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# Cast of Characters

## *China 1808*

**Zi Jun Chu** Owner of a three-masted junk plying trade routes in the East China Sea

### **Captain Of Jun's Ship**

**Ching Shih** Pirate queen whose fleet dominated the South China Sea in the early part of the nineteenth century

## *Present day*

### *Water Rats (Pirate Group)*

**Lucas Teng (Teng Kung-lu)** Leader of the band of thieves calling themselves the Water Rats

**Vincent Uhr** Second in command of the Water Rats

**Callum Zhen** Member of the Water Rats

## *Hong Kong*

**Kinnard Emmerson** British expatriate and leader of a Hong Kong-based criminal organization

**Kuānchá (the Watcher)** Emmerson's lieutenant and most trusted assassin

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**Yan-Li** Nautical historian and former dive specialist for the PRN, her academic discipline underwater excavation

**Degra** One of the leaders of CIPHER, a notorious cybercrime organization based in China

**Ferret** One of the hackers working for CIPHER

*National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA)*

**Kurt Austin** Director of Special Projects, salvage expert and boating enthusiast

**Joe Zavala** Kurt's assistant and best friend, helicopter pilot and mechanical genius

**Rudi Gunn** Deputy Director of NUMA, graduate of the Naval Academy, runs most of the day-to-day operations at NUMA

**Hiram Yaeger** NUMA's Director of Information Technology, expert in the design and function of the most advanced computers

**Paul Trout** NUMA's chief geologist, graduate of Scripps Institute

**Gamay Trout** NUMA's leading marine biologist, also graduated from Scripps

**Winterburn** Executive officer of the NUMA yacht *Sapphire*

**Stratton** NUMA engineer specializing in the operation of sub-surface drones

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*Naha, Okinawa – US Navy Weather Station*

**Lieutenant Callie Baker** Sonar specialist working at  
the Naha Weather Station

**Lieutenant Commander Aaron Stewart** Senior  
officer at Naha Station

*Washington, DC*

**Anna Biel** Presidential adviser and director of the  
National Security Agency

**Elliot Harner** Deputy director of the CIA

**Rear Admiral Marcus Wagner** Head of Naval  
Intelligence for the Western Pacific

**Arthur Hicks** US Cyber Command

*Taiwan ROC*

**Steven Wu** CIA liaison officer in Taipei

*Hydro-Com Corporation*

**Sunil Pradi** Founder and CEO of Hydro-Com  
Corporation

**Sabrina Lang** Chief of Digital Security at Hydro-  
Com Corporation

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# Prologue

## The Crimson Flag

*South China Sea*  
*September 1808*

Jun Chu stood on the deck of a three-masted junk given the auspicious name *Silken Dragon*. The ship was a feast for the eyes, with an emerald green hull, golden adornments and sails dyed a resplendent blood orange hue.

The ship sat at anchor in a tranquil bay. Clear aquamarine water lay beneath the hull, while a steep mountain peak rose from an island beyond.

The peak had given them some morning shade. But the sun was now high above and the temperature had soared. If not for the breeze blowing in from the west, the heat would have been unbearable. As it was, an odd sulfur-like smell could be detected. The source of the aroma baffled Jun, but he had bigger issues to worry about.

He pulled a brass telescope from a leather case. The beautiful instrument was polished and gleaming. Engraved characters on the casing reminded him that it had been given as a gift, from the powerful pirate queen Ching Shih.

The captain of the vessel moved up next to him. ‘What do you see?’

Jun gazed through the spyglass. His face turned grim.

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‘It seems our escape from Macau did not go unnoticed. Three ships are approaching.’

‘This is a trade route,’ the captain reminded him. ‘Many vessels ply these waters. Do not assume danger where there is only the company of other travelers.’

‘I assume nothing,’ Jun said. ‘Take the spyglass. You’ll see that I’m not wary without reason. Those ships fly the red banner of Madam Ching. They’re hunters sent to slay us or bring us to Macau for punishments that I choose not to imagine.’

Jun focused on the nearest of the approaching ships. It was a larger vessel than the *Dragon*. Four sails to his three and a topmast adorned with banners red as blood.

The other ships in the squadron were farther back, too far to see any details, but they tracked the same heading.

The captain offered a hopeful suggestion. ‘It’s said Madam Ching will spare a ship’s crew if the master surrenders their cargo without a fight.’

Jun lowered the telescope. Ching Shih had indeed created a code of honor among her pirates, but such considerations would not be extended to Jun. ‘Her code will not apply to us. We are thieves and traitors, not honorable adversaries.’

There was no need to say more. The treasure in their hold had been pirated by Madam Ching’s ships once already, but instead of being turned in to the collective and disbursed fairly, a rogue captain of hers had set much of it aside. He’d sold it to Jun, assuring him the truth had been hidden.

‘Your friend must have been caught short,’ the captain said.

Jun shivered at the man’s fate. ‘To withhold captured plunder is punishable by death,’ he said. ‘To steal it

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outright . . . Beheading would be the best fate such a man could hope for. No doubt he's been killed. Though not soon enough to keep him from speaking our names.'

'We cannot outrun them,' the captain said. 'Each of her ships are larger and faster.'

'Then we must fight,' Jun said. 'We have cannonades we bought from the East India Company. We have cross-bows and harquebuses.'

'We'll be outnumbered five to one.'

'They cannot come all at once,' Jun said. 'And her large ships will not be able to cross the reef. If we remain here, they will have to come in small boats, hoping to climb aboard using ladders and grappling hooks. In my experience, *grenadoes* and flaming arrows are quite effective at such a range.'

The captain's face began to soften. 'You hope to bleed them one small group at a time.'

Jun nodded. It was truly their only hope. 'And when they've bled enough, they'll depart from us and return to Macau, where they'll tell Madam Ching we burned the ship rather than surrender and face death.'

The captain's face was inscrutable. He took the spy-glass back, gazing at the red-flagged ships as they turned toward the bay. 'You have a silken tongue, Master Jun. You almost make me believe we might survive.'

As the men aboard the *Dragon* steeled themselves for battle, Ching Shih's fleet approached the reef and pulled back. Small boats were called for and the better part of each ship's complement prepared to sail forth.

Each of Jun's predictions had so far proved accurate,

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all except one. There was no condition under which the small fleet would return to Macau with a false story to tell their master, since Madam Ching was aboard the largest of the ships and her fury had been stoked like a bonfire.

Zheng Yi Sao, or Ching Shih as she was known, walked the deck before her men. An average-sized woman with broad shoulders and piercing eyes, her face remained as beautiful as it had been when she'd been taken by Lord Cheng as a wife.

Together they'd built a dynasty, ultimately controlling the towns and waters around Macau with iron fists. After Cheng's death, Ching Shih had assumed full control, building the empire ever larger, making allies out of conquered people, creating order out of chaos.

A large portion of that order stemmed from the code she'd put forth. It required fair treatment of crews, captives and concubines. It punished officers who mistreated their men. It demanded swift and ruthless retribution upon anyone who betrayed the collective good of the red-bannered fleet.

With these rules in place, she became the de facto governor of a sprawling region and the most feared and therefore respected pirate lord in all of Asia. One did not steal from her and live to tell the story.

Striding resplendently across the deck in a shimmering gown of lilac and gray, she commanded the full attention of every man on board. A red scarf adorned her neck, a black three-pointed hat rested on her head. Not a sound emanated from the hundred men standing before her as she climbed the steps to address them.

'These traitors have not stolen from me,' she said, 'they

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have stolen from you.’ She allowed that to sink in and then asked them a question. ‘What is the law of the plunder?’

They replied in unison. ‘What is taken must be presented. It must be shared by all.’

Her pride grew as they spoke. ‘And what is the punishment for stealing?’

‘Flogging and death.’

She was pleased. Her fleet was disciplined. Her men, a well-trained army. Knowing they would suffer heavy losses, she made a promise. ‘All who go forth shall receive a double share. All who are wounded shall receive triple. All who die today will have their family’s prosperity secured for the next generation.’

They stood still. The air silent and hot.

‘And whoever brings me the living body of the traitor,’ she finished, ‘shall be rich beyond the dreams of an emperor.’

The men cheered loudly, chanting her name repeatedly, their minds and bodies ready for battle.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘Retrieve what is yours.’

Sixty-four men climbed down the ladders into four boats. Eight additional boats were launching from Ching’s other ships. In each boat half the crew worked the oars while the other half stood ready to fight, either armed or waiting to throw ladders and hooks up.

Jun watched the fleet of small craft as they crossed the reef and continued toward him on the strength of the oarsmen’s arms. Twelve small boats. Perhaps a hundred and eighty men. He had only seventy-five. But he stood aboard a floating castle.

‘They’re coming,’ he shouted. ‘Be ready!’

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Warnings were called out from bow to stern. Jun's men swarmed the top deck of the junk, carrying weapons of every kind. The first group went to the rail carrying crossbows and muskets. Other groups stood behind them ready to fill in the gaps. They opened fire as soon as the approaching boats came within range.

The muskets were inaccurate at any sort of range and, aside from the noise and smoke, mostly ineffective. The crossbows, on the other hand, were lethal. The first flight of darts pierced several men in the leading boats. Several oarsmen took bolts to the back. They slumped forward or writhed in pain. Two men holding a ladder were hit in the chest. They toppled into the sea.

In the second boat several men were hit in the legs and pinned to the wooden planks beneath them. As they shrieked in agony, the fleet kept coming.

With the leading boats decimated, the men in the following boats opened fire from their longer range, hoping to force Jun's men back.

Jun ducked as musket balls whistled overhead, but this return fire was more sound and fury than danger. The rocking boats and the inaccurate shots from firearms made for a wild spray of lead that passed without hitting a single crewman.

Subsequent volleys were more effective, and for several minutes the crews traded fire, with each side losing men in the exchange.

It was a war of attrition, one that Jun's men were winning, but with each passing second Ching Shih's men sailed closer. Soon they'd surrounded the *Dragon*, with half of the small boats within reach of the junk's hull.

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‘They’re splitting up,’ Jun called out. Several boats had rowed across to the port side. Others were making for the bow. ‘They plan to take us on all sides. Disperse the men.’

The defenders fanned out, attempting to protect all sections of the ship at once as the pitched battle resumed.

‘Our ability to concentrate fire has been sorely compromised,’ the captain said.

Jun pulled out his flintlock pistol and cocked the hammer. ‘They still have to get aboard.’

That task was already underway. Grappling hooks had been thrown up on the port side. Rickety ladders on the starboard.

‘Push them back,’ the captain ordered.

Jun’s men attacked with axes, raising them high and hammering down with vicious blows. Their targets were not the men but the hooks and the lines. The vicious blows cleaved the ropes in two and dug into the ship’s painted wooden rail.

On the other side of the vessel, ladders were forced backward with long poles. They were pushed hard until gravity took over and the men climbing them tumbled into the sea.

The pirates attacked with covering fire overhead, using a barrage of arrows, gunfire and even spears to keep Jun’s men from rappelling. For each grappling hook cut and ladder knocked loose, Jun lost a defender, or two, or three. And still Ching Shih’s men came.

Additional hooks were thrown up and the first invaders reached the deck. The attackers were smaller men – renowned for the speed with which they climbed. They raced up the side of the jade green hull and vaulted over

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the rail, firing pistols and slashing wildly with swords at anything within reach.

Expecting exactly this type of attack – and knowing the first wave of men would often climb with bare feet for better speed and traction – Jun had covered the deck in crow's feet: sharp barbs of twisted metal designed to impale the soles of the men who leapt over the rail.

But Ching Shih knew all the tricks. Her men were shod in thick boots. The crow's feet did nothing to slow them. They rushed forward, short swords and daggers in hand.

Jun blasted one of them with his pistol, sending the man to the deck with a bloody chest wound. A crossbow took out the second arrival. And the captain dispatched a third with a slash of his sword. But others were climbing up behind them. Both sides of the ship were now in question, while a score of Ching Shih's men had come aboard near the bow, which was closer to the water and more easily accessible.

The combat became hand to hand. Pistols could be used but not reloaded. Muskets were useless except as blunt instruments to parry a sword or cave in an attacker's skull.

Jun's men were forced back on all sides, pushed inevitably inward from the rail and back toward the raised stern, where they would make their final stand.

Another flight of crossbow bolts went forth, thinning the number of attackers, but still more boarders came up the ropes and ladders.

'They seem willing to empty their boats to the last man,' the captain shouted.

Jun was shocked by this, but the captain was correct.

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Several boats could be seen drifting near the stern with no one aboard but the injured or the dead.

‘Form two lines,’ Jun shouted.

The crew did as ordered, but the lines didn’t hold for long. The survivors were forced to retreat even farther, relinquishing space on the bloodstained decks.

They retreated up the stairs and onto the sterncastle. Fewer than thirty men survived, with twice that number coming their way.

Ching Shih’s pirates massed for a final charge, rushing the stairs and surging toward the top. They came forward shoulder to shoulder, a wall of men and swords. At the last moment, Jun shouted an order with all the breath in his lungs.

His forces spread to the sides and dropped to the deck, revealing four cannonades and an equal number of harquebuses standing at the ready on their mounts. The weapons weren’t aimed outward against seaborne attack, but inward and down. Their yawning barrels pointed toward the stairs, now jammed with attacking pirates.

The cannonades went off with a deafening explosion of black powder. The sound was loud enough to throw any man to the deck, but the devastation came from the munitions inside.

The smoothbore barrels were packed with chains, broken blades and other fragments of metal and glass. They sent this hail of shrapnel flying into the onrushing force of men. It spread out as it flew, the chains whipping in a circular motion, the glass and metal acting like a hundred musket balls fired simultaneously.

In an instant, the attacking force was cut in half. Of

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those who survived, half again were injured. Even the untouched fell back in stunned disbelief.

The swivel guns fired next. Not as deadly or destructive, but effective enough to reduce the pirate forces further.

‘Finish them,’ Jun shouted.

The captain rushed forth with his sword. The surviving members of the crew charged alongside him, a fury of hacking and stabbing.

Jun stood where he was, gloating over his masterstroke. By waiting to employ his greatest weapons until Madam Ching’s soldiers were massed together, he’d slaughtered most of them in a single instant.

With his men counterattacking, Ching’s pirates were forced off the boat, diving over the rails into the bay. Some swam for the safety of the island, others toward the drifting boats or even toward the reef beyond.

Rushing to the aft rail, Jun pointed through the smoke at one of the departing boats. ‘Swing the guns around,’ he shouted. ‘Destroy the boats so they can’t attack again.’

A pair of his men worked to turn one of the cannonades. A third crewman packed it with powder and solid projectiles. But before they could light the fuse, a deafening blast rang out. It shook the bay, louder than any cannon or clap of thunder, or anything Jun had ever heard or felt.

The shock wave knocked him to the deck, threw several men off the ship and snapped one of the masts in half. The *Dragon* itself shuddered, leaning and threatening to roll over in the bay.

Facedown on wooden planks, Jun felt fingers of heat dancing on the nape of his neck. A wave of hot air burned

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his nostrils and dried his eyes. He rolled over, fearing himself on fire and trying desperately to stamp out the imaginary flames.

He wasn't burning, just being buffeted by three-hundred-degree winds and pelted by small rocks falling from the sky. Looking up, he watched the sun vanish behind a cloud of darkness.

Only now did he understand. The mountain had exploded, its upper third pulverized by a volcanic explosion. A mushroom cloud of ash could be seen bulling its way upward. Boulders the size of houses flew across the sky like birds. Trees and bushes, most of them in flame, rose alongside them. Lightning caused by static charges rippled through the maelstrom above.

'My god,' Jun whispered.

All fighting stopped. The battle no longer mattered; the treasure no longer mattered. A single thought obsessed every mind. Get away from the island or die.

'Flare the sails,' Jun shouted. 'Cut the anchor loose.'

The men rushed to do the work. Out beyond the reef, the red-bannered ships were leaving their stations, abandoning their rowing comrades to certain doom.

Boulders and rocks began to fall, towers of white water erupting from the bay as they landed, drenching the ship and everyone on board.

With the anchor gone and the remaining sails catching the wind, the ship began to move.

Ash began to fall around them, coating the deck with gray snow. Looking back, Jun understood the good fortune that had kept them alive so far. The eruption had been concentrated on the far side of the island. The force

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of the blast had been to the east, outward, away from the bay. The ash and pumice were spreading more widely, but the constant breeze of the trade winds was propelling the cloud eastward as well. Even the *Dragon* was picking up speed faster than he'd imagined it could.

'Perhaps the *Dragon* still favors us,' Jun said.

The captain, wounded in one leg and limping, shook his head. 'The bay is emptying,' he said.

Jun stared through the falling ash. Large heads of coral were emerging from the bay, rising from the water like a barricade of dripping teeth. Stretches of wet sand were appearing, leaving pools of water between them, filled with desperate fish.

'What's happening?' Jun asked.

'The island is rising,' the captain said. 'The eruption isn't finished.'

The ship ground to a painful stop, planks in the hull breaking against the reef.

They settled in what was left of the water, sinking lower and tilting over on one side as if they were careening the ship on a beach at high tide.

Another tremor hit and the gases and magma stored up in a chamber below the island were released all at once.

The remnants of the peak were obliterated. The ground beneath the ship collapsed and the sea rushed back in. At the same exact moment, a pyroclastic flow of fire, ash and mud surged down what was left of the mountain. The two surges collided over the sinking ship, crashing together like a pair of gigantic hands, erasing the *Silken Dragon* from view and from history.

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# I

## *One Hundred Miles Northeast of Taiwan Present Day*

The *Canberra Swift* sailed through the night, heading north from Taiwan. She was a midsized cargo vessel, with a high beltline and an aerodynamic shell covering the front half of the ship. Her bridge emerged from this shell near the middle of the ship, while twin funnels, raked sharply backward, extended aft.

A leading nautical magazine described her as unattractive in nautical terms, suggesting a Japanese bullet train and seagoing ferry had borne a child together. But the strange shape had a purpose.

The ship had been designed to carry oversize cargo in a roll on/roll off configuration, much like a ferry. Freight and equipment were loaded on the ship at the stern, using a ramp wide enough to accommodate six lanes of traffic. It would be parked or stored inside, in a vast, unbroken cargo hold that ran the length of the main deck from bow to stern. Upon reaching its destination, the cargo was simply driven forward and off the ship on another ramp at the front.

Because of her size, shape and speed, the *Swift* had been used to transport everything from the fuselage sections of large aircraft, to rocket parts, and even nuclear waste, which traveled in sealed, lead-lined containers. If a war

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ever broke out, she was already committed by an option contract to be pressed into service carrying oversize military equipment to bases near whatever combat zone arose.

Jobs like these fell to the *Swift*, not only because she'd been designed to carry unique cargoes but also because – as the name implied – the *Swift* was one of the fastest cargo ships ever built. She could make forty knots in a sprint and travel at thirty-five all day long. She could cross the Pacific in seven days, a third of the time required for the average containership.

Standing on the bridge, the *Swift*'s captain studied the radar. There were no vessels near enough to be a bother. 'All ahead full,' he ordered. 'There's a storm heading down the Canadian coast from Alaska and I'd very much like to beat it to San Francisco Bay.'

The helmsman acknowledged the order and, using the computer panel in front of him, ordered the gas turbine engines to maximum output.

With the engine room answering, the captain was satisfied. He turned to the first officer. 'The ship is yours. I'll be in my quarters if you need me.'

The first officer nodded as the captain left the bridge. Expecting a peaceful night, he took a seat in the command chair as the *Swift* put on more speed.

Clinging to the outside of the ship with magnetic hand and knee pads, Teng Kung-lu, known to his men as Lucas, did not appreciate the additional speed in quite the same way. The electromagnetic force holding him in place was substantial, but every additional bit of velocity increased the gusting slipstream that threatened to break the magnets' grip.

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He pulled himself close to the hull, doing all he could to prevent the air from getting between him and the ship. Turning his face away from the wind, he looked to the side and down. The eight men of his team were doing as he was, clinging to the ship like barnacles. Each of them dressed in black, their submachine guns held tight under Velcro flaps.

He could see the strain in their arms and the tension in their faces, as this part of the heist had gone on far longer than intended.

Looking up, he counted the seconds until finally the main lights of the ship went dark. Third watch had begun. Using his thumb, he triggered a pinpoint light in the magnetic pad under his left hand. Three dots constituted an order to begin climbing again. They needed to get up and inside before the wind blew them off the hull.

With his right thumb, he pressed down on a button connected to the gauntlet wrapped around his right arm. It disabled the power on that magnet, allowing him to pull it from the hull and move it upward. Stretching as far as he could, he released the button.

The electromagnet switched on instantly and his arm was pulled back to the steel plate, where it locked into position. Pressing a second button, he was able to move his right leg upward. He then repeated the procedure on the left side, slowly but surely crawling toward an awaiting hatch.

His men did the same, following him up. A trail of human ants, heading for the sugar inside the ship.

Reaching the hatch, he risked detaching his left hand long enough to pound on the metal plating. Nothing

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happened. He hammered it harder, using the metal part of the gauntlet to elicit a metallic clang.

This time he heard something, a latch releasing, a wheel – which was sometimes called a dog – spinning inside. Thank god, Lucas thought.

The hatch, large enough to set a gangplank on and load ship's stores, swung inward as it opened. A crewman wearing the shipping line's uniform appeared. He had black hair with an odd white streak down the middle. He made eye contact and offered a gloved hand.

Lucas took it, released the other magnets and was pulled inside.

The crewman moved back into the shadows as Lucas helped his men through the hatch and into the shelter of the small compartment.

All went well until the last man. The man disengaged his magnets a moment too soon. His leg slipped and he dropped.

Lunging forward, Lucas grabbed the strap of the sub-machine gun. The weapon wedged up under the man's shoulder and held tight, even as Lucas was pulled to the deck and nearly dragged out the hatch.

'Callum!' Lucas shouted. Despite their Chinese ethnicity, the members of the group chose Western names when they joined. Each knew the other by no other name, so that in the event of capture they could not give up any of their comrades.

'Reengage!' Lucas shouted. 'Use the couplers.'

Realizing that Callum was frozen with fear and concerned that he might be pulled over the edge, Lucas engaged his own magnetic system and locked himself to the deck.

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‘Climb over me,’ he shouted.

The man looked up.

‘Hurry,’ Lucas said, ‘before you pull my arm out of the socket.’

With several of the other men now crowding around to assist, Callum pulled himself up using Lucas like a rope ladder. As soon as they could reach him, Callum’s comrades grabbed him and hauled him inside.

Lucas relaxed and disengaged the magnets, pushing back from the edge. Callum offered a hand and helped him to his feet.

Rubbing his shoulder and stretching, Lucas moved closer to Callum. ‘That was foolish,’ he said, glaring at the man who’d almost fallen. ‘Get sloppy again and I’ll let you die.’

The words were harsh, but the men knew better. Lucas was the leader of a band of brothers, pirates who looked after their own. Unlike the famous pirate code of old, Lucas had never left a man behind.

Callum dropped his head and looked away, ashamed. As he stepped back, Lucas turned to the man who’d let them in. ‘You were late.’

‘Couldn’t be helped,’ the crewman said. ‘The captain stayed on watch thirty minutes later than usual. He’s gone to bed now.’

Lucas nodded. ‘Anything else we should know?’

The crewman shook his head. ‘The security systems are disabled. You should have no problem getting into the engine room or the communications suite.’

‘Good,’ Lucas said. He sent three men to the engine room and two others to the communications center,

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where the satellite receivers, multiband radios and controls for the various automatic beacons lay.

Turning to the *Swift's* crewman, he made a change. 'Take one of my men and go to the captain's quarters. Wake the old man up and bring him to me.'

'I thought you'd want me to lead you to the bridge,' the crewman replied.

'That, we can find on our own.'

The various groups left the compartment, heading in opposite directions. Lucas took Callum with him. They went forward toward the nearest stairwell.

Moving calmly, Lucas raised the Velcro flap covering his belly. Without breaking stride, he removed a QCW-05 submachine gun that was strapped diagonally across his chest. He slung it into place and screwed a cylindrical compressor into the barrel.

The Chinese QCW fired a subsonic 5.8mm round made of hardened steel instead of soft lead. It was compact and well suited for close quarters combat. The shell could punch through a quarter-inch steel plate.

Lucas had trained his men to use them to lethal effect, but if things went as planned, they wouldn't have to fire a single shot.

Reaching the bridge, they found the *Swift's* first officer and a pair of crewmen at the helm. Avoiding the theatrics of bursting into the compartment shouting threats, Lucas stepped quietly over the threshold, clearing his throat to get everyone's attention.

The men on the bridge reacted with glacial speed. Their collective surprise at the appearance of armed men in commando gear was so complete that they froze in confusion.

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‘Get down on the deck,’ Lucas said calmly, ‘if you’d rather not be shot to pieces.’

The two crewmen did as ordered. The first officer seemed stuck in his chair. Finally he spoke. ‘We have cash in the safe,’ he said, raising his hands, easing out of the seat and dropping to one knee. ‘It’s unlocked.’

‘Of course it is,’ Lucas said.

The lack of resistance and an unlocked safe were marks of the modern state of piracy. An unspoken agreement had arisen between the world’s various pirates and shipping lines whose vessels plowed the seas.

Pirates came aboard vessels where they could. Usually in tight coastal waters near poor, unstable countries. Instead of fighting them off and risking death and destruction, officers and crew often hid in safe rooms, or *castles*, that the pirates could not access, but allowing them time to search the ship for cash or valuables. Safes were left open and supplied with a modicum of currency. Just enough to give the pirates an easy score and incentive to get off the ship as fast as possible. At times, cell phones and laptop computers were used to augment the bribe, left out for the taking like cookies for Santa Claus.

The deal was simple. Pirates didn’t injure or kill the crews, they didn’t steal cargoes worth millions or damage the ships and, in return, the shipping lines didn’t fortify their vessels with armed guards, ex-special forces members or former Mossad agents.

The system was more akin to bribery or a protection racket, but it worked for the most part. Except when it didn’t.

As he stared down the barrel of the gun, the first

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officer realized this would be one of those times. He studied Lucas and his comrades, studying their clothing and weapons and considering the stealth with which they'd come aboard. 'You're not here for cash,' he said, 'are you?'

Lucas ignored the question. 'Call your other officers to the bridge,' he instructed. 'Make no attempt to alert them to our presence. We know your code words for security threats.'

The first officer stood slowly and stepped to the console. Setting the PA system for shipwide, he made the call. 'This is First Officer Crawford speaking. All officers report to the bridge for general briefing. We have new orders to review.'

As the sound of his voice was relayed over the ship's speakers, Crawford looked at Lucas pleadingly. 'I had to give them a reason,' he said, justifying his extra words.

Lucas nodded. 'At least you didn't lie.'

*Brisbane, Australia*

Jonathan Freeman sat at the communications desk of Canberra Shipping & Logistics in the early hours of the Australian morning. He was covering the overnight shift for the third week in a row and the hours had begun to wear on him. Yawning and checking a clipboard, a rather quaint backup for all the computer screens in front of him, he confirmed for the third time in an hour that he'd cleared all the assigned check-ins and had nothing left to do but sit there until 6 a.m. when his relief would arrive.

He hoped they'd bring breakfast. Steak and mushroom pie with a basket of hot cross buns would be delightful.

'There you go again,' he said to himself. 'Now you're hungry.'

Looking for something to take his mind off breakfast, he glanced down at the monitor that tracked the firm's ships via their AIS, Automatic Identification System, beacons. On different screens he could see them plowing the various oceans of the world, doing just what they should be doing. All of them, he realized, except one.

Tapping the screen, he zoomed in on the western Pacific, where what had been a green line was now flashing amber.

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‘What have we here?’

Tapping the screen again, he brought up the ship’s identifying information.

‘*Canberra Swift*,’ he said. ‘Not moving so swift anymore, are you?’

The information on-screen showed the ship slowing from its previous speed of thirty-five knots to less than ten and still dropping. Freeman watched as it dipped down to 9.2 and held steady.

Using both feet to propel his rolling chair, he slid to the right, stopping in front of the satcom station. Essentially a second computer, he tapped this screen to life and dialed up the correct prefix to contact the *Swift*.

‘*Canberra Swift, Canberra Swift*,’ he said. ‘This is Operations, how do you read?’

He spoke into a slim white plastic microphone.

‘*This is First Officer Crawford*,’ a voice called back over the speakers. ‘*Go ahead, Operations.*’

‘We show you slowing. Plot has you at a speed of 9.2. Is anything wrong?’

‘*Plot is correct*,’ the voice replied. ‘*We’ve had an issue with the fuel pressurization system for the gas turbine. We’re running on the diesel backup. Engineering is looking into the issue. They inform me the main engine should be back up and running in about an hour.*’

Freeman was always amazed by the calmness of the various captains and crews. The previous month he’d helped shepherd a vessel through a Force 5 gale, complete with waves that were crashing over the deck and a balky rudder. Judging from the captain’s tone, it had sounded more like a minor inconvenience.

‘Will note that,’ Freeman said, writing down the

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information. 'Do you need me to alert San Francisco and amend the expected time of arrival?'

*'Negative on that, Operations. We'll make the distance up once we get the problem fixed.'*

Freeman noted the directive on his clipboard and jotted down the time. 'Confirmed,' he said. 'Give us a shout if things change.'

The first officer signed off politely and Freeman rolled his chair back to the main computer console, where he typed in the details of the conversation.

He was still at his desk an hour later when the signal from the *Canberra Swift* vanished from the screen.

At the same moment, eight thousand miles away, the captain of the South Korean freighter *Yeongju* was taking a break on the port wing of his ship's bridge. A world traveler who preferred Indonesian cigarettes for their deep flavor, he smoked slowly and methodically, getting every speck of pleasure out of his chosen addiction and passing as much time as possible.

He took one last drag and flicked the butt over the rail, sending it out into the night. The tip glowed orange for an instant with the rush of wind but then vanished like a burned-out flare.

He was about to exhale when a double flash of light lit up the horizon to the north. It was soundless and brilliant. It had an odd bluish white hue.

It neither flickered nor faded. It was simply there one instant and then gone.

The captain stared after it for a long time, aware that the flash had been bright enough to spot his vision green.

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Feeling a wave of pressure in his chest, he realized he'd been holding his breath. He exhaled a cloud of smoke and then stepped back inside.

'Any weather to speak of?' he asked the helmsman.

'No, sir,' the crewman replied instantly. 'Nothing until tomorrow afternoon.'

Curious, he thought. Perhaps it was heat lightning. At times, the atmosphere played strange tricks. 'Make a note in the log,' he said. 'Large-scale double flash to the north of our position. Range unknown. Origin unknown.'

*M. V. Canberra Swift*

On the bridge of the darkened ship, Lucas Teng counted the minutes – it was easier than counting the hours. Two hundred and thirty-one minutes had gone by since they took the ship. One hundred and seventy since they'd gone dark and changed course. One hundred more and he'd be in position for the rendezvous and the largest payday of his life.

Twenty million dollars, split between himself and his men. After expenses, bribes and payoffs to employees of the shipping company who'd given him inside information, it was still more than enough to get him out of the criminal life.

What would he do then? he wondered. Live a little. And spend the money quickly. He knew himself well enough to know it was the thrill of the hunt that grabbed him, even more than the money. But both temptations would lure him back. It might take a year or two, the money would go, life would get boring. But one way or another, he'd find himself back planning another job.

Another glance at his watch showed the counter had lost a full digit. Ninety-nine minutes to go. Time to walk the ship.

'Keep us steady on,' he said to Callum. 'Change the

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watch every twenty minutes. I don't want the boys getting tired.'

One of the men stood at the wheel; two others stood on the ship's bridge wings, watching the horizon with night vision binoculars. The seas were calm and the winds almost nonexistent, but cruising at top speed meant the resulting gust was howling across the ship. Having shut down every system that emitted light or radio waves – even the weather radar and collision warning system – posting a pair of old-fashioned lookouts had become necessary. The last thing Lucas wanted was to run across another ship.

Lucas grabbed a radio and held it up for Callum to see. 'I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Alert me if anything happens.'

Leaving the bridge, Lucas made his way through the empty ship and down toward the cargo hold. He had the captain's key card, a list of codes and a loading manifest. Reaching the main cargo deck, he stepped out into a vast open space that looked more like a warehouse or an airplane hangar.

Walking among the oversize cargo, he came to a temporary wall that had been placed in the center of the hold. The thin steel wall was designed to protect the ship's most precious cargo if the weather got rough or if anything broke loose.

Checking the manifest and the code number he'd been given, Lucas waved the captain's card in front of the reader. The device glowed pink. Using the keypad, he punched in the code. The pink light turned green and the electronic lock disengaged.

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Lucas opened the hatch and stepped across the raised sill. A swath of lights came on above him, illuminating the space in sterile fluorescence.

The hold didn't look like anything on a normal cargo vessel. The walls were white plastic, scuffed in places but still glossy and reflecting the lights above.

Large racks inside held a group of long octagonal cylinders. Stepping closer to the first one, Lucas found an inscription.

**HYDRO-COM CORP.**

**VECTOR I-001-04**

**Warning: Container is pressurized with nitrogen  
to five atmospheres.**

**Depressurize before opening.**

'So, this is what Emmerson wants,' he whispered to himself. 'I would have expected weapons or uranium yellowcake. This is so much more palatable.'

'And profitable,' a voice said from behind him.

Lucas wheeled around. He saw a figure in the doorway. The crewman who'd let them into the ship. He was holding a weapon.

'What are you doing here?' Lucas demanded. 'You're supposed to be with the rest of the crew, pretending to be captive.'

The man trained the gun on Lucas. 'I got tired of pretending,' he said. 'So I released myself from captivity and then I shot them all dead.'

Expecting the same treatment, Lucas dove to the side, attempting to use the server housing as cover.

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The man fired rapidly, squeezing off several shots. Two went long, one hit the server, but the fourth caught Lucas in the calf, tearing through the muscle and shattering his shinbone.

He howled in pain as he hit the deck but scrambled forward in a desperate attempt to save himself.

‘You should have brought your weapon,’ the man said, walking slowly. ‘But then, I guess you thought you didn’t need it.’

Lucas was crawling now, dragging his injured leg and leaving a smear of red blood along the white plastic floor.

Pulling the radio from his belt, he called for help. ‘Cal,’ he called out, ‘I need help. We’ve been double-crossed.’

Releasing the talk switch, he listened for a reply, but all he heard was the sound of dead air and soft footsteps shuffling along behind the server units. He pressed the transmit button again. ‘Callum?’

‘It would have done you some good to familiarize yourself with the ship before you came aboard,’ the stalking man said. ‘You see, this hold is a temporary oasis for these machines, designed to protect them from any form of electromagnetic radiation. No radio waves can get in or out, meaning your call for help is trapped in here, just as you are.’

Lucas continued to crawl, ducking behind another one of the servers, as the man appeared at the far end and capped off another shot. This bullet hit Lucas below the knee, causing further pain in his damaged leg.

Pushing himself back against the wall, Lucas reached down and tore a strip from his pants, starting at the leg where the first bullet hit. It showed him the extent of the

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damage to his shin. Exposed muscle and protruding bone. Even if he survived, he would probably face amputation.

He tied a tourniquet mid-thigh, cinching it as tight as he could. 'You're not a part of the crew,' he called out. 'Who do you work for?'

'I'm afraid that's something you'll never know.'

Another shot rang out. This one punched a hole in the wall.

'You're a dead man,' Lucas shouted, squeezing in between two of the servers and inching his way along. 'Even if my men don't kill you, Emmerson will hunt you down.'

'Emmerson will never find me,' the man said, sounding farther away. 'Even if he does, I will certainly outlive you.'

The voice sounded distant now. A moment later, the hatch slamming shut told Lucas why. He forced himself to look. It was closed and locked. He'd been sealed up inside the hold.

Seconds later a low rumble shook the hull. It came in bursts, traveling forward from the stern.

Lucas recognized it as blasting charges set off in rapid succession, similar to the method a demolition expert would use to bring down a large building.

As he tried to figure out the logic behind this latest surprise, alarms rang out. The ship was taking on water.

The hull had been blown open all along the waterline. The man who'd shot him was sinking the ship. Lucas couldn't fathom why, but as the ship began to list and the floor increasingly sloped, he was certain the vessel would be going down.

Escaping from his hiding place, he dragged himself to

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the hatch. It would not budge, not even as he pulled on it with all his might.

He tried the radio once again. ‘Callum,’ he called out. ‘Callum.’

Water began leaking through tiny gaps on the sides of the hatch and dribbling in through the bullet hole in the wall.

The water had to be rising fast if it was already two feet up on the outside of the compartment.

Forcing himself to stand on his one good leg, Lucas threw himself against the door to no avail. He grabbed the handle as he fell back, pulling with all his strength and hoping the water on the outside would help push the door in. The lock held, so he pulled once more.

The door creaked and the frame bent inward. Both gave way all at once.

Lucas threw himself to the side, trying to get clear, but the rush of water caught him as it blasted through the gap. He was swept off his feet and dragged along like a piece of driftwood caught by a crashing wave.

He hit the far wall and was washed along the length of the room. Swirling water hitting the far end pushed him under and then brought him back up again. Gasping for air as he surfaced, he grabbed for the metal frame protecting one of the servers. His grip was firm and he pulled himself forward, wrapping both of his arms and legs around it like he was clinging to a tree.

By now, the ship was tilting noticeably backward. The stern had blown first. She was going to go down with her bow in the air.

Lucas pulled himself higher as more water poured in.

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But he knew it was a losing battle. He hoped the room would reach equilibrium and allow him to swim out, but as the water climbed his strength ebbed.

A resounding metallic bang echoed behind him as some piece of machinery or improperly tied-down cargo broke loose and slammed into the adjoining wall.

Seconds later the lights flickered and went out.

Lucas felt the cold soaking him to the bone. He no longer fought to keep above water. No longer imagined he could swim to the next deck and find a way off the ship.

He clutched the framework around the server, his fingers going numb, as his mind seethed, wondering who had beaten him, who had betrayed him. And then, not willing to let those be his last living thoughts, he focused on better things, his wife and children, lost to him because of the life he'd chosen, but out there somewhere safe and warm in a world far different than his own.

His grip weakened, he slipped from the framework and sank downward. In the dark, he noticed two sources of light. The first was the blurred face of the watch on his wrist, still counting down the minutes to success. The second was the glow from the panels on the octagonal casing of the server in front of him. Despite the chaos and the shooting and the flood of frigid water, the machine was still running.

## 4

### *Two Hundred Miles Northeast of Da Nang, Vietnam Present Day*

Two figures in wetsuits swam at a depth of thirty feet. Sunlight streamed down through the clear water, dancing in patterns where it hit the living reef below.

Kurt Austin studied the changing patterns of light and darkness, drifting lower, while looking past a small group of bright yellow fish and out into the bluer regions beyond.

He was head of special assignments for the American organization NUMA – the National Underwater and Marine Agency. He'd spent over a thousand hours of his life underwater on various dives. Probably three times that in submersibles of one kind or another. In all that time he'd never tired of the beauty of the sea, nor chosen to underestimate its danger.

'Butterflyfish,' a voice said. The name came through a tiny speaker in his full-face helmet.

Kurt glanced over at the diver beside him. His diving partner was a woman named Yan-Li, a nautical historian from the People's Republic of China who'd once been a dive specialist in the People's Navy. Her wetsuit and helmet were the same red as the Chinese flag. Her air tank was a yellow aluminum cylinder and she wore matching yellow dive fins.

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In contrast his gear was industrial and workmanlike. Dark blue wetsuit, scuffed steel oxygen tank, black fins, boots and gloves.

‘I’ve often thought fish get a raw deal,’ she continued.

‘If you mean as in sashimi,’ Kurt replied, ‘I’d have to agree with you.’

Kurt grinned as he spoke, the wrinkles around his eyes accentuated by the way the helmet pressed tight against his face. He was pushing forty these days, but a life at sea and in the sun had given his face more character than most. Tufts of steel gray hair added to his look, giving him an older, even more weathered appearance.

‘I mean,’ the woman explained, ‘in the naming regimens we use for aquatic species. So many of them are named after other things. Butterflyfish, parrotfish, lionfish. Earlier today I saw a pineapplefish. And if we look hard enough, we might even find a garlic bread sea cucumber around here somewhere.’

‘You’re making that last one up,’ Kurt said, turning his attention to the deeper water beyond the reef once more.

‘I assure you, I’m not,’ she replied, using a helicopter stroke to remain in position.

Kurt focused his gaze on a shadow in the distance. It had come up from the deeper offshore waters and then circled out beyond view. It was back now, gliding closer, the sunlight filtering down, accentuating the subtle stripes on its back.

‘I suggest we drop down toward the coral,’ Kurt said. ‘Another one of your unfairly named creatures is coming this way. Tiger shark. Fifteen-footer.’

Yan’s posture stiffened a bit, but she gave off no sense

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of alarm. Releasing some air from her buoyancy compensator, she dropped alongside Kurt into a gap in the reef.

Kurt knew she could take care of herself. They'd spent the last five months on the trail of a mythical treasure, working together in a sort of unsanctioned international partnership. They'd been shot at, chased through the mountains, even forced to leap off a bridge when cornered in a remote part of Cambodia. All because of a diary belonging to the famed pirate Ching Shih and the vast treasure she recorded in it as being stolen and then lost in the South China Sea.

Still, there was a difference between brawling in an alleyway and fighting a thousand-pound shark.

Dropping slowly toward the reef below, Kurt kept his eyes on the shark. It swam toward them and then turned to the north. Just as it looked like it might be leaving it turned back, accelerating and arching its back.

'Aggressive posture,' Yan said. 'Not good.'

The shark swam in toward them, surging forward like a torpedo in the water. Kurt grabbed on to a large outcropping of brain coral, pulled himself downward and dragged Yan down with his free hand.

Dropping behind the island-like obstruction, they avoided the shark's first pass. It crossed above them, its square nose and white belly near enough to touch.

Kurt spun around to track it, his flipper breaking off a tree of stag coral in the process.

'Big fish,' Yan said.

'I wish he was bigger,' Kurt joked. 'Sharks with full bellies are less dangerous. This guy looked like he might have been on a diet.'

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