

THE SUN HAD SET, and it was approaching midnight when the Haramosh Star neared the rendezvous point. They were just west of the Indian island of Cherlyam, at the northern tip of the geological formation that included the Maldives.

The Mankial Star was already at anchor, waiting for them. She was some 80 feet in length — far too small, by Yousseff's estimation. He was in the transportation business, after all. A length of 80 feet meant that there was barely enough room on the rear deck for the helicopter. His one consolation was the ship's power. Every piece of equipment that Yousseff owned had been modified in one way or another to increase its horsepower, from his new Gulfstream to the ancient Haramosh Star. He was obsessed with pulling as much power out of each piece of machinery as he could. His personal yacht was no different. The Mankial Star had four MTU Friedrichshafen Diesel Turbos, producing 2,400 horsepower each, which meant she had close to 10,000 horsepower, all told. She could carve up the Arabian Sea at an amazing 50 knots.

Yousseff gazed at the jewel in his crown with affection. He would have liked to be on his yacht, but had decided to watch the next step of the process from the darkened rear deck of the Haramosh Star. Now that they were involved in such an international scheme, his anonymity was more important than ever before. There was no telling who he could trust, and who was a spy. For this reason, he saw no reason to let the men on the Haramosh Star see him directing the operation, when others could do it equally as well. It went against his nature, but in this case he chose to sit back and watch.

The most difficult part of the operation would be connecting the two ships. While both ships were small, they were not insignificant in proportion. The Haramosh Star was 300 feet in length, and her main deck was a good 20 feet above the water. But the system designed so many years ago by Kumar, and subsequently modified by the engineers of Karachi Drydock and Engineering, worked with a simple and polished elegance. Two parallel metal arms slid out of two small hatches on the Haramosh Star, seated about ten feet above the water line. The hatches were so carefully integrated into the ship's hull that only the most scrutinizing of investigations would have uncovered them. They were approximately 60 feet apart, with the metal arms beautifully balanced on a hydraulic suspension system, also of Kumar's design. Two rubber-coated metal clamps were fixed to the distal ends of the arms. With a little careful maneuvering, these connected to two indented rectangular sockets on the starboard sides of the front and rear decks of the

Mankial Star. Thus secured, the two ships rode the sea together, with only 15 feet of water separating them.

Yousseff smiled as he watched the process. The seas were calm, with a slightly warm late afternoon breeze. From start to finish, the connecting maneuver took only five minutes. Once they were connected, the Mankial Star would appear from the air to be a catamaran extension of the much larger Haramosh Star. Now the rear deck hatch doors on the Mankial Star slid open, and the scissors lift elevated the pallets of wrapped Semtex to approximately four feet above the deck. A third, larger hatch opened in the port side of the hull of the Haramosh Star, and two more rails slowly extended towards the Mankial Star. The additional rails extended the full distance toward the yacht, and slid along her deck to attach to the lift mechanism. The railing that lined the Mankial Star's deck was folded back, opening a path that led from the lift to the Haramosh Star, complete with rails for easy transportation. There was none of the usual yelling of crewmembers while the procedure was coordinated. The crews on both ships were wired with microphones, and spoke on the same radio frequency.

The lift platform on the Mankial Star rested on four small wheels, not dissimilar to miniature locomotive wheels (which is where Kumar had obtained his inspiration for it). The four wheels were locked by an ingenious locking mechanism, which, with the flip of a switch, retracted into the lift platform itself. Three men, pushing in unison, were able to push the platform, with its first 1,500 kilos of Semtex, off the lift, through the now-open gate on the Mankial Star's deck, and across the twenty-some feet of rail. Two men on the Haramosh Star stopped the small railcar as it drifted, casually, into the aperture in the ship's hull. The only noise that accompanied this exercise was the lapping of small waves against the hulls of the two ships, and the occasional forlorn cries of seagulls. The load of Semtex was detached from the transport system, and disappeared into an internal compartment on the cargo ship. Two other loads followed, all noiselessly and easily.

Yousseff and Vince walked together to the lower deck level, where the pallets of Semtex now sat. Yousseff looked at the volume of material that had arrived. "Are you sure it will fit in the PWS-12?" asked Yousseff.

"Well, I'm not," replied Vince. "But some of those clever characters back in Karachi did the volume calculations, and they tell me that there is enough room. In fact, we could probably have handled another 500 kilos of it, according to their estimations. It should not be a problem."

"Good," said Yousseff. "I want you to personally supervise the transfer.

When it is done, make sure the trapdoor is completely covered with junk. Hose down the deck, and the lower deck. In fact, hose it down several times. The Americans may come. They may already be on your tail. So long as they don't find that," he said, pointing to the pallets, "things will be fine."

They hugged each other, feeling a pang of nostalgia at another parting. They both recalled too well Yousseff's earlier trips on this very ship — the start of their long and very close history. Yousseff drew away and stepped out onto the rails that joined the two ships. "Oh, one last thing," he said, reaching into his shirt pocket. "Here's a digital camera. If the Americans do come, take many pictures. We could have some fun with that." He tossed the camera towards Vince, who pocketed it. "Goodbye, old friend," he said, walking over the water to the Mankial Star.

"Goodbye Youss," said Vince, a lump in his throat. He didn't know the full extent of the plan, but he knew full well that he might never see his friend again.

The sailors of the Haramosh Star returned to their positions as soon as Yousseff stepped onto the Mankial Star. They wondered who this so-called idiot relative of Vince's was, who walked so boldly across the waters of the Indian Ocean, towards a stunningly beautiful yacht, complete with a helicopter attached to its rear deck. Most of them turned away, shaking their heads. They were paid extremely well not to ask questions of their captain, or the men with whom he saw fit to consort.

The process then reversed itself, as silently as it had been executed. The empty platform was pushed back to the Mankial Star. It locked in place on the scissors lift. The rails were detached from the lift, and the lift retracted into its lower storage berth. The two rails retracted into the hull of the cargo ship, and the large hatch closed. Crewmembers on the front and rear decks of Yousseff's yacht unhooked the connecting arms, which also retracted into the hull of the larger ship. The two small hull hatches closed. The captain of the Mankial Star reversed his engines, while the Haramosh Star went forward. As soon as there was a safe distance between the two vessels, both proceeded at full speed. The Haramosh Star continued on a southerly route along the Malabar Coast, while the Mankial Star turned west, towards Yousseff's retreat on the island of Socotra, just south of Yemen. The entire operation had taken less than 20 minutes. Silently, elegantly, and efficiently, thought Yousseff. It was the only way to do these things. He heaved a great sigh. Now he had a chance to rest in his own home before he was needed again. Thank Allah.

THE METALWORKERS at Karachi Drydock and Engineering had built two inner frames in the hull of the Haramosh Star, below the engine compartment. The first was for the storage of contraband — usually drugs, but in this case, explosives. The second acted as ventilation, to direct the fumes through the engine exhaust system. After this construction, Kumar's sophisticated measurements had shown that, in spite of the precise manufacture and assembly of these inner floors, several parts per billion of chemical traces still leaked into the engine compartment itself. These traces could give them away, and destroy the mission. Yousseff had instructed Kumar to build a third compartment, on top of the other two, for further insulation and venting of fumes. A few parts per trillion of the fumes still escaped, but not enough to trigger detection equipment that might be brought onboard. The likelihood of detection was almost nil. The metalwork was so precise that there was no indication whatsoever that there were three layers of compartments beneath the engine room.

It was the recently added, lower layer that was the most interesting. Nestled in this large bay was a PWS-12 submarine, built in Kumar's Long Beach manufacturing facility, and modified at Karachi Drydock and Engineering. A crew from the Haramosh Star immediately set to work, re-loading the Semtex into the hold of the submersible.