

Mustafa and his pirates had Sultan of the Seas in sight. He was on her beam. She was making at least twenty-five knots. He had to hold in eighty degrees of lead as he closed to keep her from moving to his front.

The men in the boat grasped their weapons. A few fired short bursts into the air in celebratory anticipation. The reports sounded flat.

Mustafa's radio was alive in his hand. He could hear the other boats attacking Stella Maris talking to each other. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the helicopter had left trailing smoke. One skiff sunk. If anyone who had been aboard was still alive, he was on his own; Mustafa needed all his boats if he hoped to capture a cruise ship. The men knew that, knew the risks, and had come anyway. At least there were two more skiffs to harass Stella Maris, which was only ten miles to the Northeast.

"Mustafa, this is Ahmed."

"Yes."

"We are closing from the north on Sultan. Do you have us in sight?"

"No."

They had the cruise ship in a classic trap. Pirates were closing from two sides, so whichever way Sultan of the Seas turned, she would be intercepted.

Yes! The plan was working!

Captain Arch Penney was facing his worst nightmare: a pirate attack on his ship. He had two boat-loads of pirates to port and four to starboard. Ten miles ahead, two or three pirate boats were attacking another cruise ship.

Penney was on the radio/telephone to the Task Force 151 Tactical Action Officer on duty this morning. The Navy guy had a calm, baritone American voice.

“Nearest surface warship is an hour and a half away,” the American Navy dude said. “But we will have a helo overhead in twenty minutes.”

“Send it.”

Penney handed the phone to Harry Zopp and consulted the computer screen that showed all the surface targets in the area, their course and speed, and the prediction of where they would be in a minute, five minutes, or ten if they didn't change course or speed. The computer's information was derived from the radar. The computer operator had to designate which targets were which.

Arch was not without a plan. He and the other captains of the cruise line, together with the senior captain, had worked out a contingency plan for just such an attack and presented it to management, which had insisted upon some changes designed to protect the company from lawsuits, then approved it.

The plan was The Plan. Unfortunately cruise ships did not carry weapons of any kind, not even a pistol to take down a raving, homicidal berserker. So The Plan relied upon speed and mild maneuvering to keep boatloads of armed, homicidal pirates at bay. However, the cruise line was not willing to have the pirates slaughter a great many of its customers, so if the pirates persisted in shooting into the cruise ship, the captain was supposed to surrender, on the theory that the pirates would then ransom ship, passengers and crew. It all sounded very logical in the boardroom of the cruise company in London.

“We have insured against the risk,” the chairman told Captain Penney. Ah, yes. Insurance. Even if the company had to refund fares and ransom ship, passengers and crew and pay a few families damages because they lost a family member, the cruise line wasn't going to lose money. Comforting, that.

Sultan of the Seas carried 490 passengers and 370 officers and crew. Eight hundred sixty defenseless people. Still, the international task force, Task Force 151, was out there on patrol, just over the horizon, ready to intimidate those naughty pirates and protect honest people from violent, unwashed, starving Africans.

“Don't worry, Captain,” the chairman had said. “You can outrun them. The allied navies can deal with them.”

Arch Penney looked again at the computer display. If he maintained this course and speed, the helo would arrive eight minutes after the pirates.

Eight minutes. How many people would the pirates maim and kill in eight minutes?

He picked up the mike for the ship's public address system and flipped it on.

"This is the captain. As you may know if you are on the weather decks, we are being intercepted by at least six small boats, which may contain pirates. We will do all we can to protect you and this ship. I request everyone to clear the weather decks and move to the interior of the ship, away from the windows, balconies and portholes. If your stateroom has a balcony, please step out into the passageway and remain there. I will keep you updated."

And he switched off.

Harry looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Going to panic the old pussies, aren't you?"

Arch Penney shrugged and used his hand-held radio to call the bosun. "Are you ready?"

"Two minutes."

"Use the LRAD whenever they get in range." The Long Range Acoustic Device aimed a powerful sound blast in a narrow cone. At one hundred yards, the high-pitched wail was painful. At fifty yards it was capable of rupturing eardrums. The ship had four LRADs installed, two on each side.

Now Penney asked the computer operator, "Where's that chopper?"

"One Two Two degrees true at forty-eight miles."

"Our speed?"

"Twenty eight knots and increasing," Harry Zopp said. "We are Full Ahead, sir."

"Very well. Helmsman, use slow rate on the turn and come starboard to course One Two Zero degrees. Steady on it." These new cruise liners had no rudder, but instead had engines in pods mounted below the hull. The helmsman was actually turning the pods. Maneuvering up to a pier, the pods allowed the ship to be turned in its own length and dispensed with the necessity of using tugboats.

"Slow rate on the turn," echoed the helmsman. "Come starboard and steady up on One Two Zero degrees, sir."

The slow rate of turn wouldn't tilt the deck very much, although the ship would take a while to get through the turn. With luck, Arch Penney thought he could get the pirates into his rear quarter. At the very least, the last two boats, out of Yemen, would be behind him in a tail chase.

U.S. Navy Lieutenant Buck Peterson was the pilot in command of the Sikorsky MH-60R on its way toward the two cruise ships under attack by pirates.

This had started out as just another day at sea, with coffee and eggs and reams of paperwork awaiting his attention. USS Richard Ward only carried one helo, three pilots, two enlisted crewmen and two aviation mechanics. As the senior aviator, this meant he owned the flying machine and the officers and men. And was responsible for everything.

When the call came from the task force commander, he had mounted up with the senior copilot and senior crewman, a first class named Wilsey. The captain already had his ship on a rendezvous heading, and he turned into the wind just long enough to let the chopper lift off.

Now Buck Peterson was on the radio to the flagship. Pirates had fired on a French Panther over Stella Maris and the Frenchie had sunk one boat, then retired. Still iffy if he was going to make his base ship or go into the drink. Two boats were still shooting at Stella Maris; the captain was in a panic, but he said he thought he could outrun them. He was slowly pulling away, leaving them behind.

The flagship gave Peterson a heading to Sultan of the Seas. It was being intercepted by six boats, which had it boxed.

“Wilsey, you got that gun loaded?” Buck asked on the intercom.

“Yes, sir.” As crewman, Petty Officer Wilsey was in charge of the helicopter's only defensive armament, an M-60 machine gun mounted in the door. It wasn't a cannon but it threw a nice stream of 7.62 mm NATO slugs that could slaughter a boat-load of pirates in seconds. Peterson had never had to order the gunner to fire; the sight of the gun pointed their way was always enough to dissuade even the most ardent buccaneers. There was just nowhere to hide, nothing to get behind, in an open boat. Every single pirate thought that gun barrel was pointed precisely at him.

Peterson checked the mileage to the Sultan while he listened to her captain talking on the radio to the Task Force 151 duty officer aboard the flagship.

Peterson's copilot was Crash Pizzino, a big rangy man with a wicked sense of humor. He wasn't smiling now. He was tightening his straps, running through the checklist, securing loose objects in the cockpit. Crash was also listening to the Sultan's captain describe the tactical scene, the pirate skiffs closing in...

"My God, Suzanne! Pirates!"

"We could be in Hawaii this very minute, sister of mine. I wanted to go to Hawaii. Remember?"

"We've been to Hawaii five times," Irene said, distractedly. They were crammed into a passageway just forward of the 9th deck aft dining room and outside portico where they had eaten breakfast. Someone had spotted the open boats on the horizon, and people had idly turned to watch as the skiffs closed on a collision course. Then the captain had galvanized everyone into action.

Chairs were scooted back, people hurried to get inside the ship, away from the windows and open decks. Now Suzanne, Irene, Mike Rosen, Nora and daughter Juliet were packed together in the passageway along with almost two dozen other people. A cook was also there—he looked like a Filipino—and he was obviously frightened. One of the crewmen spoke to him sharply in a language Suzanne and Irene didn't understand and the man calmed down somewhat.

Suzanne got tired of standing. She sat down on the deck and put her back against the passageway wall, or bulkhead, or whatever they called it. Irene joined her on the deck, but kept her legs tucked under her. Suzanne was not limber enough, and let hers stick out straight. Actually, she thought, for a woman of my age, they aren't bad legs.

"Hawaii," Suzanne grumped. "Egypt is filthy, the Egyptians are filthy, Aqaba is a dump. No human in his right mind would pay money to ride that damn bus across the desert to Luxor. I still can't believe we did it. See Aqaba was Number Nine Thousand and Twelve on my Before-I-Die Bucket List."

"Scratch it off."

“You won’t admit it, but this is the worst cruise we’ve ever been on. Pirates, no less!”

Irene sighed. “Next time, Kanapali Beach.”

“You bet your ass,” Suzanne shot back.

Sultan’s turn seaward, into his little squadron of on-rushing boats, gave Mustafa al-Said a bad moment. The ship kept turning and he tried to turn away, then buttonhook back and come alongside, but the constantly changing course made that impossible. And the ship was doing at least 30 knots. Mustafa’s engine was howling at the red line and the skiff seemed to leap from swell to swell. Two of the boats couldn’t make this speed, but the turn into them had given them a chance.

Finally Sultan steadied up on a southeasterly course, directly away from the land. The captain instinctively went for sea room, Mustafa realized, although that would do him no good. The four pirate boats in front of him converged.

Mustafa S-turned once and then bore in for a rendezvous on the liner’s starboard side. He well knew if he fell astern he could never catch Sultan. He swept in, turning hard to parallel, keeping his boat closing. Another boat was ahead of him and went in fearlessly against the side of the ship.

Then he heard the noise. High-pitched, a scream, rising in volume. He put on his sound-suppressor headset, a simple set of mufflers, one over each ear, as the other men in the boat hastily pulled theirs on.

Mustafa could hear the wail anyway. It was insanely loud.

The men began shooting at the LRAD installations. A sailor stood behind each unit, aiming it at the nearest pirate skiff.

“Kill them, kill them,” Mustafa screamed, but no one heard it.

Nuri was manning the machine gun, and he bent down, tried to aim, which was difficult in the bucking, heaving boat. He began firing bursts at the LRAD units.

The sailors manning the LRAD units disappeared. Probably down behind the railings. Two more long bursts, then the sound stopped.

The skiff nearest the ship was not under control. The helm wandered, the boat nosed in against the towering side of the Sultan, was caught in the wash and overturned instantly.

Mustafa ignored the pirates in the water. If they drowned, they drowned. They were in it for the money, just as he and his men were. If Mustafa didn't press the attack, there would be no money for anyone.

"The bridge," he shouted to his men, and pointed. Three of them fired Ak-47s at the bridge.