

THE APHRODITE CONSPIRACY

Expressionless beady eyes followed my every move... calculating, judging distance. Their long lower jaws gaping to reveal rows of teeth like broken glass. Three of the predators circled me warily, never breaking eye contact even for a second while the rest kept their distance. There was no comfort in that distance though, with the ability to accelerate to thirty miles an hour in the time it takes to blink – my reactions wouldn't be fast enough – an attack would be swift and bloody.

My heart pounded like a bass drum, I controlled my breathing as best I could, pinched my nose and blew hard to equalise the pressure building in my ears. The pain went away and I kicked my legs up, continuing downward in a sky-diving position fighting the gruesome thoughts of being hit from behind and shredded by the razor teeth of a six foot barracuda with a bad attitude. At thirty metres an alarm beeped loudly from the dive-computer on my wrist and I reached for the inflator hose and pressed one of the buttons. Air shot into my buoyancy jacket and my rate of descent slowed to a few inches per second from the previous imitation of a concrete block.

The gigantic black shape shimmered mirage-like in the gloom and the giant bronze propeller blades of the M.S. Zenobia appeared within arms reach. The stricken roll-on

roll-off ferry lay on its port side, the once gleaming blue and white superstructure now mottled brown and green with undersea growth, the home to a myriad of undersea creatures. I hovered gently to get my bearings, watching the bubbles from my regulator streaming upwards past my ears. I sank further letting my legs fall to vertical and at forty-two metres my fins brushed the ocean floor sending little clouds of sand puffing up around my feet. A voice in my head questioned my sanity and I slammed a mental door on it, opening up the one with the image of the auburn-haired goddess who I was following into one of the most dangerous wrecks in the world.

I'd swum through the lower decks dozens of times; vehicles littered the bottom like a child's discarded toys. She had entered the wreck; it's decaying cargo unstable after three and a half decades of seawater eating at the restraining chains of the juggernauts hanging on them. Rust corrosion is not an exact science; the chains could break tomorrow, in another two years or in thirty seconds. The possibility of being crushed to the ocean floor by a forty-ton articulated truck sent an involuntary shiver down my spine. We were two miles from the nearest land and at this depth we had less than ten minutes of air. I lifted the instrument console floating next to my left thigh and studied the luminous face of the air gauge. Some quick mental arithmetic and a deduction that if I didn't find her in the next five minutes I would have to leave her to the hungry barracuda whose shadowy movements followed me relentlessly. I exhaled warily and watched more bubbles shimmy their way to the surface. They were circling closer.

Flicking the switch on my dive-light a shaft of brilliant white punched through the gloom like a laser. With a flick of their powerful tail fins the shadows were gone in the time it took me to blink from the light after the dark descent. No doubt they were watching from a distance. In the light the enormity of the ship immediately became apparent;

stretching nearly six hundred feet from bow to stern and over eighty wide. I played the beam along the dirty brown steel plates of the rusting ferry, searching for the gap. A dark spot gave it away and I plunged into the blackness of the wreck, ignoring the voice in my head, which had re-opened the door and was yelling at me to leave her.

It was black as pitch inside and like swimming through a large hotel in the dead of night. A shudder rippled down my back and I wondered briefly whether curiosity had the same effect on divers as it did on cats. In reply my thoughts executed a U-turn and flashed back forty-eight hours to the first time I'd seen her by the pool, the playful smile on the sensuous mouth as she'd caught me watching her. I smiled to myself and checked the computer on my left wrist - nine minutes. I swung the light and my attention forward again and cursed into my mouthpiece, my only visual aid was now completely useless. Like headlights trying to penetrate fog, the beam bounced back at me from a billion particles fizzing in the water. My fins must have kicked up some silt, I couldn't see a thing.

Now effectively blind and deaf to all but my breathing, which was sounding louder by the second, I swallowed hard and fought to control the feeling of helplessness that was rising within me. I hate wreck diving at night, the feeling of claustrophobia is overwhelming. Swimming under thousands of tons of water is fine when you can see, but enter a wreck, where shards of jagged, rusting metal can slice through wetsuit, skin and breathing equipment - and survival suddenly becomes a lottery. I wasn't even sure I was the right way up, gravity plays very little part in a world of weightless, three-dimensional movement, but breathing out and watching the bubbles pass over my head confirmed my instincts.

There was no time to wait for the muck to settle. I closed my eyes and called up the map logged away in my mind's eye, trying to recall decks, doors, companionways and the

holds of the ship. It was no use; my brain was in temporary paralysis. I turned slowly three hundred and sixty degrees, shadows moved in the light-beam and the adrenaline pumped harder. Shit, they'd followed me in! I bit down hard on the mouthpiece as they moved again hurtling toward me. I jerked backwards to avoid the impact of the gaping jaws and gleaming razor teeth that materialised in the light beam and smashed my head on the bulkhead behind me. Something grabbed my arm, wrenching my shoulder, a blow to the side of my face rattled my brain to the core and everything went black. My mask had taken the full force of the bullet-shaped head of the barracuda, flooding it instantly as the airtight seal around my face lost its grip and the strap slid off my head. My nose felt like it was broken and water flooded into my unprotected nostrils.

"Don't breathe in! Don't breathe in! Don't breathe in!" the voice in my head was screaming at me. I snatched frantically at the water behind me. Once. Twice. The third time my fingers closed around something, mask strap or a shred of passing weed? I groped some more and with relief found the strap of my mask.

Fitting it back in place over my stinging eyes and purging the water out took just a few seconds and I could breathe normally. My right shoulder felt like it had been dislocated but it was still functioning, the muscles burning from the force of the hit from the second barracuda.

I gently probed around the nose cover of my mask, it hurt like hell but wasn't broken. All I needed now was my dive-light, which I must have dropped, my heart to stop trying to beat a hole in my wet-suit and then the situation would be back under control. I took two long, deep, calming breaths reached down and grabbed hold of the safety cord attached to my weight belt and prayed that it had halted the disappearance of my only means of navigating out of this hellhole. The nylon rope terminated eighteen inches from my belt, the end torn and frayed. The cold fingers of after-

shock slid up the back of my neck making me shudder; that rope had a breaking strain of over a quarter of a ton. No wonder my shoulder ached - the attack from the second barracuda had torn the shackle clean away. I cursed my own stupidity - in my haste to get down here I had broken two cardinal rules of survival, I hadn't brought a spare light and I hadn't attached a life-line to the outside before penetrating the hull.

With zero visibility I had no idea how to get out. Swallowing hard against the sudden dryness in my mouth I checked the still luminous face of my watch, I had to put my arm almost onto my mask to see through the muck. Seven minutes.

A few deep breaths pumped enough oxygen to allow clear thought. I couldn't continue the search without light and if I didn't find an exit real fast the voice in my head was going to be proved right. Come on Palmer, THINK! I turned another slow circle, peering desperately into the all-engulfing gloom, looking for a sign, anything that would give me a clue as to the direction Katherina had taken. My compass was useless, I watched it rotating slowly as the huge mass of the ship confused it totally. How could I have been so stupid as to neglect the basic rules I had taught hundreds of other divers? Diving alone is the quickest way to die. Talk about ironic. A sudden flash of light jerked me back to reality. I blinked and shook my head, unsure if it was real or wishful thinking.

Another flash.

Turning toward it, I kicked hard against the water, swimming as fast as possible, both arms outstretched in case I ran into a wall. The light stabbed out again with a gleam of pink and relief flooded through my body, I'd found her. Suddenly there was clear water, it was still black as pitch but the murk had gone. Another flash, inspiration this time; this had to be the lower lorry deck for there to be clear water, the corridors are so narrow that even a gentle movement kicks

up years of undisturbed silt. The lorry decks are so wide you never touch the sides.

Her beam lanced through the water like a World War Two searchlight over London. I spread my arms wide to act as brakes as I didn't want to appear suddenly in front of her. I remembered only too clearly the effect six feet of muscle and teeth appearing in my light beam had on me a few seconds earlier, I wouldn't want to inflict that on anyone.

Too late...

I heard the muffled scream at the same instant as her torch beam hit me full in the face and blinded me. I jerked my upper body back as I sensed rather than saw her arm sweep past my chest, the razor sharp blade of the knife gleamed wickedly in the reflected light. I backed away, spat my regulator out, and waved hoping she would recognise me - the light left my face. Counting to five with my eyes shut to get used to the dark again, I groped around until my hand closed around my regulator and replaced it.

She had the light in front of her now, shining vertically. Her hand was in the beam, thumb and forefinger forming a circle. OK. She'd recognised me. As I swam towards her she signalled that something was wrong. I reached for her and manoeuvred the light between us to show me her face clearly - her eyes were wide open but the pupil size looked normal. The rush of air bubbles from our regulators seemed to be dancing together in the still water, so her breathing was no more laboured than mine. If there was nothing physically wrong then it had to be a piece of equipment stuck on something, she hadn't moved. Taking the torch from her hand I played the beam down behind her back. I groaned involuntarily, her air tank was firmly wedged into the open cab window of one of the trucks whose chains had not yet given up their strength and plummeted to the bottom of the dead ship. Holding tightly onto the valve at the top of the cylinder I braced both feet against the side of the weed-covered cab and pulled hard. My fins were not

the best means of maintaining a good purchase and my left foot skidded off the door and into the void beyond, sending clouds of weeds and silt swirling into the clear water - the cylinder remained wedged.

Katherina's fingers dug into my right forearm and pulled. I let go of the cylinder and floated round in front of her, bringing the light between us so we could communicate. She made a slashing motion across her throat with her left hand - she was out of air. There was no panic in her actions, she showed me her air-supply gauge, I glanced at it, my eyes widening, and then back at her - she just shrugged. This was one cool lady. There was no more time for thinking, tucking the torch under my arm so it pointed at her chest I rapidly began undoing the quick-release clips that held her gear on. She shrugged the harness off as I ripped open the last buckle. The only connection between her and the jammed equipment was now her regulator. I yanked my emergency reg clear of its quick-release and held it towards Katherina. She took the final lungful from her own cylinder, spat out her mouthpiece and replaced it with mine. The alarm on my computer shrieked urgently - it was time to get out. I slid an arm round her waist and pulled her toward me.

She twisted violently away, reaching for something out of my line of vision. I swung the light to see what was so important and not three feet away was a white rope - My God, she'd actually come down on a safety line, but where from? I thought I knew every way into this ship.

This was no time to look a gift horse in the mouth; I grabbed the line with both hands and pulled us along it hoping the worst was over. If we had a way out then all I had to concern myself with was making our air supply last to the surface. As we followed the rope I played the torch beam into the depths of the once bustling lorry deck in an effort to get my bearings. Everything was the same colour, a muddy green and brown. Thirty-six years is more than enough time for millions of sea creatures to colonise a new home.

The old adage ‘To err is human, to really screw-up you need a computer’ was never so true. A freshly commissioned vessel on its maiden voyage, the Zenobia’s ballast-control computer pumped thousands of tons of sea water into all the wrong tanks. The ship developed an unrecoverable list and eventually sank. No lives were lost, but it went to the bottom with a full cargo and over a hundred articulated trucks.

Katherina tapped me on the shoulder, I swung round with the beam, the rope disappeared over a sill and into a corridor. The width of the passageway meant a change of position. I stopped, brought the light between us once more and signalled for her to hang on to my air tank. With Katherina riding pillion and using the torch as a headlight it left me free to concentrate on getting us out fast. As we moved off I checked the air supply – three minutes – the computer indicated that I’d already been down for seven, I’d no idea how long Katherina had been down there but it was longer than allowed for a dive that deep. I held her legs firmly between mine and flung us along the rope. The hand-over-hand pulling motion became automatic and my thoughts switched to the possible reasons she could have for risking her life. Another minute trapped and her only alternative would have been to abandon her aqualung and try to reach the surface on one deep breath. I shuddered inwardly at the thought, also wondering how she’d managed to get trapped in the truck at all and then the barracuda sprang to mind; they must have followed her in and not me. She must have backed away from them, jammed her tank in the open window and drawn her knife in case they attacked.

There was very little headroom along this section; with the ship lying on its side it meant that the corridor width became our only height space. I searched my memory for the length of this corridor, but the details stayed forgotten, buried with all the other information I couldn’t recall; my mind filled with the urgency of getting out and the effort of

pulling us along the rope. I felt a tug on my high-pressure line, Katherina was checking the instruments. Damn. I didn't want her to know how little air we had left. The hose went slack again and I felt her hand squeeze my shoulder.

The colour of the darkness changed imperceptibly and I sensed the nearness of the final doorway. My muscles found an extra burst of power and we shot out of the wreck like torpedoes. We drifted for a moment as I looked up to get my bearings, the dim but welcome shadows of our two boats tied together filtered down by the hazy light of the full moon. The surface looked flat calm. I threw a glance back to where we had emerged and made a mental note of the position of the doorway. I looked over my shoulder curiously at Katherina; she must have had help to find that.

A low-pitched whistle snapped my attention back to the dwindling air supply, my regulator was the culprit and the noise coincided with my inhaling. I reached for the instrument console and glared at it, the air gauge was hardly registering and the depth gauge next to it read one twenty. One hundred and twenty feet to the surface and all that fresh sea air.

Reaching for the side of the ship I grasped the deck railing and pulled us along it, heading for the point where the surface buoy was anchored to a lifeboat davit. It was getting harder to breathe now as I sucked the tank almost dry and I was tiring, my heart beat harder and I could feel the blood rushing around my head. Fifteen feet to the buoy-line and one hundred and twenty to the surface. I pulled harder, it was like trying to raise a ship's anchor by hand.

As I reached the rope I took a final lungful of air and spat out my regulator. In practice I had come up from a hundred feet on one breath many times and Katherina would need the little remaining air. I took us upwards as slowly as my aching chest and the thoughts of a ruptured lung would allow; the sound of Katherina's rhythmic breathing became louder and louder in my head as I fought to mentally over-

ride the spontaneous instructions from my brain telling me to breathe and re-oxygenate my lungs. I felt a movement behind me and Katherina swung round in front. I opened my eyes from the concentration of maintaining a slow rise up the rope. There was enough light for me to see her eyes widen in concern as she realised I wasn't using the scuba unit. She picked up my regulator and tried to get it back into my mouth, I shook my head and clamped my teeth together hard; she understood, wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me. I grinned despite the situation; this was one hell of a length to go to just to get a beautiful woman in my arms.

I risked a look at the depth gauge – fifty feet. We were rising too fast! The air inside my buoyancy jacket was expanding like the air in my lungs. I had forgotten to release some and in a belated flash of inspiration I stuck the exhaust valve in my mouth and pressed the button taking a good long breath. The vice-like pressure in my chest eased and our rate of ascent slowed. I checked my depth gauge, forty feet; Katherina's eyes met mine and I winked at her. Forty five seconds later we exploded to the surface in a cocktail of froth and air bubbles beside her Zodiac inflatable. Snatching one of the ropes attached to the side I hauled myself on board gulping beautiful sea air down in relief. I dragged Katherina in after me and we collapsed in a heap at the bottom of the boat.

“Are you OK....?” I gasped in between breaths. I got no further, my head exploded in a galaxy of stars and everything went black.