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AND GRAHAM BROWN

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SEA OF GREED

A Novel from the NUMA® Files

CLIVE CUSSLER
AND GRAHAM BROWN

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MEDITERRANEAN—1968

David Ben-Avi—Israeli genetics expert, stationed on Jaros.

André Cheval—French scientist and overall leader for Project Jericho.

Lukas—French Commando and member of the SDECE, the French External Intelligence.

Gideon—Executive officer on the Israeli submarine INS *Dakar*.

NATIONAL UNDERWATER AND MARINE AGENCY

Kurt Austin—Director of NUMA's Special Projects division, world-class diver and salvage expert.

Joe Zavala—Kurt's closest friend, mechanical genius responsible for constructing much of NUMA's exotic equipment.

Priya Kashmir—Lead member of NUMA's technology division, confined to a wheelchair due to an automobile accident but determined to get onto a field team.

Rudi Gunn—Assistant Director of NUMA, graduate of the Naval Academy.

Hiram Yaeger—NUMA's resident computer genius, owner of many patents relating to computer design.

St. Julien Perlmutter—NUMA historian and gourmet chef, owns thousands of rare books and artifacts.

Paul Trout—Member of the Special Projects division, has a Ph.D. in Ocean Sciences, married to Gamay.

Gamay Trout—NUMA's leading marine biologist, married to Paul, Gamay is a fitness aficionado and tends to say exactly what's on her mind.

Kevin Brooks—Captain of the NUMA vessel *Raleigh*.

CREW OF ALPHA STAR OIL PLATFORM

Rick L. Cox—Operations manager and drilling supervisor of the Alpha Star offshore rig.

Leon Nash—Roughneck and crewmen on the Alpha Star.

NOVUM INDUSTRIA

Tessa Franco—Founder and CEO of Novum Industria, a high-tech alternative energy company, also the designer of the *Monarch*, a one-of-a-kind amphibious aircraft.

Arat Buran—Volatile leader of Central Asian oil consortium, Tessa's former lover and confidant, currently involved with Novum via a clandestine financial arrangement.

Pascal Millard—Censured French geneticist, now working for Novum.

Brian Yates—Engineer and architect of Novum's revolutionary fuel cells.

MERCENARIES

Volke—Submersible pilot and former mercenary, works for Tessa in various capacities.

Woodrich—Ecological fanatic, wants to see the end of the Oil Age at all costs, goes by the nickname "Woods."

Alexander Vastoga—Ex-Russian helicopter pilot and soldier of fortune, can be had for a high price.

FLORIDA

Misty Moon Littlefeather—Electronics expert and old friend of Joe's.

Redfish—Misty's father, always suspicious of Joe's intentions toward his daughter.

WASHINGTON POLITICIANS

Lance Alcott—Head of FEMA, jockeying for control of the Alpha Star cleanup.

Leonard Hallsman—Former geologist, now Undersecretary of National Resources and Energy Security.

James Sandecker—Vice President of the United States, founder and former Director of NUMA.

BERMUDA

Macklin Hatcher—Wealthy venture capitalist, false identity assumed by Kurt Austin.

Ronald Ruff—Hatcher’s assistant, false identity assumed by Joe Zavala.

ISRAEL

Admiral Natal—Israeli Admiral, old friend of Rudi Gunn’s, currently in charge of the Office of Naval Records in Haifa.

SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT

INS *Dakar*—Israeli submarine, purchased from the British, vanished on its way from the UK to Haifa in January 1968.

Minerve (S647)—French submarine, vanished in 1968 roughly twenty-five miles from Toulon.

Monarch—Wide-body amphibious aircraft designed by Tessa Franco, built in Kazakhstan.

GRYPHON—Well-armed NUMA hydrofoil, deployed in dangerous environments.

SEA OF GREED

PART ONE

THE VANISHING

1

ISLAND OF JAROS, AEGEAN SEA JANUARY 1968

DAVID BEN-AVI walked along a trail on the rocky, windswept island of Jaros. The barren clump of land was just three miles in length and no more than half a mile wide at its broadest point. It sat in an isolated spot of the Mediterranean, a hundred miles northwest of Crete. Though it was officially uninhabited, Ben-Avi and a dozen others had called it home for nearly two years.

With hands shoved in his pockets, Ben-Avi kept his face to the wind, walking briskly. The Mediterranean air had a bite to it in January. Fresh and pure in comparison to the stuffy laboratory and cramped barracks they lived in.

The solitude wasn't bad either . . . while it lasted.

"David," a voice called from behind him. "Where are you going?"

The words came in English with a distinct French accent.

Ben-Avi stopped in his tracks. *Mother Hen had found him.*

He turned to see André Cheval, rushing after him. Cheval was leader of the French contingent on the island but also acted as

overall commander for the entire group. He was always after them about something. Trash in the correct receptacle, no outside lights after sundown, be careful near the cliffs.

He was dressed in outdoor gear and carrying a wool peacoat, which he handed to Ben-Avi. "Put this on. It's freezing out here."

Freezing was an exaggeration, but Ben-Avi took the coat without objection, he knew better than to argue.

"Where are you going?" Cheval asked.

"You know where I'm going," Ben-Avi said. "Out on the bluff, to watch the sunset and think."

"I'll walk with you," Cheval said.

"Can't I go anywhere without a chaperone?"

"Of course," Cheval said. "You're not a prisoner."

That was true. Ben-Avi and the others were here as part of a joint Franco-Israeli research project. They had all volunteered, but after so long on the barren island, with only the monthly arrival of a supply ship to break the monotony, it felt like they were marking time and waiting to be paroled.

"I have a feeling," Ben-Avi said, "that all who come to Jaros must be prisoners in one sense or another. The Greeks kept captured communist insurgents here after World War Two, the Turks used it five centuries before that and the Romans picked this desolate spot to exile a troublesome daughter of the Emperor Octavian."

"Really?" Cheval said.

Ben-Avi nodded. At the same time, he wondered how the Frenchman could live on the tiny island so long and not know a thing about it.

"At least the Romans put some thought into the place," Ben-Avi said. "All the Greeks did was put up those terrible rock huts we're living in. The Romans carved the harbor out of solid rock. They set

up catchment basins, dug a series of tunnels and underground cisterns to hold the rainwater, even found a way of using limestone to purify it and keep it from becoming stagnant. You should really have a look at them, they're quite remarkable."

Cheval nodded but seemed unimpressed. "It seems Octavian's daughter commanded a nicer prison than communist rebels."

The two men continued walking, though because the path was narrow in places Cheval was half a step behind.

"So, what do you think about when you're out here?" Cheval asked. "Getting back to Israel?"

"That and the implications of our work," Ben-Avi said.

"Don't tell me you're having second thoughts? It's a little late now. The project is all but finished."

Ben-Avi stopped and glanced sideways at the Frenchman. The project, as he called it, was a giant step forward in an entirely new branch of science called genetics. It involved manipulation of cellular codes, tampering with the instructions of living things. The field had been talked about in theoretical terms for years, but like many scientific endeavors—everything from atomic energy to spaceflight—once the military became interested, progress had accelerated dramatically.

"We're changing living things," Ben-Avi said. "Distorting life, creating new life. That's an awesome responsibility."

"Yes," Cheval said. "Some of the others have suggested that we're tampering with the designs of God. Do you feel this way?"

"Which god?" Ben-Avi replied briskly.

"Any god," Cheval said. "Yours, mine . . . the universe at large. Take your pick. Is that what you're worried about? Divine retribution?"

Ben-Avi resumed his walk, continuing along the path, angry

now. "If God chose this moment to get into the retribution business, I would find that a very funny thing indeed. I would ask Him where He was when the Nazis came to power and *Kristallnacht* occurred. Ask Him where He was when the fires burned in the camps, incinerating the bodies of murdered Jews, day and night."

"So, the Holocaust shook your faith?"

"Not just the Holocaust," Ben-Avi said. "The entire war. I was an engineering student before it started. Because of my skills, the German Army dragged me into Russia with them. Whoever the Germans didn't kill on the way in the Russians killed on the way out. After that, I was in Berlin when the Allies bombed it to rubble. Buildings shattered to bricks, bricks pounded to dust. Day and night the raids came until the air was black and we choked with every breath. And that was nothing compared to the firebombing of Dresden. It's a wonder that anyone survived."

Ben-Avi focused his attention back on the path, they'd come to the steepest section. When they reached the top, he would be able to see the ocean. "If there is a God, then either He doesn't care what we do or He's grown so disgusted with us that He's given up on His creation. And who could really blame Him?"

Cheval nodded. "You are troubled, my friend. If it's not God you're worried about, then what?"

"I'm concerned with the power we've unleashed," Ben-Avi said. "Every invention of man, every discovery ever made, has ultimately been used in war. This will be no different. Mark my words."

"Then why continue the work?" Cheval asked, suddenly sharper in his tone. "Why wait until we've finally succeeded to question our acts?"

Ben-Avi had asked himself that question a hundred times. He had a pat answer waiting. "Because the world is a harsh and unforgiving place, and Israel must do what it needs to survive. With or without God's help."

"So, it's every country for itself," Cheval said. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"It has to be," Ben-Avi said.

Ben-Avi was breathing hard as he climbed the last section, too hard to keep pontificating. He made it to the top of the bluff and looked out over a sheltered bay. The sea was calm, the sunset glinting upon it, the long arm of the breakwater protecting the small harbor as it had since the Romans built it. But the harbor was not empty as it should have been. A long, thin, sinister-looking vessel lay at anchor inside the bay, a surfaced submarine. Its bow pointed to the heart of the island like a dagger.

Ben-Avi turned around and saw that Cheval was holding a pistol on him.

"I'm afraid you're right," Cheval explained. "It is every nation for itself. If we didn't act, your government would. And that we cannot allow."

The sound of muted gunfire reached them from farther back down the hill. A fight had broken out—not a battle-on war, but a burst here and a burst there.

Ben-Avi took a step toward the camp.

"Don't," Cheval warned. The Frenchman's face was grim, as if performing a task he would have rather avoided. "I'm sorry. But if we had not acted, your country would have. The power you've unleashed with your *genetics* can reshape the world we live in more easily than a dozen armies. It's a weapon already. And it's a threat

to France in particular. We cannot allow it to end up in foreign hands.”

“No,” Ben-Avi said. “It’s a deterrent. No different from your atomic bombs. It would never be used.”

“I’m afraid my country cannot take that chance,” Cheval said.

The sound of additional gunfire reached them from the camp.

“So, you’re killing us?” Ben-Avi said.

“No one was supposed to be hurt,” Cheval replied. “Someone must have resisted.”

Ben-Avi didn’t doubt that. Though he suspected the French commandos might have hoped to encounter resistance. “And what about me?” he asked, his voice filled with disgust for his former friend. “Do I suddenly fall off the edge or are you going to shoot me first and then throw me in?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Cheval said. He nodded toward the submarine. “You’ll be coming with us.”

2

FRENCH SUBMARINE *MINERVE*, APPROXIMATELY TWENTY-FIVE MILES FROM TOULON

EIGHT DAYS after leaving the island of Jaros, the French submarine *Minerve* was nearing her home port of Toulon. It was operating forty feet below the surface, running at eight knots and using the diesel engines, which gulped air through a long metal tube known as a snorkel. They'd been running in this configuration almost continuously since leaving Jaros and André Cheval could not wait for them to surface.

The claustrophobia of being trapped underwater was bad enough. That the *Minerve* was carrying extra cargo, plus the equipment, supplies and samples from the laboratory, made it worse. That the submarine was overpopulated and carrying nearly twice the number of people it was supposed to house—thanks to the presence of Cheval, the other French scientists and the ten French commandos who'd conducted the raid—making the situation nearly unbearable.

The gnawing guilt that the commandos had killed all the Israelis

except Ben-Avi did not help and Cheval had taken to drinking each night to put himself to sleep.

Still, they were in French waters now and almost home. By this time tomorrow, Cheval would be sitting in a café in Paris, forgetting his sorrows in the fresh air with a bottle of fine wine.

Until then, he stood in the submarine's cramped control room, watching everything that went on. Across from him, the *Minerve's* captain leaned on the periscope handles with his face pressed into the viewer. Every few seconds he turned to scan a new section of the surface—dancing with the gray lady, as the sailors sometimes called it.

Finally, he flipped the handles closed and stepped back. “No vessels in sight,” he said. “Periscope down.”

As the periscope descended into its well, the captain turned to the radio officer. “Advise, Command. Weather deteriorating. Eight-foot swells and chop. We will remain at snorkel depth until we reach the channel.”

This news was like a kick in the gut to Cheval.

And he wasn't the only one.

A man named Lukas stood nearby, hovering over the navigation charts. Lukas was the head of the commando team, a member of the SDECE, the French external intelligence apparatus. He was a harsh man in his mid-fifties.

“Must we crawl into port like this?” Lukas said. “We've achieved a great success. We should arrive with dignity, if not fanfare.”

The *Minerve's* captain was lifelong sailor. Like many in the regular military, he distrusted secret operatives, with their hidden agendas and lack of oversight. His reply was blunt. “Do you really want to surface the boat and become a target at this point?”

Lukas pointed at the chart and a red line, approximately four

hundred miles behind them, that indicated the nearest possible approach of Israeli ships. "There are no Israeli ships within twelve hours of our position. They cannot possibly catch us."

"They have aircraft, too, Monsieur Lukas."

"None with this range. And nothing our Mirage fighters could not handle."

"You might be right," the captain said. "Regardless, we shall remain submerged until the very last moment. And you shall remain silent while a guest on my boat."

Lukas fumed at the reprimand, turning his back on the captain and heading aft to join his men.

Cheval looked at his watch, fighting the claustrophobia. It was early morning on the twenty-seventh of January. They'd left the island on the evening of the nineteenth. They were almost home. Once they were back on land, he would report Lukas for what he considered war crimes.

Even though he could do nothing about those who'd already been killed, he told himself he'd would find a way to keep Ben-Avi from vanishing into an unmarked grave.

Three hours. He just needed to hold it together for three more hours.

"THE *Minerve* will reach port in three hours."

The words came from a grim-faced man, standing in a darkened control room very similar to the one on the *Minerve*. His name was Gideon. He was the executive officer of the INS *Dakar*, an Israeli submarine recently purchased from the British.

His face sported two weeks of patchy beard. Scars on his jawline cut across it like furrows in a field. He was tall for a submariner and

spoke with his head ducked down to keep it beneath the pipes that ran overhead.

“The French have stolen something precious from Israel,” he told them. “We’re the only ones in position to prevent them from succeeding in this latest treachery.”

The *Dakar* had been two days out of Southampton en route to Haifa when an ultra-coded signal from the Israeli high command had interrupted their shakedown cruise. They’d been ordered to proceed to the southern coast of France at top speed and lie in wait, while the high command entered false position reports into the record and prepared cover stories and obituaries should their high-risk-mission fail.

For the better part of two days, Gideon and his men had been waiting and planning. After finally picking up a sonar contact, and confirming it was the *Minerve*, they’d allowed it to pass and moved in behind it.

They’d quickly closed to within a hundred yards. So close that they could hear the *Minerve*’s screw turning without using their hydrophones.

The next task seemed impossible to accomplish. Gideon and his men were not commandos, most weren’t even experienced sailors, but every single one of them were ready to fight and die for their country.

Gideon explained. “In the ancient times sea battles were not won by sailors but by soldiers. The Romans, the Phoenicians, the Greeks—they rammed their enemies and stormed on board where the fighting and killing was done by hand.”

The men looked on without blinking. Their smooth faces belied their desire to right a terrible wrong. They didn’t know exactly what was at stake, but they knew the French had betrayed them yet again.

After enacting an arms embargo on Israel during the Six-Day

War. After keeping a squadron of Mirage aircraft and a small fleet of patrol boats that Israel had already paid for. After suddenly cozying up to Israel's Arab enemies. The French had now crossed a line that could not be tolerated. They'd killed Israeli citizens and taken something the Israeli high command was willing to risk war over.

"This will not be easy," Gideon insisted. "There hasn't been a ship boarded and captured in these waters for many centuries. One is damned well going to be boarded and captured today!"

The men cheered. They had only a few submachine guns and pistols as weapons, but they most certainly had surprise on their side. They were tucked in so close behind the *Minerve* that the French submarine could not possibly hear them over its own engine noise.

As the men readied themselves to go topside and storm the *Minerve*, a radioman several feet away sat with a hand pressing a headphone to his ear. "Intercepted transmission," he said glumly. "The *Minerve* is remaining submerged until they reach the channel."

This was unwelcome news.

"We can't board them in sight of the coast," one officer pointed out. "We'll have the French Air Force down on us before we can even find the materials."

"We could put a fish in their side and be done with it," the tactical officer suggested.

The captain shook his head. "Our orders are to get the stolen materials back *at all costs*. Those orders come directly from the Knesset and the Prime Minister. We're to sink the *Minerve* only if we're in danger of being destroyed ourselves."

"But we can't board a ship that's submerged," the tactical officer said.

Gideon took it from there. He'd been considering the problem for a while. "Then we'll have to force them to the surface."

ABOARD THE *Minerve*, Cheval drummed his fingers on the chart table, remaining where he'd been during the argument with Lukas. Every few minutes he checked the clock and the boat's position. Both seemed to be crawling.

"How long until we reach the channel?" he asked.

The captain looked his way and then turned as the sound of wrenching metal ran through the boat.

What had to have been an impact was followed instantly by a suction wave that pulled air from the cabin, causing ears to pop and sinuses to ache. Yellow and red indicators lit up on a control panel and the suction grew worse.

"It's the snorkel," the dive officer said. "Valves are shut. Complete malfunction."

The snorkel was designed with an emergency cutoff that sealed the breathing tube if water overtopped the airway. With the snorkel closed off, the churning diesel engines were forced to suck air from the only place they could get it—the inner hull of the submarine.

"I ordered plus three meters on the surface," the captain said, referring to how high the snorkel was supposed to be riding above the waves.

"We're running at that depth," the dive officer insisted.

Either the weather had gotten suddenly worse and the waves larger or something in the snorkel had failed.

Every man in the control room looked upward, counting the seconds and hoping the snorkel would clear.

Cheval felt a wave of nausea, partly from fear, partly from the

decrease in pressure. He looked at the clock, this time watching the second hand. Thirty seconds went by, then forty. The situation did not correct itself.

"Water in the periscope tunnel," one of the NCOs called out. "Upper seals must be cracked."

Cheval could think of nothing more fearful than water leaking into a submerged vessel. Even if it was just a trickle. He considered the sound of the wrenching metal, the shudder in the control room. "We must have hit something," he said. "We need to surface."

To Cheval's surprise, the captain agreed with him. "Floating debris perhaps," he said. "Take us up. Surface the boat."

The dive control officer blew the tanks and changed the angle on the planes. The *Minerve* began to rise, bow first. Cheval noticed water trickling down the periscope tube. He looked to the depth gauge, saw that they were rising and sighed with relief as he felt the submarine break the surface and level off.

A second loud bang sounded and the suction vanished, causing Cheval's ears to pop again. "Main vents open," one of the men said. "Engines breathing outside air."

"Ahead one quarter," the captain ordered. "I'm going up to see what kind of damage we've taken."

With the first officer at the helm, the captain led a damage control party up into the conning tower, opening the inner and then outer hatches.

Daylight poured in. Gray and monochrome but beautiful. As the last man's legs went up through the hatch, Cheval stared jealously at the opening. Without thinking or asking permission, he stepped to the ladder and began to climb.

He reached the top, poked his head out and paused in shock.

The periscope and the snorkel were bent to the side at a

thirty-degree angle. The steel was mangled and deformed from the impact. The antenna housing had been sheared off.

Stranger still, the captain and the damage control party were not studying the damage to make repairs, they were being held at gunpoint.

Black-clad men with submachine guns had forced them to their knees. Two motorized inflatable boats were peeling off behind them, heading toward the bow of another submarine.

Before he could process the scene and react, Cheval was yanked upward and thrown against the bulkhead of the conning tower. A large man with scruffy beard jammed the point of a machine gun into his chest. "Not a sound, if you want to live."

Cheval nodded his compliance. He knew instinctively who these men were, who they had to be. "You're Israeli."

"My name is Gideon," the bearded man said, nodding as he spoke. "Judging from the lack of uniform, you must be one of the French scientists. Which means you know what we're after."

Cheval hesitated, not out of defiance but from pure shock. "I know what you want."

"Good," Gideon replied. "Go down the ladder first. Do anything foolish and you'll die first as well."

Cheval led them back into the submarine, climbing down the ladder as calmly as possible. Halfway down, Gideon kicked him and sent him tumbling. The fall acted as a distraction and the crew in the command center were watching him when Gideon and another commando jumped down and landed on the deck.

With the machine guns drawn and the crew flatfooted, there was no way to resist.

"We have your captain," Gideon told them. "We're here to take

back what you stole from us. No one will be harmed if you cooperate.”

As the *Minerve* wallowed in the swells, additional commandos came down the ladder. Leaving two men to guard the control room, Gideon forced Cheval to lead them deeper into the submarine. They took more captives in each compartment, surprising most of the men in their cabins. The French commandos were rounded up as well. All except Lukas.

“Keep the others under guard,” Gideon ordered. “Send two men to find this Lukas. Shoot him on sight.”

As the men moved off, Cheval took Gideon to Ben-Avi’s quarters and released him. “We’ve come to bring you back to Israel,” Gideon told Ben-Avi. “But not without the materials.”

“I don’t know where they are,” Ben-Avi said.

Gideon turned to Cheval. “Where are the bacterial cultures?”

“In the mess hall.”

Cheval led them to the mess hall, with Gideon, Ben-Avi and another of the Israelis right behind him. They entered the hall, where several stainless steel cylinders with black bands around each end stood.

Gideon ordered Cheval to the side and sent Ben-Avi to check the equipment.

“This is the primary strain,” Ben-Avi said, checking the first drum. “And this is—”

Before he finished his thought, the hammering of an automatic weapon rang out. Ben-Avi went down in a hail of bullets. Ricochets bounced around the mess hall and everyone dove for cover.

“Right corner, by the freezers,” the other commando yelled.

Cheval was on the ground, scrambling for cover, as Gideon

opened up with his weapon. By the time Cheval looked up, Lukas was dead, lying prone on the deck in a pool of his own blood. A few feet away, Ben-Avi was faring little better.

Cheval rushed to him and tried to to check or stop the flow of the bleeding. "I'm sorry," he said. "This is all my fault. Please forgive me."

Ben-Avi looked past Cheval as if he wasn't there. He moved his mouth to say something but never spoke a word.

WITH THE submarine under control and the first batch of materials and a few prisoners on their way to the *Dakar*, Gideon contacted the captain. He received bad news.

"French aircraft on radar, heading this way. Unsure of intentions. Our escape may prove to be more difficult than expected. We're submerging and departing immediately. You and your men are to remain on the *Minerve* and sail her to Israel."

Gideon seemed surprised. "We're commandeering her?"

"I'm not going to send her to the bottom with her crew on board, nor can I put them in lifeboats or let them sail into port and tell the world about us. We must take the ship. We'll send the sailors home once we reach Haifa."

"Without a wreck to find, the French will be suspicious," Gideon insisted. "They'll come looking that much faster."

"Do your best to deceive them," the *Dakar*'s captain said. "Dump some oil and toss some life jackets and other materials overboard, then submerge and head south. Hopefully, they'll think the *Minerve* went down."

"And if they do come looking?"

"They'll be looking for us," the captain replied. "Either way, two

boats gives us a better chance to get the materials back to Israel than one. But if at least one of us gets through, then Israel will be safer than she is today.”

Gideon would have preferred sinking the *Minerve*, with or without the crew on board. He had no desire to lead the French crew at gunpoint. There were too many ways to sabotage the ship, too many things that could go wrong. Still, he did as ordered, dumping four hundred gallons of diesel oil and tossing out anything that might float and look like wreckage.

The attempt to make the French think their submarine had gone down took only a few minutes. When it was completed, they were ready to move off.

As the submarines turned away from each other, the *Dakar* signaled *Good luck* with a flashing light and then submerged.

The *Minerve* dove less than two minutes later. Neither ship would ever surface again.

PART TWO

INFERNO

3

GULF OF MEXICO THE PRESENT DAY

RICK L. Cox stood in the operations room of the Alpha Star oil platform, ten stories above the water.

Cox was a *tool push*, which meant he oversaw the whole drilling operation. It was a job he loved and after thirty years in the oil business he had a sixth sense about things. He didn't need it today. One look at the panel told him a bad day was getting worse.

The flow rates and pressure levels in the pipelines were off. And they were off in the wrong direction. Low and dropping lower, even though the Alpha Star platform and two of her sisters were pumping massive amounts of filtered water into the seabed to pressurize the oil field and force the black gold and natural gas upward.

"This can't be right," Cox said to one of the crew. "How much water are we pumping?"

"We're maxed out on capacity," one of the techs yelled back. "All pumps are running at full power."

Even so, they were registering only a weak stream of natural gas and no oil at all.

Cox tilted the OSHA-mandated hard hat back to scratch his head and then grabbed a radio. Alpha Star was working in concert with two other platforms to save a dying offshore field. Maybe the other two rigs were holding back on him.

"Alpha Two, pick up," Cox said into the radio.

"Alpha Two here," a voice with a healthy Southern accent replied. *"Reading you loud and clear."*

"What's your injection pressure?"

"We're right up against the redline."

Cox pressed the talk switch again. "Alpha Three, can you give us any more pressure?"

The foreman from the third platform replied without hesitation. *"We're maxed out here as well, boss. If that oil doesn't break loose soon, we're gonna have to back off."*

"I'll be the judge of that." Cox looked over the gauges once more. "Keep the pressure up. The geologists insist there's an ocean of oil down there. If so, we're going to force it out. I'm drilling down another hundred feet. That'll tap it for sure."

As Cox finished speaking, he glanced over at Leon Nash, one of the roughnecks on his crew. "Take the bit down another hundred."

Nash hesitated. "The guys are a little worried, Chief. No one wants a blowout."

Cox brushed off the comment. "We've got measures in place. Just check the drill angle and punch it down another hundred feet."

Nash didn't argue further. With great care he double-checked the set up and reactivated the bit. In the center of the huge oil rig, a thick pipe began to turn. Six thousand feet below, a carbide drill bit started burrowing deeper into the earth, churning through the

mud, salt and layers of porous rock. Slurry came rushing up the pipe, but nothing more.

"Fifty feet," Nash said. "Seventy feet."

"Anything?"

"No increase in flow," Nash said.

Cox was puzzled, they should have been well into the active oil by now. "Careful, now," he urged. If the oil was there, it was being held under great pressure, then more pressure by the water being pumped down beneath it. Tapping it too cleanly could result in a sudden release, also known as a blowout. Like opening a soda bottle after you've vigorously shaken it up.

"Thirty feet to go," Nash said. "Twenty . . ."

The needles on the panel flickered. The pressure in the collection grid began to rise.

"Stop it there," Cox said.

"We have liquids and gas in the pipeline," Nash said, pumping his fist. "Pressure coming up."

The roughnecks behind them cheered.

Before Cox could join them, a series of indicators on his screen went from green to yellow.

At the same instant, the radio came to life. "*Pressure buildup in the collection grid,*" the foreman at Alpha 2 said. "*We're getting some awfully high numbers here.*"

Cox could see that. He turned back to Nash. "Are you still drilling?"

"Negative."

The radio chatter increased, Soon, Alpha 2 and Alpha 3 were talking over each other.

"*Ten thousand psi and rising.*"

"*Heat buildup in the main line.*"

"Shut off the injectors," Cox said.

Levers were thrown from open to closed and the sound of the whining pumps in a distant part of the rig died. With no more water being pumped into the underlying rock, the pressure should have stabilized. It didn't.

"Twelve thousand psi," Alpha 2 reported. *"Thirteen . . ."*

Cox didn't need the running commentary. He could see it right in front of him. The yellow indicators started blinking and then turned to angry, flashing red.

"Shut off valve failure," Nash said from the other side of the room. "Pressure in the main line at fifteen thousand. Vent the pipes or the whole line is going to blow."

Cox had no choice. He palmed the button for the emergency pressure release and pressed it.

Down below the rig, a network of crisscrossing pipes connected the oil platforms to one another and the collection grid. At critical points along the network, large valves opened to vent the gas pressure into the sea.

It should have caused a massive but harmless release of bubbles as vented natural gas funneled upward, spreading and thinning while it rose to the surface. Instead, a rumbling sound traveled through the platform.

"We got fire on the water," Alpha 2 called.

In the gap between the two rigs, a towering blaze erupted from the sea. It spread across the surface in a snaking motion, joining other waves of fire and soon engulfing all three platforms.

"Seal the rig," Cox ordered.

Doors to all compartments were slammed shut against the smoke and flames, but as they buttoned up the platform, a shudder ran through it from deeper down. It shook the floor and buckled knees.

“Pressure spike in the well,” Nash called out. “Blowout failure.”

This was the worst news yet. It meant a surge of gas had burst past the bit and was traveling up through the hole they’d drilled.

The pressure gauge went off the scale. The bubble of gas exploded through the blowout preventer and surged upward into the heart of the platform. It ignited the instant it hit the air, detonating in the heart of the rig like a thousand-pound bomb.

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