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# Santorini

Alistair MacLean

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«HarperCollins»

**MacLean A.**

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The gripping tale of sabotage at sea, from the acclaimed master of action and suspense.In the heart of the Aegean Sea, a luxury yacht is on fire and sinking fast. Minutes later, a four-engined jet with a fire in its nose-cone crashes into the sea.Is there a sinister connection between these two tragedies? And is it an accident that the Ariadne, a NATO spy ship, is the only vessel in the vicinity - the only witness? Only Commander Talbot of the Ariadne can provide the answers as he uncovers a deadly plot involving drugs and terrorism - leading to the heart of the Pentagon.

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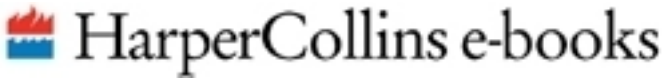
# Alistair Maclean
## *Santorini*




*To Tom and Rena*

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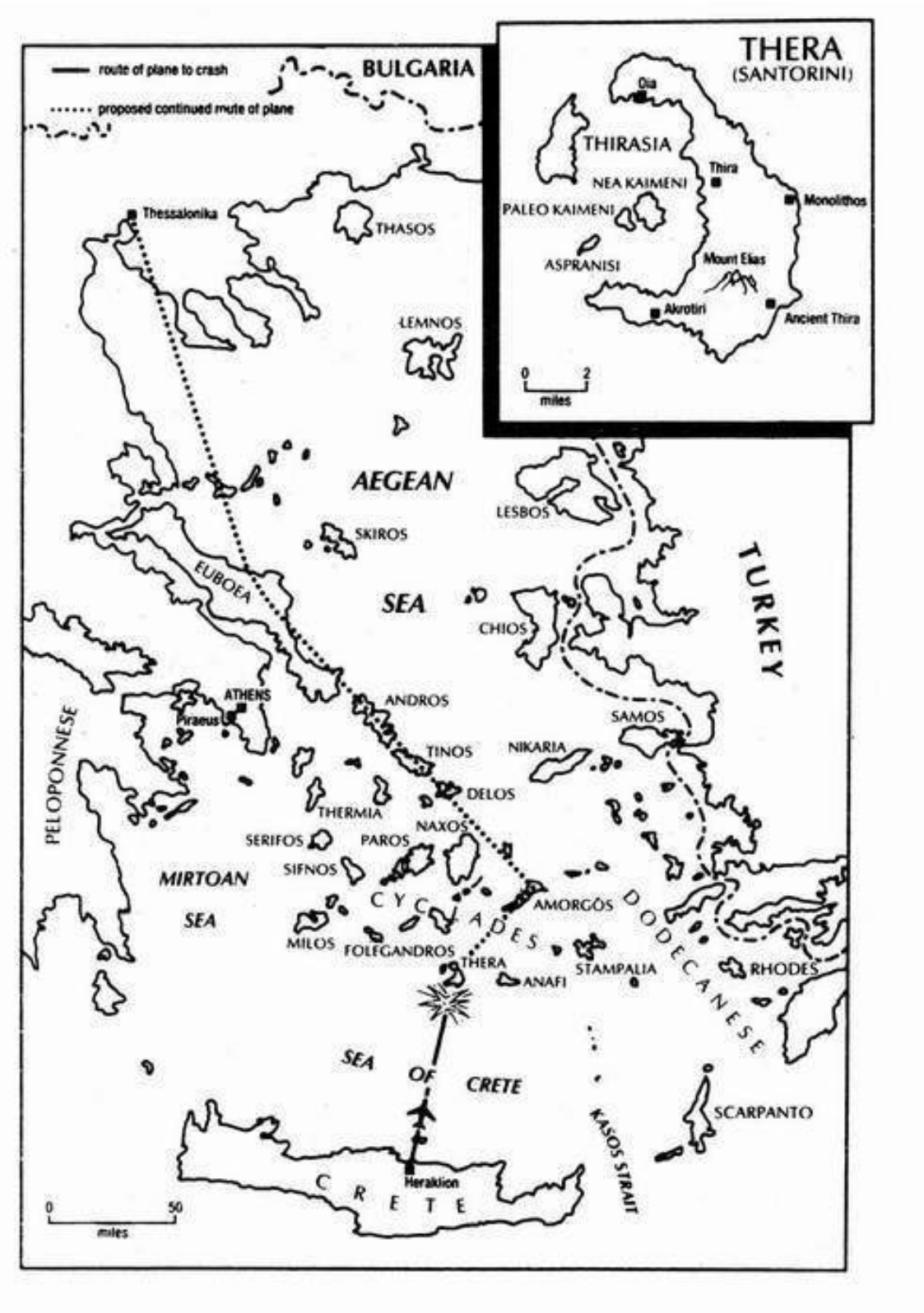
route of plane to crash
proposed continued route of plane
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Thessalonika
THASOS
LEMNOS
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CHIOS
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# 1

An overhead broadcaster on the bridge of the frigate *Ariadne* crackled into life, a bell rang twice and then O'Rourke's voice came through, calm, modulated, precise and unmistakably Irish. O'Rourke was commonly referred to as the weatherman, which he wasn't at all.

'Just picked up an odd-looking customer. Forty miles out, bearing 222.'

Talbot pressed the reply button. 'The skies above us, Chief, are hotching with odd-looking customers. At least six airlines criss-cross this patch of the Aegean. NATO planes, as you know better than all of us, are all around us. And those pesky fighter-bombers and fighters from the pesky Sixth Fleet bloweth where the wind listeth. Me, I think they're lost half the time.'

'Ah! But this is a very odd odd-looking lad.' O'Rourke's voice was unruffled as ever, unmoved by the less than flattering reference to the Sixth Fleet, from which he was on temporary loan. 'No trans-Aegean airline uses the flight path this plane is on. There are no NATO planes in this particular sector on my display screen. And the Americans would have let us know. A very courteous lot, Captain. The Sixth Fleet, I mean.'

'True, true.' The Sixth Fleet, Talbot was aware, would have informed him of the presence of any of their aircraft in his vicinity, not from courtesy but because regulations demanded it, a fact of which O'Rourke was as well aware as he was. O'Rourke was a doughty defender of his home fleet. 'That all you have on this lad?'

'No. Two things. This plane is on a due southwest to north-east course. I have no record, no information of any plane that could be following this course. Secondly, I'm pretty sure it's a big plane. We should see in about four minutes—his course is on a direct intersection with ours.'

'The size is important, Chief? Lots of big planes around.'

'Not at 43,000 feet, sir, which is what this one is. Only a Concorde does that and we know there are no Concordes about. Military job, I would guess.'

'Of unknown origin. A bandit? Could be. Keep an eye on him.' Talbot looked around and caught the eye of his second-in-command, Lieutenant-Commander Van Gelder. Van Gelder was short, very broad, deeply tanned, flaxen-haired and seemed to find life a source of constant amusement. He was smiling now as he approached the captain.

'Consider it done, sir. The spy-glass and a photo for your family album?'

'That's it. Thank you.' The *Ariadne* carried an immense and, to the uninitiated, quite bewildering variety of looking and listening instruments that may well have been unmatched by any naval ship afloat. Among those instruments were what Van Gelder had referred to as the spy-glass. This was a combined telescope and camera, invented and built by the French, of the type used by spy satellites in orbit and which was capable, under ideal atmospheric circumstances, of locating and photographing a white plate from an altitude of 250 miles. The focal length of the telescope was almost infinitely adjustable: in this case Van Gelder would probably use a one in a hundred resolution, which would have the optical effect of bringing the intruder—if intruder it was—to an apparent altitude of four hundred feet. In the cloudless July skies of the Cyclades this presented no problem at all.

Van Gelder had just left the bridge when another loudspeaker came to life, the repeated double buzzer identifying it as the radio-room. The helmsman, Leading Seaman Harrison, leaned forward and made the appropriate switch.

'I have an SOS. I think—repeat think—vessel's position is just south of Thera. All I have. Very garbled, certainly not a trained operator. Just keeps repeating "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday".' Myers, the radio operator on duty, sounded annoyed: every radio operator, the tone of his voice said, should be as expert and efficient as he was. 'Wait a minute, though.' There was a pause, then Myers came on again. 'Sinking, he says. Four times he said he was sinking.'

Talbot said: 'That all?'

'That's all, sir. He's gone off the air.'

'Well, just keep listening on the distress frequency, Harrison, 090 or near enough. Can't be more than ten, twelve miles away.' He reached for the engine control and turned it up to full power. The *Ariadne,* in the modern fashion, had dual engine-room and bridge controls. The engineroom had customarily only one rating, a leading stoker, on watch, and this only because custom dictated it, not because necessity demanded it. The lone watchman might, just possibly, be wandering around with an oil-can in hand but more probably was immersed in one of the lurid magazines with which what was called the engineroom library was so liberally stocked. The *Ariadne*'s chief engineer, Lieutenant McCafferty, rarely ventured near his own domain. A firstclass engineer, McCafferty claimed he was allergic to diesel fumes and treated with a knowing disdain the frequently repeated observation that, because of the engine-room's highly efficient extractor fans, it was virtually impossible for anyone to detect the smell of diesel. He was to be found that afternoon, as he was most afternoons, seated in a deckchair aft and immersed in his favourite form of relaxation, the reading of detective novels heavily laced with romance of the more dubious kind.

The distant sound of the diesels deepened—the *Ariadne* was capable of a very respectable 35 knots—and the bridge began to vibrate quite noticeably. Talbot reached for a phone and got through to Van Gelder.

'We've picked up a distress signal. Ten, twelve miles away. Let me know when you locate this bandit and I'll cut the engines.' The spy-glass, though splendidly gimballed to deal with the worst vagaries of pitching and rolling, was quite incapable of coping with even the mildest vibration which, more often than not, produced a very fuzzy photograph indeed.

Talbot moved out on to the port wing to join the lieutenant who stood there, a tall, thin young man with fair hair, thick pebbled glasses and a permanently lugubrious expression.

'Well, Jimmy, how do you fancy this? A maybe bandit and a sinking vessel at the same time. Should relieve the tedium of a long hot summer's afternoon, don't you think?'

The lieutenant looked at him without enthusiasm. Lieutenant the Lord James Denholm—Talbot called him 'Jimmy' for brevity's sake—seldom waxed enthusiastic about anything.

'I don't fancy it at all, Captain.' Denholm waved a languid hand. 'Disturbs the even tenor of my ways.'

Talbot smiled. Denholm was surrounded by an almost palpable aura of aristocratic exhaustion that had disturbed and irritated Talbot in the early stage of their acquaintanceship, a feeling that had lasted for no more than half an hour. Denholm was totally unfitted to be a naval officer of any kind and his highly defective eyesight should have led to his automatic disbarment from any navy in the world. But Denholm was aboard the *Ariadne* not because of his many connections with the highest echelons of society—heir to an earldom, his blood was indisputably the bluest of the blue—but because, without question, he was the right man in the right place. The holder of three scientific degrees—from Oxford, UCLA and MIT, all *summa cum laude*—in electrical engineering and electronics, Denholm was as close to being an electronics wizard as any man could ever hope to be. Not that Denholm would have claimed to be anything of what he would have said to be the ridiculous kind. Despite his lineage and academic qualifications, Denholm was modest and retiring to a fault. This reticence extended even to the making of protests which was why, despite his feeble objections—he had been under no compulsion to go—he had been dragooned into the Navy in the first place.

He said to Talbot: 'This bandit, Captain—if it is a bandit—what do you intend to do about it?'

'I don't intend to do anything about it.'

'But if he *is* a bandit—well, then, he's spying, isn't he?'

'Of course.'

'Well, then—'

‘What do you expect me to do, Jimmy? Bring him down? Or are you itching to try out this experimental laser gun you have with you?’

‘Heaven forfend.’ Denholm was genuinely horrified. ‘I’ve never fired a gun in anger in my life. Correction. I’ve never even fired a gun.’

‘If I wanted to bring him down a teeny-weeny heat-seeking missile would do the job very effectively. But we don’t do things like that. We’re civilized. Besides, we don’t provoke international incidents. An unwritten law.’

‘Sounds a very funny law to me.’

‘Not at all. When the United States or NATO play war games, as we are doing now, the Soviets track us very closely indeed, whether on land, sea or air. We don’t complain. We can’t. When they’re playing their game we do exactly the same to them. Can, admittedly, have its awkward moments. Not so long ago, when the US Navy were carrying out exercises in the Sea of Japan an American destroyer banged into, and quite severely damaged, a Russian submarine which was monitoring things a little too closely.’

‘And *that* didn’t cause what you’ve just called an international incident?’

‘Certainly not. Nobody’s fault. Mutual apologies between the two captains and the Russian was towed to a safe port by another Russian warship. Vladivostok, I believe it was.’ Talbot turned his head. ‘Excuse me. That’s the radio-room call-up.’

‘Myers again,’ the speaker said. ‘*Delos.* Name of the sinking vessel. Very brief message—explosion, on fire, sinking fast.’

‘Keep listening,’ Talbot said. He looked at the helmsman who already had a pair of binoculars to his eyes. ‘You have it, Harrison?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Harrison handed over the binoculars and twitched the wheel to port. ‘Fire off the port bow.’

Talbot picked it up immediately, a thin black column of smoke rising vertically, unwaveringly, into the blue and windless sky. He was just lowering his glasses when the bell rang twice again. It was O’Rourke, the weatherman, or, more officially, the senior long-range radar operator.

‘Lost him, I’m afraid. The bandit, I mean. I was looking at the vectors on either side of him to see if he had any friends and when I came back he was gone.’

‘Any ideas, Chief?’

‘Well…’ O’Rourke sounded doubtful. ‘He *could* have exploded but I doubt it.’

‘So do I. We’ve had the spy-glass trained on his approach bearing and they’d have picked up an explosion for sure.’

‘Then he must have gone into a steep dive. A very steep dive. God knows why. I’ll find him.’ The speaker clicked off.

Almost at once a telephone rang again. It was Van Gelder.

‘222, sir. Smoke. Plane. Could be the bandit.’

‘Almost certainly is. The weatherman’s just lost it off the long-range radar screen. Probably a waste of time but try to get that photograph anyway.’

He moved out on to the starboard wing and trained his glasses over the starboard quarter. He picked it up immediately, a heavy dark plume of smoke with, he thought, a glow of red at its centre. It was still quite high, at an altitude of four or five thousand feet. He didn’t pause to check how deeply the plane was diving or whether or not it actually was on fire. He moved quickly back into the bridge and picked up a phone.

‘Sub-Lieutenant Cousteau. Quickly.’ A brief pause. ‘Henri? Captain. Emergency. Have the launch and the lifeboat slung outboard. Crews to stand by to lower. Then report to the bridge.’ He rang down to the engine-room for Slow Ahead then said to Harrison: ‘Hard a-port. Steer north.’

Denholm, who had moved out on to the starboard wing, returned, lowering his binoculars.

'Well, even I can see that plane. Not a plane, rather a huge streamer of smoke. Could that have been the bandit, sir—if it was a bandit?'

'Must have been.'

Denholm said, tentatively: 'I don't care much for his line of approach, sir.'

'I don't care much for it myself, Lieutenant, especially if it's a military plane and even more especially if it's carrying bombs of any sort. If you look, you'll see that we're getting out of its way.'

'Ah. Evasive action.' Denholm hesitated, then said doubtfully: 'Well, as long as he doesn't alter course.'

'Dead men don't alter courses.'

'That they don't.' Van Gelder had just returned to the bridge. 'And the man or the men behind the controls of that plane are surely dead. No point in my staying there, sir—Gibson's better with the spy-glass camera than I am and he's very busy with it. We'll have plenty of photographs to show you but I doubt whether we'll be able to learn very much from them.'

'As bad as that? You weren't able to establish anything?'

'Very little, I'm afraid. I did see the outer engine on the port wing. So it's a four-engined jet. Civil or military, I've no idea.'

'A moment, please.' Talbot moved out on the port wing, looked aft, saw that the blazing plane —there was no mistaking the flames now—was due astern, at less than half the height and distance than when he had first seen it, returned to the bridge, told Harrison to steer due north, then turned again to Van Gelder.

'That was all you could establish?'

'About. Except that the fire is definitely located in the nose cone, which would rule out any engine explosion. It couldn't have been hit by a missile because we know there are no missile-carrying planes around—even if there were, a heat-seeking missile, the only type that could nail it at that altitude, would have gone for the engines, not the nose cone. It could only have been an up-front internal explosion.'

Talbot nodded, reached for a phone, asked the exchange for the sick bay and was through immediately.

'Doctor? Would you detail an SBA—with firstaid kit—to stand by the lifeboat.' He paused for a moment. 'Sorry, no time to explain. Come on up to the bridge.' He looked aft through the starboard wing doorway, turned and took the wheel from the helmsman. 'Take a look, Harrison. A good look.'

Harrison moved out on the starboard wing, had his good look—it took him only a few seconds —returned and took the wheel again.

'Awful.' He shook his head. 'They're finished, sir, aren't they?'

'So I would have thought.'

'They're going to miss us by at least a quarter mile. Maybe a half.' Harrison took another quick look through the doorway. 'This angle of descent—they should land—rather, hit the sea—a mile, mile and a half ahead. Unless by some fluke they carry on and hit the island. That would be curtains, sir.'

'It would indeed.' Talbot looked ahead through the for'ard screens. Thera Island was some four miles distant with Cape Akrotiri lying directly to the north and Mount Elias, the highest point of the island—it was close on 2000 feet—to the north-east. Between them, but about five miles further distant, a tenuous column of bluish smoke, hardly visible against a cloudless sky, hung lazily in the air. This marked the site of Thira Village, the only settlement of any size on the island. 'But the damage would be limited to the plane. The south-west of the island is barren. I don't think anyone lives there.'

'What are we going to do, sir? Stop over the point where it goes down?'

'Something like that. You can handle it yourself. Or maybe another quarter or half mile further on along the line he was taking. Have to wait and see. Fact is, Harrison, I know no more about it than you do. It may disintegrate on impact or, if it survives that, it may carry on some distance under

water. Not for far, I should think—not if its nose has gone. Number One—' this to Van Gelder '—what depths do we have here?'

'I know the five fathom mark is about half a mile offshore along the south of the island. Beyond that, it shelves pretty steeply. I'll have to check in the chart-room. At the moment I'd guess we're in two to three hundred fathoms. A sonar check, sir?'

'Please.' Van Gelder left, brushing by Sub-Lieutenant Cousteau as he did. Cousteau, barely in his twenties, was a happy-go-lucky youngster, always eager and willing and a more than competent seaman. Talbot beckoned him out on to the starboard wing.

'Have you seen it, Henri?'

'Yes, sir.' Cousteau's normal cheerfulness was in marked abeyance. He gazed in unwilling fascination at the blazing, smoking plane, now directly abeam and at an altitude of under a thousand feet. 'What a damnable, awful thing.'

'Aye, it's not nice.' They had been joined by Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander Andrew Grierson. Grierson was dressed in white shorts and a flowing multi-coloured Hawaiian shirt which he doubtless regarded as the correct dress of the day for the summer Aegean. 'So this is why you wanted Moss and his first-aid box.' Moss was the Leading Sick Bay Attendant. 'I'm thinking maybe I should be going myself.' Grierson was a West Highland Scot, as was immediately evident from his accent, an accent which he never attempted to conceal for the excellent reason that he saw no earthly reason why he ever should. 'If there are any survivors, which I consider bloody unlikely, I know something about decompression problems which Moss doesn't.'

Talbot was conscious of the increased vibration beneath his feet. Harrison had increased speed and was edging a little to the east. Talbot didn't even give it a second thought: his faith in his senior quartermaster was complete.

'Sorry, Doctor, but I have more important things for you to do.' He pointed to the east. 'Look under the trail of smoke to the plane's left.'

'I see it. I should have seen it before. Somebody sinking, for a fiver.'

'Indeed. Something called the *Delos,* a private yacht, I should imagine, and, as you say, sinking. Explosion and on fire. Pretty heavily on fire, too, I would think. Burns, injuries.'

'We live in troubled times,' Grierson said. Grierson, in fact, lived a singularly carefree and untroubled existence but Talbot thought it was hardly the time to point this out to him.

'The plane's silent, sir,' Cousteau said. 'The engines have been shut off.'

'Survivors, you think? I'm afraid not. The explosion may have destroyed the controls in which case, I imagine, the engines shut off automatically.'

'Disintegrate or dive?' Grierson said. 'Daft question. We'll know all too soon.'

Van Gelder joined them. 'I make it eighty fathoms here, sir. Sonar says seventy. They're probably right. Doesn't matter, it's shallowing anyway.'

Talbot nodded and said nothing. Nobody said anything, nobody felt like saying anything. The plane, or the source of the dense column of smoke, was now less than a hundred feet above the water. Suddenly, the source of the smoke and flame dipped and then was abruptly extinguished. Even then they failed to catch a glimpse of the plane, it had been immediately engulfed in a fiftyfoot-high curtain of water and spray. There was no sound of impact and certainly no disintegration for when the water and the spray cleared away there was only the empty sea and curiously small waves, little more than ripples, radiating outwards from the point of impact.

Talbot touched Cousteau on the arm. 'Your cue, Henri. How's the whaler's radio?'

'Tested yesterday, sir. Okay.'

'If you find anything, anybody, let us know. I have a feeling you won't need that radio. When we stop, lower away then keep circling around. We should be back in half an hour or so.' Cousteau left and Talbot turned to Van Gelder. 'When we stop, tell sonar I want the exact depth.'

Five minutes later the whaler was in the water and moving away from the side of the *Ariadne,* Talbot rang for full power and headed east.

Van Gelder hung up a phone. 'Thirty fathoms, sonar says. Give or take a fathom.'

'Thanks. Doctor?'

'Hundred and eighty feet,' Grierson said. 'I don't even have to rub my chin over that one. The answer is no. Even if anyone could escape from the fuselage—which I think would be impossible in the first place—they'd die soon after surfacing. Diver's bends. Burst lungs. They wouldn't know that they'd have to breathe out all the way up. A trained, fit submariner, possibly with breathing apparatus, might do it. There would be no fit, trained submariners aboard that plane. Question's academic, anyway. I agree with you, Captain. The only men aboard that plane are dead men.'

Talbot nodded and reached for a phone.

'Myers? Signal to General Carson. Unidentified four-engined plane crashed in sea two miles south of Cape Akrotiri, Thera Island. 1415 hours. Impossible to determine whether military or civilian. First located altitude 43,000 feet. Apparent cause internal explosion. No further details available at present. No NATO planes reported in vicinity. Have you any information? Sylvester. Send Code B.'

'Wilco, sir. Where do I send it?'

'Rome. Wherever he is he'll have it two minutes later.'

Grierson said: 'Well, yes, if anyone knows he should.' Carson was the C-in-C Southern European NATO. He lifted his binoculars and looked at the vertical column of smoke, now no more than four miles to the east. 'A yacht, as you say, and making quite a bonfire. If there's anyone still aboard, they're going to be very warm indeed. Are you going alongside, Captain?'

'Alongside.' Talbot looked at Denholm. 'What's your estimate of the value of the electronic gear we have aboard?'

'Twenty million. Maybe twenty-five. A lot, anyway.'

'There's your answer, Doctor. That thing's gone bang once already. It can go bang once again. I am not going alongside. *You* are. In the launch. That's expendable. The *Ariadne*'s not.'

'Well, thank you very much. And what intrepid soul—'

'I'm sure Number One here will be delighted to ferry you across.'

'Ah. Number One, have your men wear overalls, gloves and flash-masks. Injuries from burning diesel can be very unpleasant indeed. And you. I go to prepare myself for self-immolation.'

'And don't forget your lifebelts.'

Grierson didn't deign to answer.

They had halved the remaining distance to the burning yacht when Talbot got through to the radio-room again.

'Message dispatched?'

'Dispatched and acknowledged.'

'Anything more from the *Delos*?'

'Nothing.'

'Delos,' Denholm said. 'That's about eighty miles north of here. Alas, the Cyclades will never be the same for me again.' Denholm sighed. Electronics specialist or not, he regarded himself primarily as a classicist and, indeed, he was totally fluent in reading and writing both Latin and Greek. He was deeply immersed in their ancient cultures as the considerable library in his cabin bore testimony. He was also much given to quotations and he quoted now.

'The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece! Where burning Sappho loved and sung, Where grew the arts of war and peace, Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung, Eternal summer—'

'Your point is taken, Lieutenant,' Talbot said. 'We'll cry tomorrow. In the meantime, let us address ourselves to the problem of those poor souls on the fo'c's'le. I count five of them.'

'So do I.' Denholm lowered his glasses. 'What's all the frantic waving for? Surely to God they can't imagine we haven't seen them?'

'They've seen us all right. Relief, Lieutenant. Expectation of rescue. But there's more to it than that. A certain urgency in their waving. A primitive form of semaphoring. What they're saying is "get us the hell out of here and be quick about it".'

'Maybe they're expecting another explosion?'

'Could be that. Harrison, I want to come to a stop on their starboard beam. At, you understand, a prudent distance.'

'A hundred yards, sir?'

'Fine.'

The *Delos* was—or had been—a rather splendid yacht. A streamlined eighty-footer, it was obvious that it had been, until very, very recently, a dazzling white. Now, because of a combination of smoke and diesel oil, it was mainly black. A rather elaborate superstructure consisted of a bridge, saloon, a dining-room and what may or may not have been a galley. The still dense smoke and flames rising six feet above the poop deck indicated the source of the fire—almost certainly the engine-room. Just aft of the fire a small motorboat was still secured to its davits: it wasn't difficult to guess that either the explosion or the fire had rendered it inoperable.

Talbot said: 'Rather odd, don't you think, Lieutenant?'

'Odd?' Denholm said carefully.

'Yes. You can see that the flames are dying away. One would have thought that would reduce the danger of further explosion.' Talbot moved out on the port wing. 'And you will have observed that the water level is almost up to the deck.'

'I can see she's sinking.'

'Indeed. If you were aboard a vessel that was either going to go up or drag you down when it sank, what would your natural reaction be?'

'To be elsewhere, sir. But I can see that their motorboat has been damaged.'

'Agreed. But a craft that size would carry alternative life-saving equipment. If not a Carley float, then certainly an inflatable rubber dinghy. And any prudent owner would carry a sufficiency of lifebelts and life-jackets for the passengers and crew. I can even see two lifebelts in front of the bridge. But they haven't done the obvious thing and abandoned ship. I wonder why.'

'I've no idea, sir. But it is damned odd.'

'When we've rescued those distressed mariners and brought them aboard, you, Jimmy, will have forgotten how to speak Greek.'

'But I will not have forgotten how to listen in Greek?'

'Precisely.'

'Commander Talbot, you have a devious and suspicious mind.'

'It goes with the job, Jimmy. It goes with the job.'

Harrison brought the *Ariadne* to a stop off the starboard beam of the *Delos* at the agreed hundred yards distance. Van Gelder was away at once and was very quickly alongside the fo'c's'le of the *Delos.* Two boat-hooks around the guard-rail stanchions held them in position. As the launch and the bows of the sinking yacht were now almost level it took only a few seconds to transfer the six survivors—another had joined the group of five that Talbot had seen—aboard the launch. They were, indeed, a sorry and sadly bedraggled lot, so covered in diesel and smoke that it was quite impossible to discriminate among them on the basis of age, sex or nationality.

Van Gelder said: 'Any of you here speak English?'

'We all do.' The speaker was short and stocky and that was all that could be said of him in the way of description. 'Some of us just a little. But enough.' The voice was heavily accented but readily understood. Van Gelder looked at Grierson.

'Any of you injured, any of you burnt?' Grierson said. All shook their heads or mumbled a negative. 'Nothing here for me, Number One. Hot showers, detergents, soap. Not to mention a change of clothing.'

'Who's in charge here?' Van Gelder asked.

'I am.' It was the same man.

'Anybody left aboard?'

'Three men, I'm afraid. They won't be coming with us.'

'You mean they're dead?' The man nodded. 'I'll check.'

'No, no!' His oil-soaked hand gripped Van Gelder's arm. 'It is too dangerous, far too dangerous. I forbid it.'

'You forbid me nothing.' When Van Gelder wasn't smiling, which wasn't often, he could assume a very discouraging expression indeed. The man withdrew his hand. 'Where are those men?'

'In the passageway between the engine-room and the stateroom aft. We got them out after the explosion but before the fire began.'

'Riley.' This to a Leading Seaman. 'Come aboard with me. If you think the yacht's going, give me a call.' He picked up a torch and was about to board the *Delos* when a hand holding a pair of goggles reached out and stopped him. Van Gelder smiled. 'Thank you, Doctor. I hadn't thought of that.'

Once aboard he made his way aft and descended the after companionway. There was smoke down there but not too much and with the aid of his torch he had no difficulty in locating the three missing men, all huddled shapelessly in a corner. To his right was the engine-room door, slightly buckled from the force of the explosion. Not without some difficulty, he forced the door open and at once began coughing as the foulsmelling smoke caught his throat and eyes. He pulled on the goggles but still there was nothing to see except for the red embers of a dying fire emanating from some unknown source. He pulled the door to behind him—he was reasonably certain there was nothing for him to see in the engineroom anyway—and stooped to examine the three dead men. They were far from being a pretty sight but he forced himself to carry out as thorough an investigation as he could. He spent some quite considerable time bent over the third man—in the circumstances thirty seconds was a long time—and when he straightened he looked both puzzled and thoughtful.

The door to the after stateroom opened easily. There was some smoke there but not so much that he required to use his goggles. The cabin was luxuriously furnished and immaculately tidy, a condition which Van Gelder very rapidly altered. He pulled a sheet from one of the beds, spread it on the floor, opened up wardrobes and drawers, scooped up armfuls of clothes—there was no time to make any kind of selection and even if there had been he would have been unable to pick and choose, they were all women's clothing—dumped them on the sheet, tied up the four corners, lugged the bundle up the companionway and handed it over to Riley.

'Put this in the launch. I'm going to have a quick look at the for'ard cabins. I think the steps will be at the for'ard end of the saloon under the bridge.'

'I think you should hurry, sir.'

Van Gelder didn't answer. He didn't have to be told why he should hurry—the sea was already beginning to trickle over on to the upper deck. He passed into the saloon, found the companionway at once and descended to a central passage.

He switched on his torch—there was, of course, no electrical power left. There were doors on both sides and one at the end. The first door to port opened up into a food store, the corresponding door to starboard was locked. Van Gelder didn't bother with it: the *Delos* didn't look like the kind of craft that would lack a commodious liquor store. Behind the other doors lay four cabins and two bathrooms. All were empty. As he had done before, Van Gelder spread out a sheet—in the passageway, this time—threw some more armfuls of clothes on to it, secured the corners and hurried up on deck.

The launch was no more than thirty yards away when the *Delos,* still on even keel, slid gently under the surface of the sea. There was nothing dramatic to mark its going—just a stream of air bubbles that became gradually smaller and ceased altogether after about twenty seconds.

Talbot was on deck when the launch brought back the six survivors. He looked in concern at the woebegone and bedraggled figures before him.

'My goodness, what a state you people are in. This the lot, Number One?'

'Those that survived, sir. Three died. Impossible to get their bodies out in time.' He indicated the figure nearest him. 'This is the owner.'

'Andropulos,' the man said. 'Spyros Andropulos. You are the officer in charge?'

'Commander Talbot. My commiserations, Mr Andropulos.'

'And my thanks, Commander. We are very deeply grateful—'

'With respect, sir, that can wait. First things first, and the very first thing is to get yourselves cleaned up immediately. Ah. And changed. A problem. Clothes. We'll find some.'

'Clothing we have,' Van Gelder said. He pointed at the two sheet-wrapped packages. 'Ladies. Gentlemen.'

'A mention in dispatches for that, Number One. You said "ladies"?'

'Two, Commander,' Andropulos said. He looked at the two people standing by him. 'My niece and her friend.'

'Ah. Well, should apologize, I suppose, but difficult to tell in the circumstances.'

'My name is Charial.' The voice was unmistakably feminine. 'Irene Charial. This is my friend Eugenia.'

'We could have met under happier circumstances. Lieutenant Denholm here will take you to my cabin. The bathroom is small but adequate. By the time you bring them back, Lieutenant, I trust they are recognizable for what they are.' He turned to a burly, dark-haired figure who, like most of the crew, wore no insignia of rank. 'Chief Petty Officer McKenzie.' McKenzie was the senior NCO on the *Ariadne.* 'The four gentlemen here, Chief. You know what to do.'

'Right away, sir. If you will come with me, gentlemen.'

Grierson also left and Van Gelder and Talbot were left alone. 'We can find this place again?' Van Gelder asked.

'No trouble.' Talbot looked at him speculatively and pointed towards the north-west. 'I've taken a bearing on the monastery and radar station on Mount Elias there. Sonar says that we're in eighteen fathoms. Just to make sure, we'll drop a marker buoy.'

General Carson laid down the slip of paper he had been studying and looked at the colonel seated across the table from him.

'What do you make of this, Charles?'

'Could be nothing. Could be important. Sorry, that doesn't help. I have a feeling I don't like it. It would help a bit if we had a sailor around.'

Carson smiled and pressed a button. 'Do you know if Vice-Admiral Hawkins is in the building?'

'He is, sir.' A girl's voice. 'Do you wish to speak to him or see him?'

'See him, Jean. Ask him if he would be kind enough to stop by.'

Vice-Admiral Hawkins was very young for one of his rank. He was short, a little overweight, more than a little rubicund as to his features and exuded an aura of cheerful bonhomie. He didn't look very bright, which he was. He was widely regarded as having one of the most brilliant minds in the Royal Navy. He took the seat to which Carson had gestured him and glanced at the message slip.

'I see, I see.' He laid the message down. 'But you didn't ask me here to comment on a perfectly straightforward signal. The Sylvester is one of the code names for the frigate HMS *Ariadne.* One of the vessels under your command, sir.'

'Don't rub it in, David. I know it, of course—more accurately I know of it. Don't forget I'm just a simple landlubber. Odd name, isn't it? Royal Naval ship with a Greek name.'

'Courtesy gesture to the Greeks, sir. We're carrying out a joint hydrographic survey with them.'

'Is that so?' General Carson ran a hand through his grizzled hair. 'I was not aware that I was in the hydrographic business, David.'

'You're not, sir, although I have no doubt it could carry out such a survey if it were called for. The *Ariadne* has a radio system that can transmit to, and receive transmissions from, any quarter of the globe. It has telescopes and optical instruments that can pick out the salient features of, say, any passing satellite, even those in geosynchronous orbit—and that's 22,000 miles up. It carries long-range and surface radar that is as advanced as any in the world. And it has a sonar location and detection system that can pick up a sunken object at the bottom of the ocean just as easily as it can pinpoint a lurking submarine. The *Ariadne,* sir, is the eyes and the ears and the voice of your fleet.'

'That's nice to know, I must say. Very reassuring. The ability of the commanding officer of the *Ariadne* is—ah—commensurate with this extraordinary array of devices he controls?'

'Indeed, sir. For an exceptionally complex task an exceptionally qualified man. Commander Talbot is an outstanding officer. Hand-picked for the job.'

'Who picked him?'

'I did.'

'I see. That terminates this line of conversation very abruptly.' Carson pondered briefly. 'I think, Colonel, that we should ask General Simpson about this one.' Simpson, the over-all commander of NATO, was the only man who outranked Carson in Europe.

'Don't see what else we can do, sir.'

'You would agree, David?'

'No, General. I think you'd be wasting your time. If you don't know anything about this, then I'm damned sure General Simpson doesn't know anything either. This is not an educated guess, call it a completely uneducated guess, but I have an odd feeling that this is one of your planes, sir—an American plane. A bomber, almost certainly, perhaps not yet off the secret lists—it was, after all, flying at an uncommon height.'

'The *Ariadne* could have been in error.'

'The *Ariadne* does not make mistakes. My job and my life on it.' The flat, unemotional voice carried complete conviction. 'Commander Talbot is not the only uniquely qualified man aboard. There are at least thirty others in the same category. We have, for example, an electronics officer so unbelievably advanced in his speciality that none of your much-vaunted high-technology whizzkids in Silicon Valley would even begin to know what he's talking about.'

Carson raised a hand. 'Point taken, David, point taken. So an American bomber. A very special bomber because it must be carrying a very special cargo. What would you guess that to be?'

Hawkins smiled faintly. 'I am not yet in the ESP business, sir. People or goods. Very secret, very important goods or very secret and very important people. There's only one source that can give you the answer and it might be pointed out that their refusal to divulge this information might put the whole future of NATO at risk and that the individual ultimately responsible for the negative decision would be answerable directly to the president of the United States. One does not imagine that the individual concerned would remain in a position of responsibility for very much longer.'

Carson sighed. 'If I may speak in a spirit of complaint, David, I might point out that it's easy for you to talk and even easier to talk tough. You're a British officer. I'm an American.'

'I appreciate that, sir.'

Carson looked at the colonel, who remained silent for a couple of moments, then nodded, slowly, twice. Carson reached for the button on his desk.

'Jean?'

'Sir?'

'Get me the Pentagon. Immediately.'

## 2

'You are unhappy, Vincent?' Vincent was Van Gelder's first name. There were three of them seated in the wardroom, Talbot, Van Gelder and Grierson.

'Puzzled, you might say, sir. I don't understand why Andropulos and the others didn't abandon ship earlier. I saw two inflatable dinghies aboard. Rolled up, admittedly, but those things can be opened and inflated from their gas cylinders in seconds. There were also lifebelts and life-jackets. There was no need for this the-boy-stood-on-the-burning-deck act. They could have left at any time. I'm not saying they'd have been sucked down with the yacht but they might have had a rather uncomfortable time.'

'Same thought had occurred to me. Mentioned it to Andrew here. Odd. Maybe Andropulos had a reason. Anything else?'

'The owner tried to stop me from boarding the yacht. Maybe he was concerned with my health. I have the feeling he wasn't. Then I would much like to know what caused that explosion in the engineroom. A luxurious yacht like that must have carried an engineer—we can find that out easily enough—and it's a fair guess that the engines would have been maintained in an immaculate condition. I don't see how they could have caused an explosion. We'll have to ask McCafferty about that one.'

'That, of course, is why you were so anxious that we pinpoint the spot where the *Delos* went down. You think an expert on the effects of explosives could identify and locate the cause of the explosion? I'm sure he could, especially if he were an expert at determining the causes of aircraft lost through explosions—those people are much better at that sort of thing than the Navy is. Explosives experts we have aboard but no experts on the effects of explosives. Even if we did, we have no divers aboard—well, you and myself apart—trained to work at levels below a hundred feet. We could borrow one easily enough from a lifting vessel or salvage tug but the chances are high that he'd know nothing about explosives. But there's really no problem. It would be a simple matter for any lifting vessel to raise an aircraft fuselage to the surface.' Talbot regarded Van Gelder thoughtfully. 'But there's something else worrying you, isn't there?'

'Yes, sir. The three dead men aboard the *Delos*—well, to be specific, just one of them. That's why I asked the doctor here to come along. The three of them were so smoke begrimed and blackened that it was difficult to tell what they were wearing but two of them appeared to be dressed in white while the third was in a navy blue overall. An engineer wouldn't wear whites. Well, I admit our engineer Lieutenant McCafferty is a dazzling exception; but he's a one-off case, he never goes near his engines anyway. In any event I assumed the man in the overalls was the engineer and he was the one who caught my attention. He had a vicious gash on the back of his head as if he had been blown backwards against a very hard, very sharp object.'

Grierson said: 'Or been struck by a very hard, sharp object?'

'Either way, I suppose. I wouldn't know. I'm afraid I'm a bit weak on the forensic side.'

'Had his occiput been crushed?'

'Back of his head? No. At least I'm reasonably certain it hadn't been. I mean, it would have given, wouldn't it, or been squashy. It wasn't like that.'

'A blow like that should have caused massive bruising. Did you see any?'

'Difficult to say. He had fairly thick hair. But it was fair. No, I don't think there was any.'

'Had it bled a lot?'

'He hadn't bled at all. I'm quite sure of that.'

'You didn't notice any holes in his clothing?'

'Not that I could see. He hadn't been shot, if that is what you're asking and that is what I think you are asking. Who would want to shoot a dead man? His neck was broken.'

'Indeed?' Grierson seemed unsurprised. 'Poor man was through the wars, wasn't he?'

Talbot said: 'What do you think, Andrew?'

'I don't know what to think. The inflicting of the wound on the head and the snapping of the vertebra could well have been simultaneous. If the two weren't simultaneous, then it could equally well have been—as Vincent clearly seems to think—a case of murder.'

'Would an examination of the corpse help at all?'

'It might. I very much doubt it. But an examination of engine-room bulkheads would.'

'To see if there were any sharp edges or protrusions that could have caused such a head wound?' Grierson nodded. 'Well, when—and if—we ever raise that hull, we should be able to kill two birds with one stone: to determine the causes of both the explosions and this man's death.'

'Maybe three birds,' Van Gelder said. 'It would be interesting to know the number and layout of the fuel tanks in the engine-room. There are, I believe, two common layouts—in one case there is just one main fuel tank, athwartships and attached to the for'ard bulkhead, with a generator or generators on one side of the engine and batteries on the other, plus a water-tank to port and another to starboard: or there could be a fuel tank on either side with the water-tank up front. In that case the two fuel tanks are interconnected to keep the fuel levels equal and maintain equilibrium.'

'A suspicious mind, Number One,' Talbot said. 'Very suspicious. What you would like to find, of course, is just one fuel tank because you think Andropulos is going to claim that he didn't abandon ship because he thought another fuel tank was about to go and he didn't want his precious passengers splashing about in a sea of blazing fuel oil which would, of course, also have destroyed the rubber dinghies.'

'I'm grieved, sir. I thought I'd thought of that first.'

'You did, in fact. When the passengers are cleaned up see if you can get this young lady, Irene Charial, alone and find out if she knows anything about the layout of the engine-room. The casual approach, Vincent, the innocent and cherubic expression, although I doubt the last is beyond you. Anyway it's possible she's never been there and may possibly know nothing about it.'

'It's equally possible, sir, that she knows all about it and may well choose to tell me something. Miss Charial is Andropulos's niece.'

'The thought had occurred. However, if Andropulos is not all he might be, then the chances are high that there is some other member of his ship's company in his confidence and I would have thought that would be a man. I don't say that that's because you know what the Greeks are like because I don't know what the Greeks are like. And we mustn't forget that Andropulos may be as innocent as the driven snow and that there is a perfectly rational explanation for all that has happened. Anyway, it would do no harm to try and you never can tell, Vincent—she might turn out to be a classic Greek beauty.'

From the fact that the whaler was lying stopped in the water and that Cousteau, his hand resting idly on the tiller, appeared to be expressing no great degree of interest in anything, it was obvious that his wait had been a vain one, a fact he confirmed on his arrival on the bridge.

Talbot called the sonar room. 'You have pinpointed the location of the plane?'

'Yes, sir. We're sitting exactly above it. Depth registered is eighteen fathoms. That's the echo from the top of the fuselage. Probably lying in about twenty fathoms. It's lying in the same direction as it was flying when it came down—northeast to south-west. Picking up some rather odd noises down here, sir. Would you care to come down?'

'Yes, I will.' For reasons best known to himself Halzman, the senior sonar operator, preferred not to discuss it over an open line. 'A minute or two.' He turned to Van Gelder. 'Have McKenzie put down a marker buoy, about midships. Tell him to lower the weight gently. I don't want to bump too hard against the plane's fuselage in case we do actually come into contact with it. When that's been done, I want to anchor. Two anchors. A stern anchor to the north-west, about a hundred yards distant from the buoy, then a bow anchor a similar distance to the south-east.'

'Yes, sir. May I suggest the other way around?'

'Of course, you're right. I'd forgotten about our old friend. Taking a holiday today, isn't it? The other way around, of course.' The 'old friend' to which he referred and which Van Gelder clearly had in mind, was the Meltemi wind, referred to as the 'Etesian' in the British sailing directions. In the Cyclades, in the summer months—and indeed in most of the Aegean—it blew steadily, but usually only in the afternoon and early evening, from the north-west. If it did start up, the *Ariadne* would ride more comfortably if it were bows on to it.

Talbot went to the sonar room which was only one deck down and slightly aft. The sonar room was heavily insulated against all outside noise and dimly lit by subdued yellow lighting. There were three display screens, two sets of control panels and, over and above all, a considerable number of heavily padded earphones. Halzman caught sight of him in an overhead mirror—there were a number of such mirrors around, speaking as well as any other kind of sound was kept to a minimum in the sonar room—removed his earphones and gestured to the seat beside him.

'Those earphones, sir. I thought you might be interested in listening for a minute.'

Talbot sat and clamped the earphones on. After about fifteen seconds he removed them and turned to Halzman, who had also removed his.

'I can't hear a damned thing.'

'With respect, sir, when I said a minute, I meant just that. A minute. First of all you have to listen until you hear the silence, then you'll hear it.'

'Whatever that means, I'll try it.' Talbot listened again, and just before the allotted minute was up, he leaned forward and creased his brow. After another thirty seconds he removed the head-set.

'A ticking sound. Strange, Halzman, you were right. First you hear the silence and then you hear it. Tick…tick…tick, once every two to three seconds. Very regular. Very faint. You're certain that comes from the plane?'

'I have no doubt, sir.'

'Have you ever heard anything like it before?'

'No, sir. I've spent hundreds of hours, more likely thousands, listening to sonar, asdics, hydrophones, but this is something quite new on me.'

'I've got pretty good hearing but I had to wait almost a moment before I could imagine I could hear anything. It's very, very faint, isn't it?'

'It is. I had to turn the hearing capacity up to maximum before I stumbled on it—not a practice I would normally follow or recommend—in the wrong circumstances you can get your eardrums blasted off. Why is it so faint? Well, the source of the sound may be very faint to begin with. I've been thinking about this, sir—well, I've had nothing else to think about. It's either a mechanical or electrical device. In either case it has to be inside a sealed or waterproof casing. A mechanical device could, of course, operate in water even if it was totally submerged, but operating in water would dampen out the sound almost completely. An electrical device would have to be totally sealed against sea-water. The plane's own electrical system, of course, has ceased to function, so it would have to have its own supply system, almost certainly battery-powered. In either event, mechanical or electrical, the sound impulses would have to pass through the waterproof casing, after which they must pass through the fuselage of the plane.'

'Have you *any* idea as to what it might be?'

'None whatsoever. It's a two and a half second sequence—I've timed it. I know of no watch or clock movement that follows that sequence. Do you, sir?'

'No, I don't. You think it could be some sort of timing device?'

'I thought about that too, sir, but I put it out of my mind.' Halzman smiled. 'Maybe I'm prejudiced against that idea because of all those cheap and awful video film cassettes we have aboard, with all their special effects and pseudo science. All I know for sure, sir, is that we have a mysterious plane lying on the sea-bed there. Lord only knows what mysterious kind of cargo it was carrying.'

'Agreed. I think we'd better leave it at that for the moment. Have one of your boys monitor it, once, say, in every fifteen minutes.'

When Talbot returned to the bridge he could see the marker buoy just astern, bobbing gently in the very small wake Van Gelder was creating as he edged the *Ariadne* gently to the north-west. Very soon he stopped, juggled the engines to and fro until he reckoned the bows were a hundred yards distant from the buoy, had the anchor dropped, then moved just as slowly astern, the anchor chain being paid out as he went. Soon the stern anchor had been paid out and the *Ariadne* was back to where she had started, the buoy nudging the midships port side.

'Neatly done,' Talbot said. 'Tell me, Number One, how are you on puzzles?'

'Useless. Even the simplest crossword baffles me.'

'No matter. We're picking up a strange noise on the sonar. Maybe you'd like to take a turn along there, perhaps even identify it. Baffles me.'

'Consider it done. Back in two or three minutes.'

Twenty minutes elapsed before he returned to the bridge where Talbot was now alone: as the ship was no longer under way, Harrison had retired to his Mess.

'That was a long couple of minutes, Vincent, and what are you looking so pleased about?'

'I really don't know how you do it, sir. Incredible. I don't suppose you have any Scottish blood?'

'Not a drop, as far as I'm aware. Am I supposed to be following you, Number One?'

'I thought maybe the second sight. You were right. A classic Greek beauty. Irene. Miss Charial, that is. Odd, mind you, blonde as they come. I thought all those warm-blooded young Latin ladies had hair as black as a raven's wing.'

'It's the sheltered life you lead, Vincent. You should go to Andalucia some day. Seville. On one street corner a dusky Moorish maiden, the next a Nordic blonde. We'll discuss pigmentation some other time. What did you learn?'

'Enough, I hope. It's an art, sir, this casual and inconsequential approach. The questioning, I mean. She seems honest and open enough, not ingenuous, if you know what I mean, but quite straightforward. Certainly didn't give the impression of having anything to hide. Says she doesn't know the engine-room well but has been there a couple of times. We came to the question of fuel oil —I was just wondering out loud, natural curiosity, I hope she thought—as to what could have caused the explosion. Seems I was wrong when I said there were just two common ways of arranging fuel and water tanks. Seems there's a third. Two big tanks on either side of the engine, one fuel, one water. How big, I don't know, she was a bit vague about that—no reason why she should know—but at least thousands of litres, she says. If there was a spare fuel tank she didn't know about it. I look forward, sir, to hearing Mr Andropulos justifying his decision not to abandon ship.'

'So do I. Should be interesting. Anyway, congratulations. A good job.'

'No hardship, sir.' Van Gelder scanned the sea around. 'Odd, don't you think, sir? I mean, are we the only ones who heard the SOS? I would have thought the horizon would have been black with converging vessels by this time.'

'Not so strange, really. Nearly all the vessels around at this time of year are private yachts and fishermen. Lots of them don't carry any radio at all and even those who do almost certainly wouldn't be permanently tuned to the distress frequency.'

'But we are.'

'This time I'm ahead of you. The *Delos*—or at least Andropulos—*knew* that we would be permanently tuned to the distress frequency, that we are automatically alerted by bell or buzzer whenever the distress frequency is energized. This presupposes two things. He knew we were a naval vessel and he also knew that we were in the vicinity.'

'You realize what you are saying, sir? Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound that way. But the implications, sir. I must say I really don't like those at all.'

'Neither do I. Opens up all sorts of avenues of interesting speculation, doesn't it?' He turned as McKenzie came on to the bridge: 'And how are our oil-stained survivors, Chief?'

'Clean, sir. And in dry clothes. I don't think any of them will make the list of the ten bestdressed men.' He looked at Van Gelder. 'I gather you didn't have too much time, sir, for the selection and careful matching up of clothes. They're a bit of an odd sight, I must say, but respectable enough. I knew you would want to see them, Captain—Mr Andropulos seems very anxious to see you—and I know you don't like unauthorized people on the bridge so I took the liberty of putting the four gentlemen and the two young ladies in the wardroom. I hope that's all right, sir.'

'Fine. You might ask the Surgeon Commander and Lieutenant Denholm to join us there. And send a couple of your boys up here to keep a lookout. Who knows, our radar might have a day off.'

The six survivors from the *Delos* were standing around rather awkwardly, not talking, when Talbot and Van Gelder reached the wardroom. The four men, as McKenzie had suggested, did present rather an odd spectacle. They looked rather as if they had just raided an old clothes shop, few of the items of their clothing being a match, and for the most part, fitting only where they touched. In striking contrast, both girls were immaculately clad: dressed in white blouses and white skirts, they could have stepped straight from the pages of *Vogue.*

'Please,' Talbot said. 'All of you be seated. Before we talk, I suggest we get our priorities right. First things first. You've had a harrowing experience and a lucky escape. I suggest you will not take amiss the suggestion of a suitable restorative.' He pressed a bell and a steward entered. 'Jenkins. Refreshments. Find out what they would like.' Jenkins did so and left.

'I'm the captain,' Talbot said. 'Talbot. This is Lieutenant-Commander Ven Gelder. Ah!' The door had opened. 'And this is Surgeon-Commander Grierson, whom you have met and whose services you fortunately didn't require, and Lieutenant Denholm.' He looked at the short stocky man seated before him. 'I take it that you, sir, are Mr Andropulos, the owner.'

'I am, Commander, I am.' Andropulos had black hair, black eyes, white teeth and a deeply tanned complexion. He looked as if he hadn't shaved that morning but then, he would always look as if he hadn't shaved that morning. He leapt to his feet, took Talbot's hand, and shook it vigorously. He positively radiated a combined aura of benevolence and bonhomie. 'Words cannot express our gratitude. A close-run thing, Commander, a very close-run thing. We owe you our lives.'

'I wouldn't go as far as to say that but I'll admit you were in a rather nasty pickle.'

'Pickle? Pickle?'

'Dangerous circumstances. I deeply regret both your loss of the members of your crew and your yacht.'

'The yacht is nothing. I can always buy another. Well, Lloyd's of London can buy it for me. Still sadder to lose an old friend like the *Delos* but sadder still, much sadder, to lose the three members of my crew. Been with me for many years. I treasured them all.'

'Who were they, sir?'

'My engineer, chef and steward. With me for many years.' Andropulos shook his head. 'They will be sadly missed.'

'Wasn't it odd for a chef and steward to be in the engine-room?'

Andropulos smiled sadly. 'Not aboard the *Delos,* Commander. It was not exactly run along the lines of a ship of the Royal Navy. They were in the habit of having an after-lunch drink there with the engineer. They had my permission, of course, but they preferred to be discreet about it—and what more discreet place than the engine-room? Alas, their discretion cost them their lives.'

'That is ironic. May I be introduced to the others?'

'Of course, of course. This is my very dear friend Alexander.' Alexander was a tall man with a thin, unsmiling face and black, cold eyes who didn't look as if he could possibly be anybody's very dear friend. 'This is Aristotle, my captain.' Andropulos didn't say whether Aristotle was the first or last name: he had watchful eyes and a serious expression but looked as if he might, unlike Alexander,

be capable of smiling occasionally. ‘And this is Achmed.’ He didn’t say what occupation Achmed held. He was young, pleasant-faced and smiled readily. Talbot couldn’t even begin to guess at his nationality except that he wasn’t Greek.

‘But I forget myself. Deplorable, deplorable. I forget myself. Such manners. Should have been ladies first, of course. This is my niece, Irene.’ Van Gelder hadn’t made any mistakes about her, Talbot thought, except that he’d missed out on the wide green eyes and a rather bewitching smile. ‘And this is Eugenia.’ This one, Talbot reflected, was much closer to Van Gelder’s concept of a warm-blooded young Latin lady. She had a slightly dusky skin, black hair and warm brown eyes. And she also, no doubt, was quite beautiful. It seemed to Talbot that Van Gelder was going to find himself in something of a quandary.

‘I congratulate you, Mr Andropulos,’ Talbot said gallantly, ‘and ourselves. Certainly the loveliest passengers we’ve ever had aboard the *Ariadne.* Ah. The steward.’

Andropulos took his glass—a scotch and not a small one, and disposed of half the contents in one gulp.

‘My goodness, I needed that. Thank you, Commander, thank you. Not as young as I was nor as tough, either. Age cometh to us all.’ He quaffed the rest of his drink and sighed.

Talbot said: ‘Jenkins, another for Mr Andropulos. A slightly larger measure this time.’ Jenkins looked at him expressionlessly, closed his eyes momentarily and left.

‘The *Ariadne,*’ Andropulos said. ‘Rather odd, is it not. Greek name, British vessel.’

‘Courtesy gesture to your Government, sir. We are carrying out a hydrographic charting exercise with your people.’ Talbot saw no point in mentioning that the *Ariadne* had never carried out a hydrographic exercise in its life and that the ship had been called *Ariadne* to remind the Greeks that it was a multi-national vessel and to persuade a wavering Greek government that perhaps NATO wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

‘Hydrographic, you say. Is that why we’re moored fore and aft—a fixed platform for taking bearings.’

‘A fixed platform, yes, but in this instance the purpose is not hydrographic. We’ve had quite a busy afternoon, Mr Andropulos, and at the moment we’re anchored over a plane that crashed into the sea just about the time we were receiving your SOS.’

‘A plane? Crashed? Good God! What—what kind of plane?’

‘We have no idea. It was so wreathed in smoke that it was impossible to distinguish any important features.’

‘But surely—well, don’t you think it was a big plane?’

‘It may have been.’

‘But it could have been a big jet. Maybe *hundreds* of passengers.’ If Andropulos knew it wasn’t a jet carrying hundreds of passengers, his face wasn’t saying so.

‘It’s always possible.’ Talbot saw no point in telling Andropulos that it was almost certainly a bomber and equally certainly not carrying hundreds of passengers.

‘You—you mean to tell me that you left the area to come to our aid?’

‘A reasonable enough decision, I think. We were pretty certain that there were people alive aboard the *Delos* and we were also pretty certain that there was no one alive aboard that plane.’

‘There could have been survivors aboard that plane. I mean, you weren’t there to see.’

‘Mr Andropulos.’ Talbot allowed a certain coldness to creep into his voice. ‘We are, I hope, neither callous nor stupid. Before leaving, we lowered one of our motorboats to circle the area. There were no survivors.’

‘Oh dear,’ Irene Charial said, ‘Isn’t it awful? All those people dead and there we were, busy doing nothing except feeling sorry for ourselves. I’m not being inquisitive, Captain, and I know it’s none of my business, but why do you remain anchored here? I mean, there can’t possibly be any hope now that some survivors may surface.’

'There is no hope, Miss Charial. We're remaining here as a marker until the diving ship arrives.' He didn't like lying to her but thought it inadvisable to tell her that there was no rescue ship hurrying to the scene and that, as far as he knew, the only other people who knew of the disaster were the NATO HQ in Italy. More especially, he didn't want any person or persons in her company to know.

'But—but it will be too late to save anyone.'

'It's already too late, young lady. But they'll send divers down to investigate, to find out whether it's a passenger-carrying jet or not and to try to ascertain the cause of the accident.' He was looking, without seeming to look, at Andropulos as he said the last words and felt almost certain that he saw a flicker of expression cross his face.

Andropulos's captain, Aristotle, spoke for the first time. 'How deep is this plane, Commander?'

'Seventeen, eighteen fathoms. Just over thirty metres or so.'

'Thirty metres,' Andropulos said. 'Even if they do get inside—and there's no guarantee that they will be able to do so—won't it be difficult to move around and see anything?'

'I can guarantee they'll get inside. There are such things as oxyacetylene torches, you know. And they'll have powerful underwater torches. But they won't bother with either of those things. The divers will carry down a couple of slings with them. A diving ship will have no difficulty at all in bringing the fuselage to the surface. Then they'll be able to examine the plane at their leisure.' This time there was no trace of expression in Andropulos's face: Talbot wondered if he, Andropulos, had become aware that such changes in expression were being sought for.

Jenkins entered and handed Talbot a sealed envelope. 'From the radio-room, sir. Myers said it was urgent.'

Talbot nodded, opened the envelope, extracted and read the slip of paper it had held. He slipped it in his pocket and stood.

'My apologies, ladies and gentlemen. I have to go to the bridge. Come along with me, Number One. I'll join you at seven o'clock for dinner.'

Once outside, Van Gelder said: 'You really are a fearful liar, sir. A fearfully good liar, I mean.'

'Andropulos isn't half bad, either.'

'He's had practice. Between the two of you—well, in his own phrase, it's a close-run thing. Ah, thank you.' He unfolded the slip of paper Talbot had handed him. ' "Vitally urgent you remain in closest contact with downed plane Stop will join you earliest in the morning Stop Hawkins". Isn't that the Vice-Admiral, sir?'

'None other. Vitally urgent and flying down to see us. What do you make of that?'

'I make it that he knows something that we don't.'

'Indeed. Incidentally, you've kind of forgotten to tell me about your visit to sonar.'

'Sorry about that, sir. I had something else on my mind.'

'Somebody, not something. Having seen her I can understand. Well?'

'The noise from the plane? Tick…tick…tick. Could be anything. Halzman half suggested it might be some sort of timing device. Could be that he's right. I don't want to sound alarmist, sir, but I don't think I like it very much.'

'I don't particularly care for it myself. Well, then, the radio-room.'

'I thought you said you were going to the bridge?'

'That was for Andropulos's benefit. The less that character knows about anything the better. I think he's cunning, astute and alert for the slightest nuances.'

'Is that why you didn't make any reference to the engine-room explosion?'

'Yes. I may, of course, be doing him a massive injustice. For all I know he may be as fresh and innocent as the dawn's early dew.'

'You don't really believe that, sir.'

'No.'

Myers was alone in the radio-room. ‘Another message to Rome,’ Talbot said. ‘Again Code B. To Vice-Admiral Hawkins. Message received. Strongly advise that you come soonest. Tonight. Report repeated two and a half second ticking sounds from plane. Could be timing device. Please phone immediately.’

‘A ticking sound, possibly a timing device, Talbot says.’ Vice-Admiral Hawkins was standing by Carson’s chair as the general read and reread the slip of paper Hawkins had just handed him.

‘A timing device. We don’t have to discuss the implications of this.’ From his high-rise office Carson looked out over the roofs of Rome, then at the colonel across the desk, then finally up at Hawkins. He pressed a button on his desk.

‘Get me the Pentagon.’

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was also standing as the man behind the desk read the slip of paper he had just been handed. He read it three times, laid it down carefully on the desk, smoothed it out and looked across at the Chairman. His face looked drawn and tired and old.

‘We know what this means, or what it could mean. If anything goes wrong the international repercussions will be enormous, General.’

‘I’m afraid I’m fully aware of that, sir. Apart from the universal condemnation, we will become the pariah dog, the outcasts of the world.’

‘And no hint of any Soviet involvement.’

‘None whatsoever. No proof, direct or indirect. As far as the world is concerned, they are blameless. My first reaction is that they are indeed blameless. My second thoughts are exactly the same. I can see no way they are linked with this. We bear the burden, sir.’

‘We bear the burden. And will stand condemned before the court of mankind.’ The General made no reply. ‘The Chiefs have no suggestions?’

‘None that I regard as very useful. In short, bluntly, none. We have to rely on our people out there. *Carte blanche,* sir?’

‘We have no option. How good are your men in the Mediterranean?’

‘The very best. No rhetoric, sir. I mean it.’

‘And this British vessel on the spot?’

‘The frigate *Ariadne*? A very special vessel indeed, I am given to understand. Whether or not it can cope with this, no one can say. There are too many imponderables.’

‘Do we pull it out?’

‘That’s not for my decision, sir.’

‘I know it’s not.’ He was silent for a long moment then said: ‘It may be our only hope. It stays.’

‘Yes, Mr President.’

Talbot was alone with Van Gelder on the bridge when the radio-room called.

‘I have voice contact with Rome, sir. Where will you take it?’

‘Here.’ He gestured to Van Gelder to take up a listening phone. ‘Talbot here.’

‘Hawkins. I’m leaving shortly with two civilians for Athens. You’ll have a phone call from there letting you know our estimated time of arrival. We’ll be landing on Thera Island. Have a launch standing by to meet us.’

‘Yes, sir. Take a taxi down to Athinio—there’s a new quay about two miles south of the Thira Village anchorage.’

‘My map shows that the Thira anchorage is nearer.’

‘What your map may not show is that the only way down to Thira anchorage is by mule-track down a precipitous cliff. A seven-hundred-foot cliff, to be precise.’

‘Thank you, Talbot. A life saved. You have not forgotten my twin *bêtes noires,* my fatal flaws. Till this evening, then.’

‘What *bêtes noires*?’ Van Gelder said. ‘What flaws?’

'He hates horses. I would imagine the detestation extends to mules. And he suffers from acrophobia.'

'That sounds a very nasty thing to suffer from. And what might that be?'

'Vertigo. A fear of heights. Almost got him disbarred from entry to the Navy. He had a powerful aversion to climbing up rigging.'

'You know him well, then?'

'Pretty well. Now, this evening. I'd normally send young Henri to pick anybody up but Vice-Admiral Hawkins and the two no doubt equally distinguished civilians who are with him are not anybody. So we do it in style. A Lieutenant-Commander , I thought.'

'My pleasure, sir.'

'And tell them all you know about the plane, the *Delos* and the survivors. Also our suspicions about the survivors. Saves the time when they get here.'

'I'll do that. Speaking about the survivors, when I go ashore do you want me to take them along and dump them?'

'You are unwell, Number One?'

'I'm fine. Didn't for a moment think you'd want them out of your sight. And we couldn't very well abandon the two young ladies on that barren rock there.'

'It's as well the islanders can't hear you. There's fourteen hundred people in the Thira township and there's a fair amount of tourist accommodation. And speaking again of the survivors, not to mention our three other visitors, we'll have to find sleeping accommodation for them. The Admiral can have the admiral's cabin—it'll be the first time an admiral has slept there. There are three empty cabins. You can have mine, I'll sleep here or in the chart-room. The rest, well, you fix it.'

'Five minutes,' said he confidently.

He was back in forty-five.

'Took me a little longer than I thought. Ticklish problems.'

'Who's got my cabin?'

'Irene. Eugenia has mine.'

'It took you three-quarters of an hour to arrange that?'

'Decisions, decisions. Calls for a little delicacy and a modicum of finesse.'

'My word, you do do yourselves well, Commander,' Andropulos said. He sipped some claret. 'Or is this a special treat for us?'

'Standard fare, I assure you.' Andropulos, whom Grierson had reported as having a remarkable affinity for scotch, seemed relaxed to the point of garrulity. Talbot would have taken long odds that he was cold sober. He talked freely about quite a number of subjects, but had not once broached the question of being sent ashore. It was clear that he and Talbot had at least one thing in common—the wish that he remain aboard the *Ariadne.*

Jenkins came in and spoke softly to Van Gelder, who looked at Talbot.

'Call from the radio-room. Shall I take it?' Talbot nodded. Van Gelder left and returned within half a minute.

'Call was delayed, sir. Difficulty in contacting us. They will be there in less than half an hour. I'd better go now.'

'I'm expecting visitors later this evening,' Talbot said, 'I shall have to ask you not to come to the wardroom for some time after they come. Not for too long. Twenty minutes at the most.'

'Visitors?' Andropulos said. 'At this time of the evening. Who on earth are they?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Andropulos. This is a naval vessel. There are certain things I can't discuss with civilians.'

# 3

Vice-Admiral Hawkins was the first up the gangway. He shook Talbot's hand warmly. The Admiral didn't go in much for saluting.

'Delighted to see you again, John. Or I would be if it weren't for the circumstances. And how are you, my boy?'

'Fine, sir. Again, considering the circumstances.'

'And the children? Little Fiona and Jimmy?'

'In the best, thank you, sir. You've come a long way in a short time.'

'Needs must when the devil drives. And he's sitting on my tail right now.' He turned to the two men who had followed him up the gangway. 'Professor Benson. Dr Wickram. Gentlemen, Commander Talbot, the captain of the *Ariadne.*'

'If you will come with me, gentlemen. I'll have your gear taken to your quarters.' Talbot led them to the wardroom and gestured them to their seats. 'You want me to get my priorities right?'

'Certainly.' Talbot pressed a bell and Jenkins came in. 'A large gin and tonic for those two gentlemen,' Hawkins said. 'Lots of ice. They're Americans. Large scotch and water for me. Quarters, you said. What quarters?'

'You haven't been aboard since before commissioning but you won't have forgotten. For an admiral, an admiral's quarters. Never been used.'

'How perfectly splendid. Honoured, I'm sure. And for my two friends here?'

'A cabin apiece. Also never been used. I think they'll find them quite comfortable. I'd like to bring along some of my officers, sir.'

'But of course. Whom did you have in mind?'

'Surgeon-Commander Grierson.'

'Know him,' Hawkins said. 'Very wise bird.'

'Lieutenant Denholm. Our electronic *Wunderkind.* I know you've met him, sir.'

'That I have.' He looked at his two friends, smiling broadly. 'You'll have to mind your p's and q's here. Lieutenant Denholm is the heir to an earldom. The genuine article. Fearfully languid and aristocratic. Don't be deceived for an instant. Mind like a knife. As I told General Carson, he's so incredibly advanced in his electronic speciality that your high-tech whizzkids in Silicon Valley wouldn't even begin to understand what he's talking about.'

'Then there's Lieutenant McCafferty, our senior engineer, and, of course, Lieutenant-Commander Van Gelder whom you've already met.'

'For the first time. Favourably impressed. Very. Struck me as an able lad indeed.'

'He's all that. More. If I were laid low tomorrow you wouldn't have to worry. He could take over the *Ariadne* at any moment and you wouldn't notice the difference.'

'From you, that's worth any half-dozen testimonials. I'll bear it in mind.'

Introductions completed, Hawkins looked at Talbot and his four officers and said: 'The first question in your minds, of course, gentlemen, is why I have brought two civilians with me. First I will tell you who they are and then, when I have explained the purpose of our coming, you will understand why they are here. In passing, I might say how extraordinarily lucky I am to have them here with me. They seldom leave their home state of California: it just so happened that both were attending an international conference in Rome.

'Professor Alec Benson here.' Benson was a large, calm man in his early sixties, grey of hair, cherubic and cheerful of countenance, and wearing a sports jacket, flannels and polo jersey, all of varying shades of grey and all so lived in, comfortable and crumpled that he could well have inherited them from his grandfather. 'The Professor is the director of the seismological department of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. He's also a geologist and vulcanologist. Anything

that makes the earth bang or shake or move is his field. Regarded by everybody in that line as the world's leading expert—he chaired, or was chairing until I so rudely interrupted him, an international conference in seismology in Rome. You all know, of course, what seismology is.'

'A rough idea,' Talbot said. 'A kind of science—I think "study" would be a better word for it—of the causes and effects of earthquakes.'

'A kind of science?' Hawkins said. 'I am distressed. It *is* a science.'

'No offence meant, I'm sure, and none taken,' Benson said equably. 'The Commander is perfectly correct. Far from being a science, we're still only dabbling on the periphery of the subject.'

'Ah, well. Dr Wickram is a physicist, as well known in his own field as Professor Benson is in his. He specializes in nuclear physics.'

Talbot looked at Dr Wickram who, in startling contrast to Benson, was thin, dark and immaculately dressed in a blue suit, white button-down collar and a black tie, the funereal hue of which went rather well with the habitual severity of his expression, and said: 'Does your interest in nuclear physics extend to nuclear weaponry, Dr Wickram?'

'Well, yes, it does rather.'

'You and the Professor are to be congratulated. There should be some kind of civilian medal for this. Vice-Admiral Hawkins, of course, is acting in the line of duty. I would have thought you two gentlemen should have stayed in Rome. I mean, isn't it safer there?'

Hawkins cleared his throat. 'You wouldn't dream of stealing a superior officer's thunder, would you?'

'I wouldn't dream of it, sir.'

'Well, to the point. Your two signals duly received. The first gave rise to some concern, the second was profoundly disturbing.'

'The "tick…tick…tick" bit, sir?'

'The "tick…tick…tick" bit. Both signals were sent to the Pentagon, the second one also going to the White House. I should imagine that the word consternation would suitably describe their reaction. Guessing, of course, but I think the speed of the reply to the second message showed how badly shaken they were. Normally, it can take forever—well, even months at times—to extract just a nugget of information from the Pentagon, but this time minutes only. When I read their reply, I could understand all too well.' Hawkins paused, possibly for suitable dramatic effect.

'So can I,' Talbot said.

'What do you mean?'

'If I were the Pentagon or the White House I'd be upset too if a US Air Force bomber or cargo plane, carrying a load of bombs, suddenly disappeared into the sea. Especially if the bombs—or missiles—that plane was carrying were of the nuclear variety. Even more especially if they were hydrogen bombs.'

'Well, damn your eyes, Talbot, you do deprive ageing vice-admirals of the simpler pleasures of life. There goes my thunder.'

'It wasn't all that difficult, sir. We had already guessed it was a bomber. Civilian planes, with the exception of Concorde, don't fly at the height at which we picked it up. We'd have had to be pretty stupid not to assume what we did. Bombers usually carry bombs. American reaction made it inevitable that it was an American plane. And you wouldn't have come down here in such a tearing hurry, and be accompanied by an expert in nuclear weaponry, unless the bombs were of a rather nasty variety. I can't imagine anything nastier than hydrogen bombs.'

'Nor can anyone. When you put it the way you put it, I suppose I should have guessed that you had guessed. Even the Pentagon don't know or won't divulge what type of plane it was. They suggest an advanced design of the C.141 Starlifter cargo plane. It was refuelled in the Azores and heading for Greece. From your first message we gathered you saw the plane crash into the sea but couldn't identify it. Why not?'

'Number One, show the Admiral why not.'

Van Gelder produced a sheaf of photographs and handed them to Hawkins who flipped through them quickly, and then, more slowly, a second time. He sighed and looked up.

'Intriguing, I suppose, if you're a connoisseur of the pattern effects of smoke and flame. I'm not. All I can make out is what I take to be the outer port engine and that's no help at all. And it gives no indication as to the source or cause of the fire.'

'I think Van Gelder would disagree with you, sir,' Talbot said. 'He's of the opinion that the fire originated in the nose cone and was caused by an internal explosion. I agree with him. It certainly wasn't brought down by ship-based anti-aircraft fire. We would have known. The only alternative is a heat-seeking missile. Two objections to that. Such a missile would have targeted on the engines, not the fuselage and, more importantly, there are no vessels in the area. Our radar would have picked them up. As a corollary to that, the missile didn't come from an aircraft, either. The Admiral will not need reminding that the radar aboard the *Ariadne* is as advanced as any in the world.'

'That may no longer be true, sir.' Denholm's tone was deferential but not hesitant. 'And if it is true, then we can't discount missiles just like that. This is not a dissenting opinion, I'm just exploring another possibility.'

'Explore away, Lieutenant,' Hawkins said. 'Any light that can illumine the darkness of our ignorance, etcetera, etcetera.'

'I'm not sure I'm all that good as a beacon, sir. I do know that I don't go along with the belief that the Soviets always trail the West in technological advancement. Whether this belief is carefully and officially nurtured I do not know. I admit that the Soviets spend a certain amount of time and trouble in extracting military secrets from the West. I say "certain" because they don't have to try all that hard: there appears to be a steady supply of scientists, both American and British, who, along with associates not necessarily involved in direct research at all, are perfectly willing to sell the Soviets anything they want—provided, that is, the price is right. I believe this to be true in the case of computers where they do lag behind the West: I do not believe it in the case of radar.

'In this field, Plessey, of Britain, probably leads the West. They have developed a revolutionary new radar system, the Type 966, which is fitted, or about to be fitted, to Invincible-class aircraftcarriers, the Type 42 Sheffield-class destroyers and the new Type 23 Norfolk-class frigates. This new radar is designed not only to detect and track aircraft and sea-skimming missiles, but it also—'

Hawkins cleared his throat. 'Sorry to interrupt, Denholm. You may know this but surely it comes under the heading of classified information?'

'If it did, I wouldn't talk about it even in this company, sir. It's in the public domain. As I was about to say, it's also able to control Sea Dart and Seawolf missiles in flight and home them in on their targets with great accuracy. I also understand they're virtually immune to jamming and radar decoys. If Plessey have done this, the Soviets may well have also. They're not much given to advertising such things. But I believe they have the know-how.'

Hawkins said: 'And you also believe, in this case, that a missile was the culprit?'

'Not at all, sir. I'm only suggesting a possibility. The Captain and Lieutenant-Commander Van Gelder may well be right. Trouble is, I know nothing about explosives. Maybe there are missiles with such a limited charge that they cause only limited damage. I would have thought that a standard missile would have ensured that a plane it brought down would not have struck the sea with its fuselage relatively intact but in a thousand pieces. Again, I simply don't know. I just wonder what the security was like at the base from which that plane took off in the States.'

'Security? In the case of a super-sensitive plane such as this? Total.'

'Does the Admiral really believe there is such a thing as total security?' The Admiral didn't say what he believed, he just sipped his scotch in silence. 'There were four major air disasters last year, all

four planes involved having taken off from airports which were regarded as having maximum security. In all four cases terrorists found the most stringent airport checks childishly easy to circumvent.'

'Those were civilian airports. This would be a top-secret US Air Force base, manned exclusively by US Air Force personnel, specially chosen for their position, rigidly screened, backgrounds exhaustively researched, and all subjected to liedetector tests.'

'With respect to the Vice-Admiral, and our American friends, lie-detector tests—more accurately, polygraph tests—are rubbish. Any moderately intelligent person can be trained to beat the polygraph test, which, after all, depends on crudely primitive measurements of pulse rate, blood pressure and perspiration. You can be trained to give right answers, wrong answers or merely confusing ones and the scrutineer can't tell the difference.'

'Doesn't measure up to your idea of electronics, eh?'

'Nothing to do with electronics, sir. Polygraphs belong to the horse-and-buggy era. You've just used the word supersensitive, sir. The *Ariadne,* if I may put it that way, is a hotbed of super-sensitivity. How many members of this crew have ever been subjected to a polygraph test? None.'

Hawkins considered his glass for a few moments, then looked up at Talbot. 'Should the need arise, Captain, how long would it take you to contact the Pentagon?'

'Immediately. Well, half a minute. Now?'

'No. Wait. Have to think about it. Trouble is, even the Pentagon is having difficulty in extracting information from this Air Force base which is, I believe, somewhere in Georgia. The Pentagon's own fault, really, although you can't expect them to admit this. They've so inculcated this passion for absolute secrecy into the senior officers of all four services that no one is prepared to reveal anything without the permission of the commanding officer of the Air Force base or ship or whatever. In this particular case, the commanding officer who, to the Pentagon's distress, would appear to have a human side to his nature, has elected to take twenty-four hours off. No one appears to know where he is.'

Van Gelder said: 'Makes it a bit awkward, sir, doesn't it, if war breaks out in the next halfhour?'

'No. Base remains in full operational readiness. But there's still no relaxation of the iron-bound rules concerning the release of classified information.'

Talbot said: 'You wouldn't be sitting here unless they'd released *some* information.'

'Naturally not. The news they've released is vague and incomplete but all very, very bad. One report says there were twelve nuclear weapons aboard, another fifteen. Whether they were missiles or bombs was not disclosed: what was disclosed was that they were hydrogen devices, each one in the monster megaton range, twelve to fifteen megatons. The plane was also understood to be carrying two of the more conventional atom bombs.'

'I think I'll break a self-imposed regulation and have a scotch myself,' Talbot said. A half-minute passed in silence, then he said quietly: 'This is worse than I ever dreamed.'

'Dream?' Grierson said. 'Nightmare.'

'Dream or nightmare, it won't matter to us,' Lieutenant Denholm said. 'Not when we're drifting through the stratosphere in vaporized orbit.'

'A hydrogen bomb, Dr Wickram,' Talbot said. 'Let's call it that. Is there any way it can spontaneously detonate?'

'In itself, impossible. The President of the United States has to press one button, the man on the spot another: the radio frequencies are so wildly different that the chances of anyone happening on the right combination are billions to one.'

'Is there a chance—say a billion to one—that the Soviets might have this combination?'

'None.'

'You say it's impossible to detonate in itself. Is there any other way, some external means, whereby it could be detonated?'

'I don't know.'

'Does that mean you're not saying or that you're not sure? I don't think, Dr Wickram, that this is the time to dwell on such verbal niceties.'

'I'm not sure. If there were a sufficiently powerful explosion close by it might go up by sympathetic detonation. We simply don't know.'

'The possibility has never been explored? I mean, no experiments?'

'I should hope not,' Lieutenant Denholm said. 'If such an experiment were successful, I wouldn't care to be within thirty or forty miles at the time.'

'That is one point.' For the first time, Dr Wickram essayed a smile, but it was a pretty wintry one. 'In the second place, quite frankly, we have never envisaged a situation where such a possibility might arise. We could, I suppose, have carried out such an experiment without the drastic consequences the Lieutenant has suggested. We could detonate a very small atom bomb in the vicinity of another. Even a charge of conventional explosive in the vicinity of a small atom bomb would suffice. If the small atom bomb went up, so then would the hydrogen bomb. Everybody knows that it's the fissioning of an atom bomb that triggers off the fusion of a hydrogen bomb.'

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.