

BEYOND ALL MEASURE

By

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Chapter One

Soviet submarine K-278 Komosomolets
3,700 feet deep The Arctic Ocean
March 8th
14:23 (13:23 UTC)

The metal groaned in protest under the relentless pressure, inching toward five thousand pounds per square inch. At such depth, it was a haunting reminder of the fragile balance between life and death. Trudging along deeper than any normal nuclear sub, the submarine surveyed the ocean floor an additional four thousand feet below. Special ground-penetrating radar and sonar constantly beamed and received signals from under the Arctic's silty bottom, revealing secrets tens of millions of years old.

Akram Saman, a man hand-selected by His Royal Highness, Prince Awadi Salib, read the data from the sophisticated instruments and double-checked his findings before leaving his station. He entered the bridge and approached the commanding officer.

"Captain, I have the information I need. Please surface so I may communicate my findings with His Majesty."

An old, gruff man, scarred by the trials of war, turned and clenched the cigar he was smoking between his weathered, yellowed teeth. "Are we going to get our money?"

“Yes.” Akram coughed as he waved away the smoke. The stench assaulted his senses. “You can get confirmation of the deposit before we dive.”

The old man squinted, nodding in understanding, then turned. “Surface the boat. Up bubble, twenty degrees.”

Once they finished communicating with the prince and the boat’s crew confirmed their payment, they descended to one thousand feet.

Akram went to his berthing and, from his locker, removed his prayer rug, Koran, and special box presented to him by the prince. After completing his prayers, he wiped the sweat from his brow and took a deep breath. Opening the box, he removed the compact, but powerful bomb.

Armed with double-stick tape, he fastened the explosive to the sub’s titanium hull, stepped back to his rug, and sat on his knees. Now, he would complete the mission he was chosen for. Grasping the detonator firmly, he swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

“Allahu Akbar.”

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Bahrain Polytechnic Research Center
Manama, Bahrain
April 23rd 14:07 (12:07 UTC)

The school sat adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Palm tree-lined walkways crisscrossed the property like veins running through the heart of an oasis. The gentle breeze from the sea whispered through the campus like a soothing lullaby, carrying the salty essence of tranquility and timeless wisdom.

Dr. Sagadish Agate was an accomplished innovator in deep sea rover and submersible technology. He stood at his worktable, surrounded by the odors of saltwater and machinery,

hyper-focused on his task. His white lab coat, almost touching the ground, enveloped his compact frame like a child wearing his father's oversized robe. The lights reflected off the bald spot on his head.

Dr. Madison Wyrick, his assistant, stood tall and commanding, her long, dishwater-blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and secured with an orange and white scrunchie. At the young age of twenty-seven, she was no slouch. When she was twenty, she earned her undergraduate and master's degrees in engineering from the University of Tennessee. She completed her PhD at MIT eighteen months later, specializing in underwater drilling. Her skill and knowledge were a major factor in helping to drill and access two major oil fields off Guyana for ExxonMobil a few years prior.

The expanse reverberated with the rhythmic cadence of footsteps. The scent of brine mingled with the faint hint of hydraulic oil. Crown Prince Awadi Salib strode purposefully into the main research lab. His presence commanded attention even before he uttered a word. His *Bisht*, a regal extended cloak in deep crimson hues, billowed behind him like a banner of authority, echoing his swift steps.

Behind the Crown Prince marched a contingent of Saudi Royal Guard Regiment soldiers, their disciplined formation contrasting with the chaotic jumble of scientific equipment cluttering the marine laboratory. Each soldier wore an immaculate uniform, tailored perfectly and gleaming under the harsh fluorescent lights. The royal blue fabric bore intricate golden embellishments that glinted with every movement, a mark showing their allegiance and unwavering loyalty to their leader.

The sound of polished boots against the tiled floor resonated through the room, punctuated by the occasional creak of leather belts, the rustle of crisp fabric leather and the faint hint of gun

oil lingering in their wake. As they advanced into the lab, shafts of sunlight filtered through small portholes, casting ethereal beams that danced across the soldiers' polished buttons and epaulets. The air hummed with suppressed energy as the Crown Prince's entourage navigated the maze of scientific wonders and experimental apparatuses, their collective aura exuding power and purpose amidst the mass of research paraphernalia.

Madison's heart raced as he advanced, his Elite Guard moving with a precision that echoed through the room like a relentless drumbeat. His piercing gaze swept over the surroundings, absorbing every minute detail of his approach to the individuals crucial to his grand scheme.

Madison stepped forward. "Mister—or Prince Awadi, we are—"

One of the Royal Guard approached, pointing an accusatory finger. "You will address him as—"

The Crown Prince raised his hand. "Enough! It is fine." He waved his attendant back. "You may address me as Your Highness, Your Majesty, Prince Salib, or in due time—" He leaned over, cradled her hand, and tenderly kissed her knuckles. "Just Salib." He smiled warmly, his eyes crinkling at the corners ever slightly. "Please. Continue Doctor Wyrick."

The blood flowed to her cheeks after not addressing the prince correctly. The pressure on her cheek bones were a constant reminder of her ignorance. "Apologies. I didn't mean to offend you."

She motioned with her hand. "But please, follow me, Your Highness."

As they advanced, the lab's core loomed larger before them. The ceiling stretched high above, a vast expanse of industrial metal soaring sixty feet into the air. Thick steel cables dangled above, supporting an enormous bright orange submarine that dominated the space. The vessel extended fifty feet long and towered thirty in height, casting an imposing presence in the

room.

Next to the sub, a massive crane stood sentinel, its sturdy frame ready to lift and transport the submersible to the dock a hundred meters away. Ready to receive the command, the colossal machine stood tall.

Its metallic arms prepared to lower it into the depths of the murky waters.

She gestured towards the colossal orange vessel. “We’ve repurposed one of Doctor Agate’s existing models for this special project.”

The Crown Prince extended his arm and pointed to the front of the sub. “And is this where the drilling apparatus will attach?”

“Yes, and if you’ll please come this way, I’ll show you.”

As they walked, Madison continued. “We are sifting through different drilling tool options to determine which one gives the best results. We’ve narrowed it down to three; hydrothermal spallation, chemical plasma, which I have reservations about, and lasers. Your Majesty, in my humble opinion, the laser option is most suitable.”

They stopped in front of a massive apparatus.

The prince tilted his head. “And why is the laser your tool of choice?”

“A lot of advancement has taken place in the past ten years. We use laser energy for thermal spallation, melting, or evaporation of rock. This specific system is MIRACL. It offers a penetration rate of ten to a hundred times faster than conventional drilling methods.”

The prince contemplated her words. “And what does that translate to regarding speed?”

Her eyes went up in thought as she searched her memory for the information. “About four hundred and fifty feet per hour.”

His eyes widened. “That is impressive, doctor.”

She smiled. “It’s never been used for drilling in this environment before, but it will offer us the most power while maintaining control of the submersible.”

“And when do you expect to start drilling?”

Madison’s eyes shifted toward her colleagues for affirmation in her answer. “Oh—I’d say we’re twenty—perhaps twenty-two weeks out?”

Dr. Agate nodded while he popped a dried date into his mouth. His words slurred as he chewed on the sweet fruit. “Yes, I would say it’s a safe assumption.”

One of the Royal Guards approached from behind the prince and whispered in his ear. The prince’s eyes widened and soon narrowed as his irritation became apparent.

“Pardon me,” he said through a forced smile. “I need to take this call.”

He hurried to a far corner. Madison smiled at the members of the Royal Guard. They didn’t return the kind gesture. The prince’s voice rose in volume. She didn’t need to speak Arabic to understand he was displeased.

As he strode back to the group, a scowl etched itself on the Crown Prince’s face. Abruptly halting, he raised his hand and pointed to Dr. Agate.

“You have twelve weeks to complete this project.”

His words hung heavy as the team braced themselves for the challenge ahead. As fast as he approached them, he turned and walked away, his guards following closely behind him.

Her expression twisted into a mask of panic as she whipped around to face her colleague. His stoic expression offered no comfort, making her feel alone and uncertain. “But your Highness!” Madison pleaded. “There’s no—”

As they exited the lab, he turned and called over his shoulder. “Twelve weeks, Doctor Wyrick. Do it!”

#

Prince Salib emerged from the air-conditioned laboratory. As the automatic doors slid open, a wall of oppressive heat slammed into him like a physical force.

He paused for a moment, blinded by the harsh sunlight reflecting off the barren parking lot. Despite his dark sunglasses, the hot air and the brilliance of the sunlight outside contrasted sharply with the lab's cool interior.

Taking a deep breath, he steadied himself against the searing air scorching his throat. Though he was no stranger to Bahrain's punishing climate, the transition was still jarring after long hours spent in the controlled environment.

As he stepped free of the building's shelter, within seconds, beads of sweat broke out across his brow. The sweltering temperature, hovering near fifty degrees Celsius, sucked the moisture from his body.

He strode towards his vehicle, his Royal Guard flanking him on both sides. The shimmering asphalt offered no respite, radiating its absorbed heat upwards in invisible waves. Within meters, his fine cotton robes had been plastered to his damp skin.

Reaching the shadow of his vehicle brought sweet relief. As he slid into the cooled leather seat and relished the blast of blessed air conditioning, Prince Awadi Salib thanked modern technology for sheltering him from Bahrain's brutal daylight furnace, if only briefly.

Sitting in the back of his custom Rolls Royce, Salib grasped a burner phone and called the man he'd picked to lead his teams. The voice on the other end answered. "Yes?"

"We have a slight problem."

"Go on."

"Canada Oil has sent an exploration ship to the north pole."

“How do you know?”

Salib stared out the window. “That is something you do not need to concern yourself with. I am ahead of them every step of the way. Your team needs to be ready to execute on my command. If the ship finds what I am certain is there, we cannot allow them to announce it.”

Salib waited patiently for an answer.

“I’ll get started.”