

PELAGIA

BETWEEN THE STARS AND THE ABYSS

STEVE HOLLOWAY



LION FICTION

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*To the steady star of my life, Kitty, whose encouragement,
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CHAPTER ONE

2 July 2066, Forty-five miles south-west of New Caledonia, South Pacific

A lone gull swept through the last gleams of the day, high above the open sea. The gull dipped and turned on gusts of wind, wings white before the rising darkness of a storm. Below, a yacht's engines strained to stay ahead of the advancing blackness. A man at the helm pressed the throttle further forward, scanning the dials and repeatedly glancing behind.

The bird circled the boat in lazy arcs. Then it wheeled down and away, skimming the waves. Diving suddenly into an approaching swell, the gull left a ring of ripples in its wake.

The gale-driven swells increased. Blackness arched above, dwarfing the lone craft. Clouds of spray and foam swirled through the air, whipped from the waves. On deck, several figures scrambled, slipping about the cockpit as they secured the gear. The crew slammed hatches closed as rain swallowed the yacht in a deluge.

*

Ben felt lightness. His body was almost weightless, then rudely pulled down with a slam. Nausea assaulted him as his mind groped towards a twilit awareness.

A rhythmic roar drew his attention, thrumming through the floor and walls. *An engine?* The plunging and shuddering crashes. *Waves.* His mind began to recognize his environment. *A boat.*

His chest tensed: *Somalia? No, no, that was long ago.* The grip of that terror relaxed and withdrew into a dark memory.

He opened his eyes to darkness. The air was stuffy, musty, and reeking of diesel. *Who uses diesel these days?* He lingered over the smells. *Metal, rust, a whiff of rotten... what was it? Ah yes, seaweed.*

The force of the boat plunging through the waves again lifted his body,

Steve Holloway

then threw him against a solid wall. He attempted to steady himself. *My arms, legs. They're bound.* He strained against the bonds until he couldn't bear the pain.

Looking around, he perceived only blackness. He could not feel a blindfold, this must be a dark compartment of some kind. *Or am I blind?* He pushed that thought away.

His head throbbed. His tongue felt thick. Bitter. Dry. He must have been unconscious for hours. All his muscles ached from being in one position for so long.

He tensed and rolled onto his back, bracing himself for the next wave. A calm internal voice moved through him. *Be still.* He willed his six-foot frame to relax, allowing years of military training to take over. *First, assess your situation.* But his thoughts were slow to gather. He waited, letting his senses steep in his surroundings.

As he turned his head stiffly, a tiny light swung before him. Gratitude flooded through him. *I can still see.* He squeezed his eyes shut, blinked, and looked again. *A porthole.* A field of stars in a deep twilight sky flashed one way, then the other, across the small opening. *Evening, then.*

The sloping walls hindered him. Squirming to a sitting position, he brushed the walls with his bound hands. Rough texture, prickly. *Fibreglass.* Must be an old boat. Following the wall forward with his fingers, he felt the sharp angle of another wall. A chain rose before him, he could feel bits of dry seaweed clinging to it. An anchor chain, this is the bow.

Rising with effort to a hunched squat, he felt coils of rope under him. Faint whiffs of resin, rust, metal, and mildew. *It must be the chain locker of a – motor yacht? Maybe fifteen, eighteen metres.*

Now that he was moving around, his circulation began to return. The stabs of pain in his limbs felt almost welcome, helping his thoughts clear.

OK, so I'm in the forward locker of a yacht. Waves are rough, maybe there's a storm brewing. What's the last thing I remember? Images of rosewood and brass filled his mind. A restaurant. High windows, chandeliers, linen tablecloths. Of course, the symposium. I was preparing my lecture in Singapore.

A vivid memory taunted him: a half-empty glass of ice water left on the table. He licked his parched lips. *Had someone spiked that?* Possibly... That would make sense – it was the last thing he could remember, and it would explain the unconsciousness. The unwelcome realization slowly formed in his mind: *I've been kidnapped...* Dark memories began to crowd in, he pushed them down. *No time. Focus.*

He twisted around on the piles of rope, exploring the space. Using his legs, he lifted the coils and explored under them. In one corner, his foot struck something metal. He kicked it and heard a rattle. Manoeuvring, he managed to pull it out from under the ropes with his feet and onto another coil next to him. He contorted himself to run his hands over it. *A toolbox*. He could only imagine how it got there, maybe a careless workman who dropped it in a locker too deep to retrieve. He blessed the man's laziness.

Straining, panting, he fumbled and opened the latch. The hinges squealed softly; but the noise was masked by the rising storm. Ben exhaled slowly and deliberately and continued the awkward task. Just as he felt he was making progress, his sweaty fingers slipped and the lid clicked shut. He stifled an oath and set to work again. Focusing patiently, he eventually managed to tip the box over, spilling out its contents. Stretching his bound arms as far as he could, he eagerly felt among the pile and identified the jumble of angles and edges: a *wrench, screwdriver, hammer, screws, wire. Pliers*. He gripped them tightly.

Just then the boat plunged wildly, throwing him against the wall, scattering his treasures. He recovered, tensing his legs against the opposite wall amid the continued lurching. Rain rattled in a rising crescendo across the deck above.

Concentrating on the pliers, he turned them awkwardly. Their rusty surface scraped his wrists. *Patience. Concentrate*. With some twisting, Ben manoeuvred the pliers, so the wire-cutting edges closed on the plastic straps binding his arms. He pressed his weight onto the handles, the straps gave slightly. *Reposition, squeeze, reposition, squeeze*. The straps loosened and stretched, then broke. Within seconds, he had freed his legs as well.

Fire shot through his stiff limbs as he stretched them in the cramped space. Taking deep, slow breaths, he rolled to a crouch, and found his balance. With a new presence of mind, he ran his fingertips along the flat wall behind him, and then up. *A door*. It must lead into the next compartment. He pushed gently. It clicked but didn't open. He ran his hand along the frame and found rivets attaching the latch.

Reaching back, feeling in the darkness among the scattered tools, he retrieved a screwdriver and hammer. Quietly, he stacked coils of rope to kneel on. Climbing on them, crouching before the door, he paused to listen. The rhythmic thunder of rain and waves served him now, masking

his efforts. Using the screwdriver as a chisel, he sheared the heads of the rivets, timing hammer blows with the crash of the breakers against the bow.

Anger and fear, in equal measures, gripped his chest. Thoughts raced through his mind, in rhythm with his hammering. *Who's on this vessel? Why have they taken me? Where are they taking me?*

One, two, three rivets done. Halfway through shearing the fourth rivet, the boat shuddered and lost headway, pitching him towards the bow. Muffled shouts and the rumble of boots sounded from the stern. *Four or five heavy men at least,* he guessed. Rain slashed on the deck above with a steady roar. Ben breathed deeply, recovering from his fall. He moved quickly to restack the coils next to the door and sheared the last rivet.

With a gentle shove, he cracked open the door and peered into the swaying room. Windows in the cabin revealed only darkness outside, but hazy light filtered under a door at the far end. Stale cigarette smoke, unwashed laundry, a faint smell of teak oil. He took a moment to look around, letting his eyes adjust. A single bunk on each side with unmade sheets and blankets, probably water and fuel tanks under them. A lot of fine wood panelling. A kind of desk with drawers built into the back wall, heavy brass clock above and folding chairs secured to the starboard wall. A cabinet on the port side and a door – probably to a small head. He focused on the door with the light – where did it lead?

The boat swung broadside to the waves. Pitch and roll increased. The craft had lost steerage. Dishes and pans crashed to the floor beyond the door. *The galley.*

He slipped the screwdriver and hammer under his belt and moved stealthily through the small door and into the dim cabin, bracing himself against the rolling. *Breathe. Steady. Weigh your options.*

Glancing up, he spied a hatch leading to the deck. He quietly unhooked a chair, unfolded it beneath the hatch, and carefully climbed, legs instinctively flexing with the boat's movements. The hatch was hinged. Releasing the catch, he lifted it just enough to peer out. Gusts of warm rain and wind whipped at his face.

A rising moon laid a glittering path on the water, the air fresh and clear. At that moment, the boat tipped with the waves and he glimpsed a dark silhouette of land through a break in the curtains of rainfall. *About a kilometre away. Swimmable.*

He stepped down off the chair, to search the room. Studying the

starboard bunk, he tugged the ragged mattress off, then the plywood panel beneath. A plastic tank. He shook it. *Water.*

He turned to the port bunk and stripped it to reveal another tank. Reaching into the dark opening, he felt a cold metal surface. Stooping, he sniffed and smiled.

Shouts sounded as an argument erupted in the stern.

A shadow flickered across the sliver of light under the far door. Ben froze. Footsteps sounded just beyond. Someone rummaged through the clutter of fallen galley equipment.

“Where’s my knife,” he heard distinctly in Arabic. A man’s voice, angry. It sounded like a Yemeni or Somali dialect. Dark memories crept again to the edges of consciousness. Ben pushed them away.

“Maybe in the forward stateroom.” The noise stopped. Ben waited, aware of the faint sound of his breath, in and out.

The door handle rattled and slowly began to turn. Ben quietly lifted the brass wall-clock from its nail and balanced it in his hand. He flattened himself silently beside the door, holding his breath.

“Found it!” came from the other side. The handle was released with a click. Another rattle, then the footsteps receded to the stern. Ben found he was still holding his breath, the brass clock raised above his head. He exhaled noiselessly, waited ten more heartbeats, then set the clock down.

He continued his systematic search, sliding open one of the drawers in the desk. *Several packs of cigarettes. Matches.* He felt his way back to the starboard bed and, stabbing at the mattress with the screwdriver, managed to tear a piece of fabric off the smelly old mattress cover. Then, reaching down and placing the screwdriver against the side of the tank near the bottom, he struck it sharply with the hammer, matching the boom of the bow ploughing into a wave. The smell of diesel rewarded his efforts. He grabbed at the stuffing of the mattress and held it near the tank, letting it soak up the spreading diesel. He picked up one diesel-drenched rag from the pile and striking three matches at once, he brought them under the cloth to slowly catch fire, then placed it back carefully with the stuffing. *Like the wick of a kerosene lantern.* Small red flames smoked and glimmered in the dark void.

Climbing back onto the chair, he opened the hatch again. Slowly. Quietly. He peered out. *No one.* He lifted the hatch and rotated it carefully on its hinges to lie flat on the deck. Pulling himself up through the opening, he lay prone near the bow. The coolness of the storm awakened his senses;

a teak deck was beneath him, not well cared for. Darkness off the starboard side, a curtain of rain approaching. The deck was clear around him. No one on the bridge above the deck. That was puzzling.

Rolling onto his back, he paused under the deluge and allowed the sweet liquid to stream into his mouth. Thirst barely slaked, he turned again to his stomach and slithered across the deck to the starboard edge of the bow. The wind now lashed his wet body. He shivered, staring into the night, allowing his eyes to adjust again. The squall passed and he again spotted a treeline of palms silhouetted against the moonlit sky, a dark fleeting promise.

A noise, more shouting. Looking back, he saw a figure climb out onto the side of the boat. The man was perched on the narrow catwalk that gave access to the bow from the stern cockpit; he was maybe eight or ten metres away, clinging to the rail mounted on the main cabin as the boat rolled under him. His attention was still fully towards the stern. Adrenaline shot through Ben as he inched closer to the starboard edge of the bow, willing himself to be a shadow.

On both sides of the bow, stainless steel posts were linked with a safety line. Grabbing the cable, Ben swung himself over the side with the roll of the boat. He hung for a moment, suspended above the sea. He glanced at the silhouette of the man against lights from the stern; a searchlight pointed in the water behind the boat. The man's back was still turned to Ben.

Ben looked down at the black waters below. *Large, deep breaths.* Each time the boat tipped, his feet dipped beneath the waves. On the third tip, he released his grip, slipping below the surface noiselessly.

As he surfaced in the warm water, he heard the man on deck shouting in Arabic at someone in the water at the stern, "Cut the rope!" There was an answering shout from the water that was lost in the roar of rain.

Ben kept to the shadow of the bow rocking above him. *Point of no return.* He was committed, he couldn't climb back onto the boat from here. After an eternal minute, the man scrambled back into the stern cockpit. Ben slipped below the water.

The comforting warmth of the sea closed over him. He relaxed, momentarily revived. *This is my element.* He felt the vastness of the ocean all around.

He kicked off his trainers. Sharp barnacles scored his feet as he pushed away from the hull. Moving beneath the surface, with regular, strong

strokes, he distanced himself from the threat of his captors. After thirty metres, his lungs began to strain, craving air. But his resolve was stronger. Pressing down the panic, he persisted, stroke by stroke.

Finally, he broke the surface, gasping for air. He turned, face low in the water, treading in place so he could assess what lay behind. Through the rain he spotted a flickering glow in the forward cabin. He made out four men at the stern. *They haven't noticed the fire yet.* The men were shouting at a fifth person in the water near the propeller shaft.

Ben turned again towards the distant and now barely visible silhouette of land. He pressed on through the encircling darkness. The ocean depths below and the black heavens above allowed him to relax and focus his will on essentials: reach forward, pull the water past, kick. He fell into the rhythm of a strength-conserving breaststroke. Stroke, breath, glide. He rose with the wave crests and dipped into the troughs. The rain had eased.

As he swam, disturbing memories arose of previous abductions. Questions obsessed him: *Who are they? Why? What do they want?* He could not afford the rush of panic that accompanied these unanswerable thoughts. He forced them aside and focused on survival. Later there would be time enough to puzzle this through.

The swim seemed endless.

A change in the rhythm of the surrounding swells roused him from his stupor. The waves were now larger, choppier. He paused, treading water for a few moments, trying to make sense of it. *Ah, waves are reflecting off a barrier reef. The land is near.* He swam forward with heightened caution.

His left leg grazed against something jagged. He felt stabbing pains on his calf and thigh, but resisted the urge to recoil. Relaxing, he spread his arms and legs out, flattening himself to float on the surface. He sensed the reef now only a few inches below him. The water rose and fell more erratically as the current swept him over the shallows.

The waves pushed him on. He maintained a thin profile on the surface to avoid being dashed by the relentless swells onto razor-sharp coral. Even so, shallow coral raked his stomach and legs. The saltwater stung the skin now torn and raw beneath his clothing. He pushed from his mind the threat of sharks attracted by the blood in the water.

A final swell lifted and deposited him beyond the barrier reef into the calm, deeper waters of the island's lagoon.

The storm was moving on; the rain lessened until it was pattering lightly around him. The moon broke faintly through the clouds, shimmering on

the calmer water. He slowed, turning onto his back to take in this moment of beauty, even in the midst of danger. The quiet splendour gave him heart.

The silhouette of the island became sharply visible, several hundred metres away. Intent on each stroke, he continued towards it until he heard soft splashes ahead. *Waves on sand.*

In the dim light, he saw a band of gleaming white coral sand, separating the sea from the dark island vegetation. A sense of relief rose within his chest, but only for a moment. Then his military training snapped on; steely caution took control.

Turning to his left, he swam parallel to shore, searching.

He spied a rock projecting into the water, like a dark stain across the white sands. He headed for this landing and scrambled over sharp ridges onto tufts of grass. *Leave no footprints to follow.*

He ducked into the palm jungle, weaving his way through tangled brush, moving eastward, hunting for a spot that allowed a clear view across the bay. He almost tripped on a snag of a plastic tarp sticking out from the sand. He pulled it out and took it with him.

The rain had stopped. Starlight shone through ragged rips in the clouds, filtered by the palm fronds waving above. In a fleeting flash of insight under the stars, he realized that, for anyone nearby, this was a normal, peaceful evening. Families sitting down for dinner. Somehow, this gave him solace.

He spotted a blaze, far out on the ocean. *The boat.* He felt a primal joy, knowing he was the cause. There was a flash, then a few seconds later, a deafening explosion. *The galley's butane bottle.*

They may be gone for now, but maybe there were co-conspirators? He knew he must conceal himself – and quickly.

He found a small clearing in the jungle, in sight of the beach, and dropped to his knees. The soil was firmer, sandy more loamy and held together better than the loose sand on the beach. With determination, he began to scoop a hole in the sand using the wide, flat base of a palm frond as a shovel. *Three feet deep, six and a half feet long.* He spread the tattered tarp and carefully piled the dirt on it. Periodically, he would carry the full tarp to another outcrop of rock near him and dump it in the swirling water.

After twenty minutes, the hole was done. Grabbing other fallen palm fronds, he wove the leaves together roughly into panels as he'd learned in tropical survival training. He would need about eight to cover the hole, leaving a gap for an entrance. He carefully laid the finished panels, spread

the tarp over them, then used the last batch of sand to cover the tarp. Then he scattered leaves, rotted coconut husks and other debris over his hide, mimicking the surrounding jungle floor.

He wiggled down into his hole, pulling a large palm leaf over the opening as he settled. He carried a stone from the outcrop and wedged it under a corner of the frond, allowing him a clear view of the beach. Deep breath. *Now, the patient wait.* A familiar routine, one he'd experienced many times during his military tours.

Lying still made him acutely aware of cuts, bruises, encrusted blood, pain, and sand gritted between his teeth. Hunger gnawed at him insistently. A line of large black ants appeared and began a parade into his sanctuary. One bit him, then another. He ignored it.

Still he waited. Adrenaline and desperation battled against his exhaustion. He struggled to keep his vigil. The night was now clear, he could make out the burning boat still bobbing, flickering on the sea.

As he waited, Ben's mind entered a kind of trance, unaware of time passing. Pain and danger receded. His mind drifted to memories of happier times, then snapped back suddenly to full alert as a light appeared out on the water: *a searchlight near the boat.*

Shadowy activity around the boat increased; the fire was quenched. The searchlight then swung in systematic arcs over the surrounding waters as another craft advanced towards his beach. Exhaustion pulled at him as he strained to stay alert. Blackness took him.

**2 July 2066, Seastead vessel *Ossë*, 500 miles
north-north-west of Cape Reinga, New Zealand**
(the same day)

“Watanabe-san, you honour us in coming personally to test this new *iki jime* technique and give us the assistance of your engineers.” Suliman Battuta raised the steaming green tea as a toast.

His guest raised his own cup in acknowledgment, “It is a privilege, Captain. We’ve had a good business relationship for years, you provide high quality tuna, this technique will make it even better, increasing profit for both of us. Besides, I have been curious for years about your life here, herding tuna.”

“Tuna herding is not as strange as it sounds, Watanabe-san.” Sul glanced over at his guest, reluctantly turning from watching the patch of

sea busy with divers at work. “My Bedouin ancestors were herders as well, nomadic shepherds. Their clans travelled across the desert with herds of camels and goats. My family merely traded livestock for schools of fish – and they traded the vast Arabian sands for the expansive seas of the Southern Pacific Gyre.”

The Japanese businessman chuckled, “When you say it like that, Captain Battuta, it almost makes sense.”

Suliman smiled, “Bedouins have a saying: ‘When you sleep in a house, your thoughts are as high as the ceiling. When you sleep outside, they are as high as the stars.’”

Ogata Watanabe admired the horizon on all sides. “The open sea is certainly vast and empty like a desert. Some would feel anxious and vulnerable living in such desolation, so far from civilization.”

“That may be, but I would have it no other way. There is a deep joy sleeping beneath the stars and above the abyss. We Pelagics find peace, held in our suspension between two vast and measureless realms. A poet from our community wrote, ‘We make our lives at the edge of creation, we walk in wonder.’”

“Those are intriguing thoughts, indeed. They almost attract me to your life.”

The two men were seated at the table, under a sunshade, on the deck of *Ossë* as it glided just a few metres above a ruffled sea. The deck was the only part of *Ossë* above water. The submerged family quarters and work areas were connected to the upper deck by sleek metal stanchions. Waves moved freely between these supports, passing under the deck and over the living area, allowing a level ride unaffected by sea conditions.

Suliman studied his guest, admiring the aristocratic profile. “Here we are on station, Watanabe-san. Just in time for today’s demonstration of the new harvesting technique.”

*

Ossë slowed and stopped, with other similar vessels, in a semi-circle around the area of activity. Several small *Dragonfly* utility craft also hovered nearby.

This is good, Sul thought. Most of the Pod has arrived. Mr Watanabe will get a taste of our community life. A light but steady breeze streamed through Suliman’s dark hair; greying at the temples marked his years. Clear golden eyes below dark brows scanned the sea before them. A salt and pepper

beard completed the frame of his face. He was the image of a sea captain from another age; his leathery skin weathered by years of sun, wind, and salt.

There was a buzz of activity as people crowded to find good vantage points on the other vessels, watching with keen interest in this latest innovation for their community. *Dragonfly* workmen used headsets to interact with divers in the water, coordinating the experiment.

One diver waved to Sul, who waved in return. Nemo, *Ossë*'s augmented intelligence agent, conveyed the diver's message. "Captain, Gideon says the *iki jime* gate is in place. The tuna guide for Cohort 32 will now lead the school through the device. Shall we proceed with the trial?"

Sul moved swiftly to the low railing of the deck to observe the activity more closely. The dozen divers had swum away from the *iki jime* gate, a structure suspended twenty metres below the ocean's surface. "Yes, Nemo, proceed."

"This procedure will give your product a much higher price in the Tokyo market. The meat is sweeter when fish are killed in this humane way," Ogata Watanabe remarked, joining him at the railing.

"That's our hope. Thank you, my friend, for sharing this *iki jime* technique with us."

The divers were now all clustered near the *Dragonfly* craft to avoid spooking the approaching tuna. Ogata spoke again, "Your son Gideon has great talent. By the way, how are his studies coming along?"

"Kind of you to ask. He's finishing his final project for a graduate degree at the Marine Institute of Science and Technology in Auckland, an amphibious aircraft. We hope..."

"Sorry to interrupt, Captain," a disembodied voice broke in.

"Yes, Nemo?"

"The tuna guide-bot is approaching the gate."

"This'll happen quickly. Let's move to the bridge. We'll be able to see better on the holo-display." Sul indicated the semi-enclosed area at the forward end of the deck. "Please come with me, Watanabe-san."

"Of course, Captain." They moved from the railing and began walking across the deck to the bridge of *Ossë*.

Ogata spoke to the air, "Nemo, is it? Your name sounds like the Latin word for 'no one'!"

"Yes, very good, Mr Watanabe, sir. It is Captain Battuta's little joke, since I am indeed not human, only an algorithm. I believe it also is an

allusion to the name Ulysses gave himself when facing the cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey*. Similarly, it's the name of the captain in Jules Verne's submarine novel, and the name of a Pixar cartoon fish."

"Ah, I see. All marine settings. Appropriate," Watanabe observed.

"Nemo likes to show off at times," Suliman said wryly.

"I do only what I'm programmed to do – that is, what *you* have programmed me to do, Captain."

"Touché, Nemo."

Ogata laughed, "A psychologist would have a field day with this."

*

The two men had arrived on *Ossë's* bridge, the control room for the vessel, with windows allowing a view out over the bow and both sides. They stood in the centre of the bridge as a blue pool of light took shape before them. Within seconds the holo-display came into focus.

The display resolved into the scene being acted out in the water below them. A school of tuna, numbering thirty-five, emerged from the depths, following their lead fish, which was actually an autonomous underwater robot. With the bot in the lead, the school surged through the *iki jime* gate.

The trellis-like structure was a u-shaped lattice, forty feet across, the top opening to the surface of the sea. As the school entered, passing between the arms of the lattice, sensors tracked each fish, pinpointing a spot just above and behind the tuna's eye. When all the fish had been targeted, a single hail of darts was released, each dart passing through the brain of a fish.

"We're using your idea of sea ice darts, Watanabe-san, so they melt in the flesh."

"Excellent," Ogata murmured, intently watching the scene unfold.

The guide bot stopped next to the forward edge of the gate as the stricken school sank lifelessly behind it, the bodies still carried forward by momentum. Several long-legged, crab-like bots scurried along the matrix of the gate to grasp the drifting tuna with soft pincers, carrying them one by one to a storage container which had been positioned near the entrance. The fish were loaded into the case and immediately submerged inside within a slurry of sea ice.

"Well done, Captain!" Ogata exclaimed, as the holo-display showed the last tuna being stowed in the container.

The men moved outside again, to watch the ocean from the railing.

Divers now swam into position, waiting for the fully loaded container to ascend. As the container surfaced, a sudden cloud of spray alerted them all to the arrival of a *Flying Fish* courier drone. The drone lowered hoists, retrieved the precious cargo with the help of the divers, then pivoted and flew north.

All eyes tracked the drone's path. Within minutes, it had vanished over the horizon. The iced fish would arrive by evening at the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo.

"This calls for a celebration, Watanabe-san!" Sul announced. "One tuna has been set aside. We'll lunch on fresh sashimi today. Nemo, please invite Gideon and the other engineers to join us, to enjoy the fruits of their hard work!"

"Invitation given," Nemo said. "I've taken the liberty of ordering a plate of sushi for Sophia as well, Captain. She's with Fatima in the work area."

"Sophia?" interrupted Ogata.

"Forgive me," Sul hesitated, "Sophia's my daughter. I apologize that you've not met her yet. She's very shy."

"Ah yes. Now I remember, you told me, she's autistic. Is that right?"

A look of affection passed over Sul's face, "Yes. With Sophia, being autistic is not so much an affliction, but rather a kind of genius. She has a unique way of looking at the world."

"I've heard rumours of her impressive robotic creations."

"Yes, Sophia's designs are in demand throughout the Pelagic Territories and beyond."

"It seems both of your offspring have brilliant minds."

"They do indeed, they take after their mother." Sul smiled and stood up.

Ogata nodded uncomfortably, remembering Sul's recent bereavement, and wishing he hadn't allowed the conversation to stray towards that topic. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Watanabe-san. Sarah would have loved this demonstration today. She'd have been proud of Gideon." Sul looked into the distance and sighed, then turned to his guest, "Shall we go down for lunch, Watanabe-san?"

Ogata and Sul walked to the lift that would take them to the dining area below.

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Half an hour later, Sul, Ogata, Gideon and the men and women from Watanabe Enterprises were preparing to eat the fruits of their labour. The table had been set by the engineers in traditional Japanese style, with plates of fresh tuna sliced in sashimi style and sushi in the centre. The two older men sat at one end conversing quietly. The rest looked expectantly at them.

Ogata stood, “*Itadakimasu!*” Turning to Sul as he sat back down, he interpreted, “We are so grateful for this food.” The engineers cheered, toasting Sul with small cups of *saké*.

The seven young Japanese engineers, several of whom had changed into elegant kimonos for the meal, began chattering excitedly as they chose plates of food from the serving line. They settled at one of the long tables with their colleagues from the Pelagic colonies, and started to eat.

Ogata watched from his seat as Sul’s son put his chopsticks down to draw on a napkin, explaining a concept to the others. Gideon had his father’s dark hair, but his eyes were hazel and his features more refined. The other engineers watched him, first silent, and then buzzing with exclamations and comments when he’d finished.

Through the window beyond the tables, a silver stream of anchovies swirled into a ball as a school of bluefin tuna swam into view. The predators flashed through undulating sunbeams as they devoured the scattering baitfish. Scales fell like shimmering rain as the bluefin tuna finished their meal and swam out of view in their search for another.

“Was that another one of your schools of tuna, Captain?” Ogata asked.

“Nemo, which school is that?” Sul directed Ogata’s question to the AI.

“Those are part of Cohort 73,” came Nemo’s voice, from the air.

“Our farming community, the *Arraa’i* Pod, manages eighty-six schools or cohorts of tuna...” Sul’s comment was cut short by an alarm.

“Please report, Nemo.” Sul stood sharply, and the diners grew silent.

“Captain, the tuna guide for Cohort 67 has gone offline abruptly. We’ve lost telemetry of the school. Backup systems are not kicking in. I’m checking now.”

Everyone around the table looked at Sul, then Gideon, holding a collective breath.

“Captain, it seems that Cohort 67 has been poached. The tuna guide was delinked from my systems, and we’ve lost control of the school. I’ve contacted the New Zealand Coastguard, requesting assistance to catch the pirates. However, their nearest ship’s over fifty nautical miles away.”

“They won’t arrive in time,” Gideon’s voice broke the silence, weighted with frustration as he pushed his chair back. “That’s five million US dollars’ worth of tuna they’ve stolen.”

“Nemo, are any Pelagic Ranger units nearby?” Sul asked calmly.

“No, Captain. They’ve all been called out of our sector, responding to an incident at the Marcelli Township.”

“What was the last location of the cohort, Nemo?” Gideon asked, now standing.

“Five kilometres, bearing 243 degrees, Gideon.”

“Show us on the holo-display.” Sul’s tone was terse.

A blue pool of light appeared before them on the head table. Several of the engineers cleared plates out of the way.

The blue sphere of light displayed an image of an empty sea. Off to one side, were icons representing another tuna school. A “34” glowed brightly on the flank of the fish guide.

“Nemo, instruct the guide of Cohort 34 to probe for signals from tuna of Cohort 67.” The tuna guide detached itself from the school in the display and moved quickly to the centre of the pool of light. More small fish icons appeared, but as soon as they appeared, they disappeared off the screen one by one.

“Nemo, range?”

“They’re just beyond the reach of our weapons systems, Captain.”

“To be expected,” Sul said quietly. “Nemo, extend the sensitivity of the tuna guide’s electronics.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The image sharpened, and a vague shadow appeared near the dwindling members of the tuna cohort. “That’s a submarine!” Gideon pointed.

Smaller shadows moved among the remaining tuna. More tuna icons winked out as they watched.

“*Baba*, they’re poaching our schools as we watch! We’ve caught them red-handed,” Gideon cried.

Sul was staring at the display. “The resolution of the image is not sharp enough to use as evidence in court, son. We won’t be able to identify who the perpetrators are.”

Gideon turned to his father, “I could get there in eight minutes on a *Dragonfly!*”

His father looked at him with empathy and spoke in calm, deliberate tones, “Son, you can’t get there fast enough. In eight minutes, the pirates

will be long gone.” The last of the stray tuna icons disappeared from the display as he spoke.

“*Baba*, let me try!” He walked towards the door.

“Sit down, son. You mean well, but it’s too late.” Gideon returned to his chair, dejected. The other engineers looked at one another, outraged along with Gideon.

“The poachers are probably using a high-speed *Tigershark*. They love those,” Gideon mumbled.

Sul noticed a movement by the door. Sophia had come in without a noise and stood listening near the door.

“Captain, one of Sophia’s drones has arrived on site, reporting that the surface of the sea is clear, there’s no longer any sign of a vessel in the area.”

“Any clues as to the identity of the pirates, Nemo?” Sul asked.

There was a pause, then Nemo resumed his report. “Analyzing the last telemetric records, my guess is that a submarine came near the tuna school and was able to hack into programming of tuna guide 67. Within the last three hours, there have been reports of both *Yakuza* merchant ships and a Caliphate trawler in that area. Either of those could have launched a craft like the *Tigershark* Gideon suggested, from outside our detection range.”

“Nemo, please alert the rest of the *Arraa’i* Pod. Move all tuna guides to security level three, bring them close to our Pod. Ask Hafez to develop countermeasures. And send a copy of your analysis to Sophia. She might be able to use it to make the next version of tuna guides more secure.”

Sophia peeked around the door, a smile flashing across her small face.

“Yes, Captain.” Both Nemo’s voice and the display faded away.

Staff entered the dining room to clear the tables. The engineers remained alert, their taut faces revealing their anxiety about the event and their desire to help.

Ogata spoke for them, “I’m so sorry, Captain. This is terrible. We’re ashamed that the Japanese criminal *Yakuza* gangs can still act with impunity and our government has failed to control them. Ashamed we still allow pirates in this day and age. We should have eradicated them long ago.”

Sul sighed, “Piracy is all too common out here in the open ocean, I’m afraid. By *Yakuza*, by the Caliphate, even by other Pelagic communities. Be at peace, Watanabe-san, we have faced much worse. We will get through this.”

“Yes, the dark side of human nature is one thing all communities seem to have in common,” Ogata commented.

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Sul nodded. “So true. And the outlaws always have the offensive advantage as they probe for our weaknesses. No matter how well designed our systems are, the vulnerabilities only become evident when someone discovers and exploits them.”

“What measures have you been taking to combat piracy?”

“The Pelagic Territories deploy some defensive forces, but we don’t yet have enough political leverage to fully protect ourselves. Since we inhabit international waters, not our own, there is no law giving us authority to prosecute criminal behaviour. We can submit a complaint to the Pacific Rim Council, but they also have limited jurisdiction.”

“Pelagic Territories need to be granted nation status so we can stop these criminals with our own laws!” Gideon said, this time jumping up and stalking out the door.

“Forgive my son. He’s impetuous.” Sul bowed his head slightly towards Ogata.

“No need to apologize, Battuta-san,” Ogata said, waving his hand. “I actually agree with him. My corporation has spoken up repeatedly on behalf of the Pelagic Territories during negotiations with the Japanese government. You recently petitioned the Pacific Rim Council again regarding nationhood, isn’t that right?”

Sul looked out the window thoughtfully, “Yes, we petitioned, and they turned us down for the third time. The international implications of recognizing the Pelagic Territories as nations, they said, are... complicated.”

Sul straightened up and spoke to the diners, “I’m sorry this has ruined our meal, and after such a triumph.” He turned towards the engineers with a smile, “You all did very well.” He applauded them.

Ogata rose and bowed towards Sul, and the Japanese engineers rose and did the same. “We appreciate doing business with your Pod, Battuta-san. Thank you for an excellent feast. We’ll leave you now, to sort this out.”

Sul rose and bowed in return. “You’re kind, Watanabe-san. Thank you.” He watched as Ogata and his colleagues filed into the hallway. One of their company craft would be standing by at the surface to take them back to Japan.

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Sul walked, deep in thought, towards the left edge of the great sea window. A door slid open, revealing his office, built beneath the bow of *Ossē*.

The far wall, which was curved, was filled with display screens. The

upper screens, at eye-level, provided views of activity on the bridge and surrounding the vessel. The lower ones displayed sensor readings of the ocean conditions surrounding *Ossë* and cycled through telemetry of the tuna cohorts managed by the *Arraa'i* Pod. A desk below the screens was piled with papers and several computer pads. As Sul slid into his chair at the centre of the desk, before him an active holo-model appeared showing the position and movement of vessels and tuna schools belonging to the *Arraa'i* Pod. A window above and down both sides of the screens opened to the sea around the bow of *Ossë*. A giant sunfish was passing by. It looked ungainly but swam nimbly as it fed on a swarm of jellyfish.

Sul gazed out the window. *How powerless we are to stop this thievery.*

A soft tone sounded. "Yes, Nemo," Sul said without looking around.

"I trust I'm not interrupting, Captain. Paul Whitestone has an urgent request."

"Thanks, Nemo." Sul swivelled his chair towards the centre of the room where another holo-projector displayed. In a moment, his friend appeared before him, seated in a barn, with horses in the background.

"From your face, Sul, I see you're having a bad day."

Sul's smile turned wry. "You know me too well." He sighed. "We've just lost another tuna cohort to pirates."

"Sorry to hear that. A whole cohort? That has to hurt. What are your options?"

"Not many at this point. I think the pirates will get away with it."

"That's terrible, Sul. I'm sorry." Paul paused, giving his friend a moment, then said, "Are you free to chat?"

Sul smiled, "A chat with you, Paul, will improve my day. What can I do for you?"

Paul shifted uncomfortably on his stool, "Well, I'm concerned about a young man I mentored a few years back. Name's Ben Holden. He came to mind earlier today."

"One of your premonitions, Paul?"

"Possibly. I can't shake the feeling that he's in trouble. Ben's been in Singapore lecturing at a symposium. I've been trying to contact him but can't get through. The organizers said he didn't show up for his scheduled presentation yesterday and no one has seen him since just before dinner last night. His things are still in his hotel room, but the bed wasn't slept in. I'm concerned."

"How can I help?"

“Sul, I see you and the *Arraa’i* Pod are north-west of New Zealand. I’m sending you some coordinates. Would you be able to scan the sea between you and New Caledonia around these coordinates? I’m uploading them to Nemo. Could you let me know if you find anything?”

The area of ocean appeared on one of Sul’s screens. He studied it. “That’s within reach of our observation drones. I’ll get back to you in the next hour or two. Remembering how many times your premonitions have proven true, Paul, I suspect we’ll find something interesting.”

“Thank you, Sul. That’ll ease my mind.”

“No problem, my friend. Talk to you soon.” The image faded.

“I’ve released three drones towards the coordinates, Captain.” Nemo’s voice pulled Sul back to the moment. “They should send us information in about forty minutes.”

“Thank you, Nemo. Keep me posted.”

3 July 2066, Îlot Brosse, South Pacific

(the next day)

The drone of a small outboard motor humming roused Ben. The sound, stark and lonely in the vast quiet darkness of the small hours, drew Ben back towards consciousness. He woke, groggy and achy, but immediately focused.

Through the opening in his hide, dripping from a recent squall, Ben spotted points of light a quarter mile away, moving parallel to the reef. *An inflatable*. Dread gripped his stomach. The points turned into beams, sweeping the water’s surface, as the craft sought a channel into the lagoon. Someone in the bow shouted directions. The dinghy slowed as it breached a break in the reef barrier, and then muttered across the shallow lagoon, moving back and forth to avoid the treacherous coral heads just below the surface.

As it neared the island, the dinghy turned to cruise parallel to shore, finally beaching several hundred metres from Ben’s hide. Four men got out and spread to search the area. Systematically, silent, intent, thorough, their spotlights swept the sand, rocks, brush, and palms.

Several times they passed near Ben’s refuge, their beams piercing through his palm leaf cover. Ben held himself motionless, gripping the hammer he’d kept in his belt during the long swim.

At one point, a man stood a few feet away. Ben could have stretched out

and touched his boots. Ben slowed his breathing, willed his body to relax and remain motionless. He stared at a trailing shoelace.

A rustle nearby, the searcher stopped and swept the light over the area and came to rest on a land crab creeping across the dried palm leaves. It had taken a bleach bottle as its shell. The man cursed and moved on.

Several tense hours passed as the search continued. The men gathered back at the dinghy to confer in subdued voices. In the pre-dawn stillness, words drifted over the water to Ben's ears. He strained to hear their Arabic. "... the Emir... not happy ... Yunus ... furious ... almost dawn ... must leave."

A faint line of light broadened in the east. The men packed their equipment and climbed back into the dinghy, motored across the lagoon, crossed the coral reef and then out to sea. Ben sighed. Relief flooded his weak, tired body.

The pre-dawn light increased. Still lying prone and peering through the small opening, Ben's eyes followed the retreating craft. It approached a dark object a quarter mile out on the ocean. He recognized the silhouette of a conning tower. *A submarine.* The men clambered aboard, pulled the dinghy up, and disappeared into the tower. The sub slipped silently beneath the waves.

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Ben remained in his hole long after the submarine had left. Watching. Expecting the threat to return. He no longer had the strength to climb out, to escape. An empty hopelessness pooled in his spirit.

The sun climbed higher in the sky, its rays burning through his shelter. He woke again and again, prodded by the insistent heat, thirst captivating his every thought. As he opened his eyes, the sun sparkled off the sea, tantalizing.

What is that? A shadow crossed the opening as a lone gull landed on the ground next to the entrance to the hide.

Through bleary eyes, he saw the gull step towards him, then pause, pulling a leg up to rest on one foot.

His head felt light. *Hallucinations will come soon. Maybe this gull is one of those.* He tried again to lift himself from the hole, to scare the gull away, but was only able to bump the woven panels above. Loosened sand sifted down, irritating his eyes; he blinked away the grains and looked out.

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The gull turned its head, beady eyes seeming to focus on him. Behind the bird, Ben imagined he saw people emerging from the sea.

Impossible. Hallucinations, he thought. But then arms were pulling him from his shelter. Memories rose in his mind as darkness overwhelmed him.