing and watched the signalman flash a message to a low-lying vessel off the port flank. As the blinking reply came from the other vessel, the specter of death raced through his mind. It was all madness. Perhaps he should turn the destroyer hard over and ram the neighboring boat. Just sink it himself, knowing what it carried. How many more must die for the vanity of the Tsar?

He cursed his own foolish honor. The truth was, no loyalty remained in the Navy’s ranks. The mutiny on the *Potemkin* proved as much. And that was a decade before the current revolution. Many of the fleet’s ships had already pledged allegiance to the Bolsheviks. The loyalty of his own crew was in question, but at least they hadn’t shown any signs of mutiny—yet. They knew as well as he that the Imperial Navy was all but finished. Rostov shook his head. He should have walked off the ship in Odessa and disappeared into the Carpathian Mountains, as some wiser officers had done.

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Another shell whistled overhead. Duty took reign in the face of the enemy fire, and he marched stiffly back onto the bridge. *Duty*, he thought. Another word for death.

The bridge crew stood at their posts, looking at him with anticipation.

“Give me maximum speed,” he told the junior officer. “Helm, set a course bearing two-four-zero degrees.”

“Gun batteries report at the ready, sir.” The lieutenant rang a brass handle on the bridge telegraph, relaying the change in speed to the engine room.

“Inform all batteries to target the last ship in line to the east,” Rostov ordered.

The Russian destroyer’s funnel belched black plumes of smoke. The *Kerch*, as she was named, shuddered under the strain as its steam turbines spun at their maximum revolutions.

The change in course and speed threw off the enemy guns, and their shells fell harmlessly behind the destroyer. Rostov gazed at the lights of the Turkish vessels, which now appeared off the port wing as the ship steamed west. Five-to-one, he thought. The odds had been less intimidating two days earlier when they left Odessa in the company of the *Gnevny*, another light destroyer. But the *Gnevny* had developed shaft problems and turned back. Rostov had no such luck. He would have to face the enemy force alone.

The captain waited to open fire until an incoming shell hit the water ten meters off his beam, showering the deck with seawater. All four of the destroyer’s four-inch guns fired simultaneously in return, spitting flames into the night sky.

Through skill and good luck, one of the Russian shells struck

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its target, piercing the vessel's magazine. Rostov raised his binoculars as a fireball erupted from the trailing Ottoman ship.

"Concentrate fire on the next vessel to the west," he told the lieutenant. It had been an extremely lucky hit. His strategy—and prayer—was to disable or damage the two ships guarding the eastern approach, then attract the remaining vessels in pursuit. It was the only hope for the mission to succeed.

The night became alight with fire and thunder. The remaining Ottoman ships opened up with broadside after broadside, countered by the full punch of the destroyer. The Russian ship was surprisingly fast and kept a healthy cushion ahead of the Turkish gunners. But the gap narrowed as two of the Ottoman ships turned to close with the *Kerch*.

"A hit! On the second vessel," the lieutenant cried.

Rostov nodded. He had the most experienced gun crew in the Black Sea Fleet and it was showing. He turned to the Leib Guard, who was peering at the distant inferno. "Your royal odyssey may have a chance after all."

The guard smiled slightly, the first indication of humanity he had shown in two days. Then he vanished in an exploding veil of black smoke.

A Turkish shell had struck the lip of the port deck. The occupants of the bridge were knocked from their feet as a shower of flame shot skyward.

"Helm! Set heading to three-six-zero degrees," Rostov shouted before he staggered back to his feet. To his left, the guard lay facedown on the deck, a twisted piece of shrapnel protruding from his back.

The helmsman acknowledged his order, pulled himself up-

CLIVE CUSSLER

right by the ship's wheel, and spun it hard to the right. But the evasive move came too late. The Turks had finally found their mark, and another volley rained down. A leading shell blew off the destroyer's prow, while another struck amidships and ripped open the hull. The vessel shook as water poured into the forward compartments, lifting the stern and its spinning propellers out of the water.

Rostov found a megaphone and shouted for the crew to abandon ship. The lieutenant scrambled to launch a lifeboat on the starboard deck. Returning to the bridge, Rostov found the helmsman, standing fixed at the wheel, his knuckles white against the wooden spokes.

"Sasha, find a life jacket and get off the ship," Rostov said gently. He stepped over and swung a backhand against the boy's cheek.

Broken from his fear, the helmsman staggered off the bridge, muttering, "Yes, Captain. Yes, Captain."

Rostov stood alone on the bridge now as a loud bang near the stern rattled the ship. A fuel tank had ruptured and ignited. Rostov stumbled to keep his balance, groping along the deck for his binoculars. Raising them to his smoke-burnt eyes, he gazed aft past the wall of flames to a point in the distant sea.

He saw it, just for an instant. A single mast that seemed to protrude directly from the water was cutting a thin white wake toward the Bosphorus. A whistling overhead grew loud as the captain nodded at the vanishing apparition. "Duty served," he muttered.

A second later, the twin shells struck, obliterating the bridge and sending the warship's shattered hulk to the seafloor.

APRIL 1955
THE BLACK SEA



Ice blue lightning flashed before Dimitri Sarkhov's weary eyes. The pilot blinked away the spots that pranced before his retinas and refocused on an expansive panel of gauges and dials. The altimeter fluctuated around the twenty-six-hundred-meter mark. A sudden external buffeting pulled at the yoke, and, in less than a heartbeat, the big plane dropped thirty meters.

"Wretched storm." The copilot, a moonfaced man named Medev, wiped a spilled mug of coffee from his leg.

Sarkhov shook his head. "The weather office calls this a light, low-pressure front." Thick raindrops pelted the windscreen, rendering the night sky around them impenetrable.

"They don't know a thunderstorm from spit. They're real geniuses at wing command, sending us on a training mission through this weather. Especially given what we're carrying."

"I'll take us down five hundred meters and see if the air is more stable." Sarkhov fought the yoke controls.

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They lumbered through the storm in a Tupolev Tu-4, a massive, four-engine bomber with a wingspan as long as a tall building. Over the roar of the engines, the airframe creaked and groaned. A sudden burst of turbulence jolted the craft, prompting a flashing red light on the instrument panel.

“Bomb bay door,” Sarkhov said. “Probably jarred the sensor.”

“Or our usual faulty electronics.” Medev called the bombardier to investigate but got no response. “Vasily is probably asleep again. I’ll go back and take a look. If the bomb bay door is open, maybe I’ll kick him out.”

Sarkhov gave a tight grin. “Just don’t drop anything else.”

Medev climbed from his seat and snaked his way back through the fuselage. He returned to the cockpit a few minutes later. “The doors are sealed and appear fine, the payload secure. And Vasily was indeed asleep. Now he has a print from my boot on his backside.”

The plane suddenly pitched and plunged. A loud bang sounded from the rear of the craft, while Medev was flung into an overhead instrument cluster. The copilot crumpled into his seat, his legs jamming against the starboard engines throttle controls.

“Ivan?” Sarkhov called. There was a trickle of blood on Medev’s forehead. He reached over and tried to pull back on the throttle controls. But fighting against the bulk of the unconscious copilot and his tightly wedged legs, he had only limited success.

Sarkhov’s entire world seemed to explode. The instrument panel ignited with flashing lights and alarms, and his headset burst with cries from the flight crew. The bomber had entered the worst of the storm and was being pummeled from all sides. As he fought the flight controls, Sarkhov detected an acrid odor.

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The cacophony of voices in his headset settled into one panicked voice.

“Captain, this is the navigator. We have a fire. I repeat, we have a fire in the auxiliary flight generator. Navigation and communication stations are—”

“Navigator, are you there? Vasily? Fodorsky?”

No reply.

Smoke began billowing into the cockpit, burning Sarkhov’s eyes. Through the haze, he noticed a new array of warning lights. The high-revving starboard engines were dangerously overheating, aided by a ruptured oil line.

The pilot shoved the nose down as he pulled the starboard throttles hard against Medev’s limp legs. Keeping one eye on the altimeter, he watched as the bomber descended. He intended to level off at a thousand meters and order the crew to bail out. But a bright flash out the side window dictated otherwise. Overheated and starved of oil, the inside starboard engine erupted in a mass of flames.

Sarkhov throttled back the port engines, but it mattered little. As he descended, the turbulence only got worse. He called for the flight crew to bail out but had no idea if anyone could hear. At the thousand-meter mark, the cabin filled with black smoke. At five hundred meters, he could feel the heat of the flames behind the cockpit.

Sweat dripped from his brow, not from the heat but from the stress of trying to control the massive plane in its rapid descent. There was no thought of bailing out himself, not with the wall of flames he’d have to cross and the need to leave Medev behind. His only thought was to will the plane down, fearing the rudder

CLIVE CUSSLER

and aileron controls would vanish under the lick of the flames. He pushed the yoke harder, trying to get beneath the storm and find a place to ditch.

At one hundred meters, he turned on the landing lights, but the heavy rain still obscured his vision. Were they over land? He thought he glimpsed a black, featureless plain.

The flames entered the cabin, igniting the flight plans dangling from a clipboard. Taking a deep breath, Sarkhov cut the power to the three remaining engines and felt the plane surge lower.

From afar, the bomber appeared to be a glowing comet, a fury of flames spitting from its midsection. The fireball descended through the black, wet night until it plunged into the sea, vanishing as if it had never existed.



PART I
**THE MISTS OF
THE DEEP**

1



JULY 2017
THE BLACK SEA

A dull glow blanketed the southern horizon in a cottony glaze. Although Istanbul was more than fifty miles away, the electric blaze from its fourteen million inhabitants lit the night sky like a sea of lanterns. Churning slowly toward the light, a weathered black freighter rolled in a choppy sea. The ship rode low, catching the sporadic rogue wave that sent a spray of seawater surging across its deck.

On the wide bridge, the helmsman nudged the wheel to port, fighting a stiff breeze.

“Speed?”

The question came from a bearded man hunched over a chart table. His gray eyes were glassy and bloodshot, and his voice offered a trace of a slur. His sweat-stained clothes hinted at priorities other than hygiene. As the crew expected, in the two days since the ship had left port the freighter’s captain had ventured well into his third bottle of vodka.

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“Eight knots, sir,” the helmsman said.

The captain grunted, estimating the time it would take them to clear the Bosphorus Strait.

A bridge wing door opened and an armed man in brown fatigues entered. He approached the glassy-eyed captain with a mix of concern and disdain. “The sea is getting rough. There is water washing over the decks.”

The captain looked at the man and snickered. “You sure it is not just your vomit that is soiling my decks?”

Green at the gills, the armed man found no humor in the comment. “I am responsible for the cargo. Perhaps we should get closer to shore.”

The captain shook his head. He’d had an uneasy feeling when the ship’s owner phoned him minutes before they were to depart Sevastopol, instructing him to wait for a last-minute delivery. The small gang of armed men that arrived in a battered panel van only contributed to his suspicions as he watched them unload a large metal crate. He’d protested when they’d insisted on placing it in the engine room but muffled his complaints when he was handed a bag of uncirculated rubles. Now he glared at one of the two armed men who had accompanied the secret cargo.

“Get off my bridge, you stupid fool. These seas are for children. The *Crimean Star* can slice through waves five times larger and still deliver your precious cargo intact.”

The armed man steadied himself against a roll and leaned into the captain. “The shipment will go through as scheduled—or I will see that you will be scraping barnacles off an icebreaker in Murmansk.” The man moved off to the side bridge wing. He stood in defiance, the fresh breeze helping quell his seasickness.

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The captain ignored him, studying his charts and tracking the ship's progress.

The freighter rolled along quietly for another twenty minutes before the helmsman called out. "Sir, there's a vessel approaching off our flank that appears to be mirroring our track."

The captain raised himself from the table and stepped to the helm. He glanced at the radarscope, which showed the green blip of a vessel approaching from the stern. A faint smaller blip appeared briefly about a mile ahead of the ship. "Come right, steer a course two-three-zero."

"Right rudder, to two-three-zero degrees." The helmsman rotated the ship's wheel.

The freighter eased onto the new heading. A few minutes later, the shadowing vessel was seen to follow.

The captain scowled. "Probably an inexperienced commander looking for a guide to lead them through the strait. Hold your course."

A moment later, a deep thump sounded across the waves, followed by a slight vibration that shook the decks.

"What was that?" the gunman asked.

The captain stared out the bridge window, trying to focus on the source of the noise.

"Sir, it's an explosion in the water." The helmsman pointed off the bow. "Directly ahead of us."

The captain found his focus and spotted the falling remnants of a large water spire a hundred meters ahead of the ship.

"Engine ahead one-third." He reached for a pair of binoculars.

There was little to focus on, aside from a frothy boil of water

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in their path. He glanced out the rear bridge window and noticed the lights of the accompanying vessel had drawn closer. There were actually two vessels—a large workboat towing a barge.

An acrid odor enveloped the bridge, subtle, initially, then overpowering. The armed man near the doorway felt the effects first, choking and coughing, then dropping his weapon and falling to his knees. The helmsman followed, gagging and crumpling to the deck.

His senses numbed by alcohol, the captain was slower to feel the invisible assault. As his two companions on the bridge turned silent and stiff, his mind grasped to understand what was happening. Somewhere nearby he heard a gunshot, then he felt his throat constrict. His pulse raced as he struggled to breathe. Staggering to the helm, he grabbed the radio transmitter and rasped into it, “Mayday! Mayday! This is the *Crimean Star*. We are under attack. Please help us.”

Confusion and fear were consumed by an overpowering pain. He swayed for a second as the transmitter slipped from his hand and then he collapsed to the deck, dead.

2



“Sir, there’s no response on the emergency channel.” The youthful third officer looked up from the communications station and gazed at a lean man studying the ship’s radarscope.

Dirk Pitt nodded in acknowledgment while keeping his eyes glued to the radar screen. “All right, Chavez. Let them know we’re on our way. Then you best go rouse the captain.”

Pitt straightened his tall frame and turned toward the helmsman. “We’re well clear of the Bosphorus, so you can open her up. The *Crimean Star* looks to be about thirteen miles ahead of us. Steer a course of zero-five-five degrees and give me everything she’s got.”

As the helmsman acknowledged the order, Pitt called the engine room and had the chief engineer apply all available power to the vessel’s twin screws. A low whine reverberated through the fifty-meter oceanographic research ship as its twin diesels wound to maximum revolutions. A few minutes later, the ship’s captain,

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a large, sandy-haired man named Bill Stenseth, stepped onto the bridge. He was followed by Third Officer Chavez, who resumed his place at the communications station.

Stenseth suppressed a yawn. "We've got a Mayday?"

"A single distress call from a vessel named *Crimean Star*," Pitt said. "Listed as a Romanian-flagged bulk freighter. She appears to be on a direct inbound course about a dozen miles ahead of us."

Stenseth gazed at the radar screen, then noted his own ship's accelerating speed. "Do we know the nature of their emergency?"

"All we picked up was a single distress call. Chavez hailed them repeatedly, but there was no response." Pitt tapped a finger on the radar screen. "We look to be the closest ship in the area."

"The Turkish Coast Guard Command might have some fast-responding resources nearby." He turned to the third officer. "Let's give them a call, Chavez."

Pitt grabbed a handheld radio from a charging stand and stepped toward a bridge wing door. "Chavez, when you're done there, can you ring Al Giordino and have him meet me on the aft deck in ten minutes? I'll prep a Zodiac in case we're needed aboard. Call me when we're clear to launch."

"Will do," Chavez said.

As Pitt started to leave, Stenseth squinted at a bulkhead-mounted chronometer. It read two in the morning. "By the way, what were you doing on the bridge at this hour?"

"A loose davit was banging against my cabin bulkhead and woke me up. After securing it, I wandered up to see where we were."

"Sixth sense, I'd say."

Pitt smiled as he left the bridge. Over the years, he did seem

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to have a knack for finding trouble around him. Or perhaps it found him.

The Director of the National Underwater and Marine Agency climbed down two levels, then moved aft along the main deck of the oceanographic research ship. A roar from the engine room revealed that the *Macedonia* was pressing her rated top speed of seventeen knots, kicking up white foam along her turquoise sides. She was one of several dozen research vessels in the NUMA fleet tasked with studying the world's oceans.

On the *Macedonia's* fantail, Pitt released the lines of a Zodiac, secured to a cradle, and pulled back its oilskin cover. He checked the fuel tank, then attached a lift cable. Satisfied as to its readiness, he stepped to the ship's rail and peered ahead for the distant lights of the *Crimean Star*.

He shouldn't even be here, Pitt thought. He had joined the *Macedonia* in Istanbul just the day before, after traveling from his headquarters office in Washington, D.C. A last-minute plea for assistance from the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture to help locate a lost Ottoman shipwreck had lured him halfway across the globe.

Twenty minutes later, the NUMA research ship pulled alongside the black freighter, which drifted silently like an illuminated ghost ship. On the *Macedonia's* bridge, Captain Stenseth scanned the merchant ship through night vision binoculars.

"Still no response from the vessel," Chavez said. "Turkish authorities report a cutter is en route, and a rescue helicopter is being scrambled from Istanbul, with an estimated arrival time of twenty-six minutes."

Stenseth nodded as he held the binoculars firm to his brow.

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There was no sign of life aboard the ship. He glanced at the radar-scope. A small image a half mile distant was moving away from the freighter. Retraining the binoculars, he detected the faint outline of a vessel with no running lights. He picked up a handheld radio. "Bridge to Pitt."

"Pitt here."

"The freighter is still silent and adrift. I see no signs of a list or physical damage. Turkish Coast Guard resources are on the way, if you want to sit tight."

"Negative. There could be lives at risk. Al and I will attempt to board. Pitt out."

Pitt turned to a short, sleepy-eyed man standing next to the Zodiac. He had a broad, muscular frame that looked like it had been carved out of a block of granite.

"Let's get over the side," Pitt said.

Al Giordino yawned. "This better be a real distress. I was cozy in my bunk, dreaming I was in a Turkish harem and the veils were about to come off."

Pitt smiled. "The girls in the harem will thank me."

They lowered the Zodiac over the side, climbed down, and released its lift cable. Pitt started the outboard and spun the throttle, shooting the inflatable boat across the choppy water to the freighter's side. Running down the ship's length, he spotted a lowered accommodations ladder near the stern and ran toward it.

"Nice of them to leave the welcome mat out." Giordino hopped onto the base of the ladder and tied off the Zodiac. He sniffed the air and frowned. "Smells like the Easter Bunny left us a basket of rotten eggs."

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“Something in her cargo, perhaps,” Pitt said. But the smell didn’t seem to originate from the ship.

The two ran up the steps and boarded the ship, finding the foul odor gradually diminished. Under the stark illumination of the deck lights, the passageways appeared empty as they moved forward toward the accommodations block. The deck hatches were secured and the ship appeared undamaged, just as Stenseth had reported.

Approaching a companionway to the bridge, they hesitated. A body blocked the doorway, that of a young man in dark fatigues whose hair was sheared in a short buzz cut. In its frozen state of death, his face expressed a mixture of confusion and agony, his open blue eyes searching for reason. His stiff hands cradled an AK-47.

“He was fighting off somebody.” Pitt toed the deck near a handful of spent shell casings.

Giordino played a flashlight on the body. “No visible cause of death.”

They stepped over the body and into the companionway, which they climbed to the bridge on the fifth level. There they found another macabre scene. An armed man in fatigues sprawled beside a crewman near the helm. An older, bearded man, likely the captain, had collapsed near a chart table. Giordino checked for signs of life, but bulging eyes, blue skin, and contorted mouths signified a quick but painful end.

“No external wounds, just like the guy downstairs,” Giordino said.

Pitt noticed a smell of sulfur and opened a bridge window. “Possible gas leak. Why don’t you check the crew’s quarters for

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possible survivors? I'll let the *Macedonia* know what we've found, then see about getting this floating coffin under way."

Giordino moved down to the companionway to the living quarters beneath the bridge. Pitt relayed a report to Stenseth, then engaged the freighter's engines and turned on a course toward Istanbul, accompanied by the *Macedonia*.

The freighter slowly gathered speed, plowing through an endless line of high swells as it angled south. Pitt was checking for approaching traffic when a loud bang reverberated from the stern. He turned to see a fountain of white water erupt outboard of the port flank. The freighter shuddered as red lights flashed on the helm console.

"What was that?" Giordino's voice crackled over the hand-held radio.

"Small explosion on the stern."

"Somebody trying to scuttle her?"

"Could be."

Pitt studied a navigation monitor. The nearest land was eight miles distant. He altered course, hopeful he might run the ship aground if necessary. Additional red lights on the console told him they wouldn't make it. Some papers slide off a corner workstation, confirming the growing list he felt beneath his feet.

"The ship is flooding," he radioed to Giordino. "How are you making out?"

"Two crewmen dead in their bunks. I think there's another suite of cabins to check in the deck below."

Pitt detected something out of the corner of his eye. To his side, a closed-circuit video monitor displayed live feeds from the bow, stern, and engine room. He had seen some sort of move-

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ment in the engine room. Looking closer, he could just distinguish a prone figure at the rear of the image.

“Al, finish up and meet me on deck in five minutes. I’m going to check the engine room.”

The helm console was ablaze with flashing lights as the flooding crept through the freighter’s lower recesses. The bow had already begun rising toward the sky as the stern sank lower. Pitt glanced at the distant lights onshore, then ran from the bridge. He reached the main deck and descended a companionway to the engine room.

Pitt found the floor of the engine bay awash, but the power plants continued to churn with a deafening roar. Through flickering lights, he spotted a figure stretched out on a gray case behind a generator. Pitt waded over to find a young crewman in oil-stained coveralls, his feet dangling in the rising water. His face had a bluish tint as he stared at Pitt through listless eyes, then blinked.

“Hang on,” Pitt said. “I’ll get you out of here.”

He hooked an arm around the stricken man, raised him to his feet, and muscled him up the steps. Pitt glanced around for additional survivors, but the bay was empty. He struggled up the steps with his load, a journey made harder by the ship’s list. They reached a hatch door, which Pitt kicked open as a generator below them sizzled to a halt from the rising waters.

Giordino stood near the rail and rushed over to help. “This baby’s about to go under. The *Macedonia* is ordering us to evacuate right away.”

They were briefly blinded by a powerful searchlight from the NUMA ship that swept over the angled deck. Pitt glanced aft.

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Waves were washing over the stern rail. Metallic creaks and groans filled the air, along with sporadic crashes from shifting cargo. The freighter had only seconds left afloat.

Pitt and Giordino dragged the crewman across to the accommodations ladder. The freighter's steep list had raised the stairway to a nearly horizontal angle. Giordino descended first, supporting the engineer over his shoulder as Pitt lowered the injured man by the collar. Alongside them, the freighter shuddered as it fought to stay afloat.

"We've got a problem," Giordino said.

Pitt stared at the Zodiac. Partially submerged, the inflatable was standing on end in the water. As the ship settled, the lower section of the accommodations ladder had dropped underwater. The attached bow line had pulled the Zodiac down with it, leaving it bobbing upright like a cork in the water.

The freighter lurched again, its bow shooting skyward as its stern began sliding into the sea. They could simply wait a few seconds and step off into the water, but they would face the risk of being pulled under by the suction from the sinking ship. Even if they managed to swim free, there was a good chance the semi-conscious engineer would drown.

"Take him and grab hold of the Zodiac," Pitt yelled. Then he stepped off the ladder and dove into the sea.

Pitt struck the surface alongside the upright mass of the Zodiac, the cold water prickling his skin. As he kicked downward, he felt along the inflatable's fiberglass hull. The Zodiac suddenly jerked away from him as the freighter began its final plunge. Pitt kicked hard to keep up, pulling himself along the inflatable's surface wherever he could find a grip. In the dark water, he reached

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out and felt its pointed prow. Grabbing hold, he pulled himself forward while groping with his other hand for the bow line.

The rope was tightly secured in the Zodiac's interior, so his only chance for a quick release was to free it from the ship's ladder. He pulled himself hand over hand against the rush of water, a flurry of bubbles obscuring the minimal visibility. The growing water pressure squeezed his ears and lungs as he willed himself down the line. His outstretched hand finally banged against the platform and he grasped the cleat that held the line. The rope was pulled taut by the pressure, but he found the end and began working it loose. With a hard tug, the line broke free.

The accommodations ladder smacked his side as the Zodiac began to shoot toward the surface. Pitt nearly lost his breath but clung tightly to the line. With the freighter continuing to slide past him, he had no sense of ascending until his ears popped. A second later, he was flung above the waves by the momentum of the surfacing inflatable. He regained his bearings and swam to the side of the Zodiac. A waterlogged Al Giordino reached over the side and helped hoist him aboard. He grinned at Pitt. "I'm glad you didn't wait to hit bottom before releasing the line."

Pitt forced an exhausted smile. "I wanted to give you your money's worth. How's our friend?"

"If you understand Russian, he can tell you himself. He swallowed a bit of seawater during our thrill ride but actually seems better for it after a bit of retching."

The crewman sat on the floor of the Zodiac, clinging to a bench seat. Though his skin was pale, his eyes appeared steady, and he breathed easily. He glanced up at Pitt and nodded.

Around them, a collection of flotsam coated the water. A

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motor sounded nearby and a second Zodiac from the *Macedonia* raced over and towed the battered inflatable back to the research ship. The freighter's crewman was rushed to sick bay while Pitt and Giordino climbed to the bridge.

Captain Stenseth greeted them with mugs of hot coffee. "You boys cut your exit a little close there."

Giordino savored the warm brew. "It being a nice night for a midnight swim, we opted for a dip."

"Only one survivor?"

"Afraid so," Pitt said. "The other crewmen showed no signs of injury. Looks to be a possible chemical or gas leak."

"Something to do with that blast?"

"I'm not sure," Pitt said. "It occurred well aft of the cargo holds."

"She didn't look old enough to be a candidate for an insurance policy scuttling," Giordino said. "That leaves an accident or an aborted hijacking."

They were interrupted by a call from an approaching Turkish Coast Guard helicopter.

Stenseth turned to Chavez. "Tell them the *Crimean Star* has gone down and that we're at the site of the sinking. We'll welcome their assistance in searching for survivors."

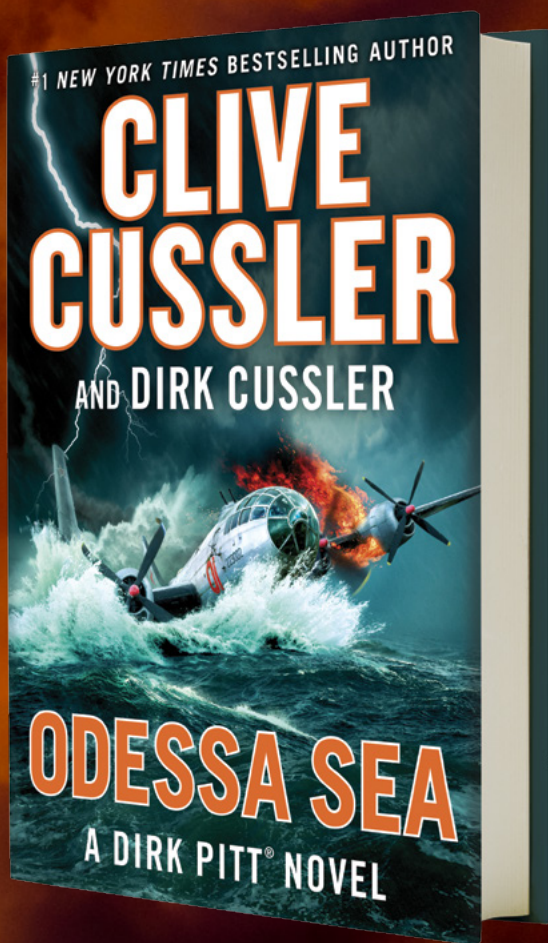
The thumping drone of the search and rescue chopper sounded a moment later. Pitt and Giordino stepped to the bridge wing as it surveyed the freighter's small field of floating debris. Its bright searchlight narrowed on a pair of drifting bodies.

Giordino shook his head. "All of her crew gone but one."

Staring at the roiling sea, Pitt nodded. "A death ship that took her secrets with her. At least for now."

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