DEEP BELOW

Book One: The Ran Protocol

Michael J. Beery & Gregory S. Beery

SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

You are accelerating. Stop.



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THE PRINCIPALS

CMDR. MARA VOSS, USN — analyst, Office of Naval Intelligence, Suitland; twenty-two years of service, eleven in the same directorate

DANIEL SEO — the youngest analyst on the floor; Arlington facility

DR. YUSUF ABARA — oceanographer, Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, Seattle

SEN. ELEANOR HARWICK — prosecutor, then governor, then three terms in the Senate — and seven years of unanswered questions

DR. WARREN DELACROIX — physicist, retired to Reykjavik; the man the record forgot on purpose

DR. MARCUS HALLER — senior analyst, AARO — the Pentagon's UAP office

SONDA — a classified analytical model. Seo named it.

CASSIE VOSS — the Commander's daughter; marine biology, San Diego

DR. SUSAN OKORO — professor emeritus, Ann Arbor; Abara's first reader

AND, IN THE RECORD

DR. PATRICIA LENNON — civilian observer aboard the submersible Nereid-4, 1982

LT. CMDR. DAVID PARK, USN — pilot of the submersible Nereid-7, 1987

DR. ELENA MARSH — scientist aboard Nereid-7, 1987

Chapter One — Telemetry

SUITLAND, MARYLAND — WEEK ONE

The data came in at 0200, the way important data always did — quietly, unannounced, waiting in the queue when Commander Mara Voss arrived at 0647. She worked the overnight accumulation in the order it arrived. The order things came in was itself information. She had learned long ago not to skip ahead.

Eleven years in this directorate. The room was windowless, which she preferred. What mattered was on the screens — six of them, arranged to put the acoustic data front and center. The ocean was not a visual medium. It was known, when it was known at all, by sound.

She made coffee first. Three minutes of not-yet-looking before the day began. Twenty-two years of naval service had taught her the value of that pause.

She was forty-six. Lean in the way of people who run before dawn because the day belongs to other things; dark hair kept short past the point where any regulation required it; a face that gave away exactly what she decided it would, which was usually nothing. Twenty-two years — surface warfare, then intelligence, then this directorate — had pared her manner down to the functional: economical, unhurried, and entirely uninterested in being read.

She sat down. The overnight queue held 340 items. She began at the top.

Most of it was routine. Hydrophone calibration reports from three Atlantic stations. A thermal update from the Southern Ocean buoy network — a 0.3-degree anomaly in the Weddell Sea, within normal parameters but worth flagging. She flagged it and moved on. Two AARO incident reports, both marked resolved. The mid-Pacific attribution was clean. The Bering Strait one wasn't, quite — the timing didn't align with the vessel's logged position — but it wasn't her program, and the gap was small. She let it go. She would think about it again at 3 AM some night next week.

She worked through 280 items in forty minutes. A typical Tuesday.

At item 281, she stopped.

The file header read: *RAN AUV — FINAL TELEMETRY PACKAGE — ANOMALY CROSS-REFERENCE REQUEST — ROUTING: ONR SPECIAL PROGRAMS — CLASSIFICATION: SECRET/NOFORN.*

She read the header twice. Then she opened the file.

* * *

The *Ran* was Swedish — the University of Gothenburg's autonomous underwater vehicle, the most sophisticated AUV working Antarctic waters. Its mission was the Thwaites Glacier melt field, which was disappearing faster than any model predicted. If Thwaites went entirely, it would raise global sea levels by 65 centimeters. The newer models said it would. The timeline kept being revised in one direction only.

The Ran had disappeared eleven days ago. The Swedish team issued a public statement within 48 hours: systems failure in sub-zero saline conditions. AUVs were lost occasionally. The Ran had been operating at the edge of its certified depth. The explanation was plausible, everyone accepted it, and the story faded from the science pages within a week.

Voss had noted the disappearance when it happened and filed it away. At the time, nothing in the public record made it more than what it appeared to be.

The file in front of her contained the raw telemetry — not the summary the Swedish team had released. A classified SOSUS relay had been passively recording the *Ran*'s acoustic signature for three weeks before it vanished — and, because the vehicle reported its own health and position in compressed acoustic bursts, capturing its telemetry along with it. The file fused those intercepts with the Swedish team's partial downlink. The sector was instrumented for reasons that had nothing to do with Swedish oceanographic research, at a classification level the Swedish team would never know existed.

Someone had pulled that telemetry, run a cross-reference, and routed it to her program with a flag.

She read it.

* * *

The *Ran*'s final eighteen minutes were not consistent with a systems failure.

Failures had signatures — the cascade pattern, one anomaly triggering another, the characteristic degradation of a vehicle losing coherence. Voss had seen it dozens of times. It was unmistakable once you knew it.

This was not that.

In its final eighteen minutes, the *Ran* had deviated from its programmed survey route. A controlled course change, executed by its own navigation

system in response to a sensor input. The *Ran* had detected something and turned toward it. That part was normal — the vehicle was programmed to investigate anomalies.

What it detected was not normal.

A thermal gradient, increasing sharply with depth, in a sector where the charted geology allowed no heat source at all. The Thwaites area had been surveyed extensively. No volcanic activity. Nothing at depth that could produce it.

The *Ran* had turned toward a heat source that should not exist.

It descended toward it for 12.4 minutes at maximum operational depth. Its signal stayed strong and clean the whole way — no degradation, no distress. The vehicle was doing exactly what it was built to do: follow an anomaly until it understood it.

At 14:23:07 local time, eleven days ago, the signal ceased.

Not degraded. Ceased — cleanly, at a specific instant, as if a switch had been thrown. Or as if the Ran had crossed a boundary beyond which its signals could not return.

Voss read that section three times. Then she scrolled to the bottom of the file.

There was a notation on the last page. Handwritten — scanned with the document. Someone had printed the file, written on it, and scanned it back in. Either a security violation, or a deliberate way to leave a message the document management system couldn't trace.

Two words.

Cross-reference MERIDIAN.

She ran a search on MERIDIAN across every database her clearance could reach. No results. Variant spellings. No results.

She sat back. The coffee had gone cold without her noticing. Somewhere above this windowless room, the city was starting an ordinary morning — people checking phones, making breakfast, not thinking about eighteen minutes of telemetry from a drone that had turned toward something impossible and gone silent.

She picked up her phone. Seo answered at once — already awake, a keyboard going somewhere under his voice.

"*Get in here,*" she said.

"*I'm twenty minutes out. I have —*"

"*Leave the coffee.*"

A pause. "*Commander, it's not even —*"

"*Twenty minutes.*" She hung up.

She studied the notation again. An instruction, and a name that existed in no database she could reach — written by hand by someone who had read this telemetry before she had — and had known where it pointed.

She didn't write things down as a rule. Records created constraints. But she picked up a pen and wrote the word on the back of her hand, small, where she would see it all day.

MERIDIAN.

Then she went to make fresh coffee and waited for Seo.

* * *

He arrived in nineteen minutes. Daniel Seo was twenty-eight and looked younger — slight, quick-eyed, hair still damp from a two-minute shower, carrying the metabolism of the genuinely curious and a messenger bag half-zipped around a laptop that never fully slept. He had grown up twenty minutes away in Annandale and had been the youngest analyst on the floor since the day he cleared in. He sat down, looked at the screen she turned toward him, and read in silence for four minutes without asking a single question — which told her everything. Seo asked questions constantly. When he stopped, he was thinking hard about something he didn't have language for yet.

"*The deviation is controlled,*" he said finally.

"*Yes.*"

"*So it's not a malfunction.*"

"*The deviation isn't. Keep reading.*"

A minute passed.

"*The signal termination,*" he said.

"*What about it.*"

He turned to look at her, very still.

"*That's not what failure looks like,*" he said.

"*No.*"

"*That's what passing through something looks like.*"

He had been in signals intelligence since he was eighteen, and he had one of the best instincts for acoustic data she had encountered in her career. It was why he was in this room.

"*Scroll to the bottom,*" she said.

He scrolled. Read the notation. Read it again.

"*MERIDIAN.*"

"*It's not in any database I can reach.*"

"*That's interesting.*"

"*That's one word for it.*"

"*Who wrote this?*" Seo asked.

"*I don't know. Whoever routed the file to us.*"

"*So someone inside the system who can pull classified SOSUS data and route it to our program also knows about something called MERIDIAN that officially doesn't exist.*"

"*That's a reasonable summary.*"

He sat back, his right hand moving slightly, as if scrolling through options on a screen that wasn't there.

"*How many other incidents,*" he said. "*Southern Ocean. Signal loss. Last forty years.*"

"*That's what I want to know.*"

"*Give me two hours.*"

"*You have one.*"

He was already pulling up the incident archive. "*Of course I do.*"

Voss turned back to her screens. In the Thwaites sector, the melt field was advancing, the ice going where all things went eventually — into the water, into the deep. Somewhere below that deep, something was generating heat the geology couldn't explain. Eleven days ago, a Swedish drone sent to map a dying glacier had crossed its edge — and turned, and found it, and stopped.

She looked at the word on the back of her hand.

Then she turned back to the data and began building the shape of the question.

The Ran had turned toward a heat source that should not exist.

What Commander Voss finds next was never supposed to be found.

DEEP BELOW — coming soon

Book One of the five-book DEEP BELOW series