

Paul Cunningham and other members of the hull syndicate, alongside a supporting cast of attorneys, accountants, and investigators. Veale and Conner hadn't been invited, but a few detectives from the City of London Police, who'd finally taken a tentative interest in the *Brillante* affair, were seated at the head of the table. Separate from the much larger Metropolitan Police, and responsible only for the crowded financial district, the City force had jurisdiction over the vast majority of the capital's insurance headquarters, and would therefore play a lead role in any investigation.

It quickly became clear that the room was divided over how to proceed. Several of the underwriters wanted to do something about what looked like a brazen fraud against the entire Lloyd's market. Someone suggested that if the police opened a formal investigation, it would give the insurers a legal basis to delay any payments. That wasn't how things worked, a detective explained. For the police to investigate properly, they would need a letter officially requesting help from all the members of the syndicate. The cops weren't going to intervene to halt a suspected fraud without firm support from its ostensible victims. But not all the insurers agreed. An executive from RSA was particularly hesitant, according to others who were in the room. "Our main concern is the reputation of the Royal Insurance companies and its clients," she said. Many of those clients happened to be members of the Greek shipping community. Getting in the habit of rejecting claims might lead to embarrassing lawsuits that were impossible to win.

In the end, the meeting broke up without a definitive resolution. Afterward, Jull spoke to the police detectives, who were surprised at the insurers' reluctance to make a criminal complaint. To them, it seemed crazy to even think about rewarding illegal conduct. "I'm here as an investigator," Jull told them. "I can't do anything about it."

Talbot and the hull syndicate decided not to change course. They would continue to pursue a defensive legal strategy against Marios Iliopoulos, the *Brillante's* owner, while searching for concrete evidence of fraud. But a few weeks after the market meeting, RSA, Zurich, and Allianz quietly settled with the salvors, writing out a check for \$34 million. Some in the cargo syndicate were disgusted at how easily their colleagues had given up.

According to a person who was present, one argument over the decision, between an insurance executive and a lawyer in a City pub, got so heated that they nearly came to blows.

But as far as the cargo insurers were concerned, the *Brillante* case was closed. A few months later, the dispute over the *Elli*, the Iliopoulos-owned tanker that had run aground near Aden in 2009, was also settled out of court. The *Elli*'s insurers agreed to pay an undisclosed sum and committed themselves to keeping the matter confidential. Iliopoulos now had extra money in the bank to fund his *Brillante* litigation. And Veale and Conner were on their own.

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CHAPTER 16

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

On a gray afternoon in October 2013, Veale and Conner pulled into Whitehall, the broad avenue that hosts the great institutions of the British state. A few weeks earlier, Conner had reached out to an official at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, explaining that they were working on a civil case they believed had substantial ramifications for Britain's maritime sector. They needed assistance getting information out of Yemen, he said, and finding out what evidence the government might hold on a tanker called the *Brillante Virtuoso*. A significant pirate attack, and the subsequent murder of a UK citizen, would surely have drawn the attention of the authorities in London, and presumably produced considerable amounts of documentation. But Veale and Conner had access to virtually none of it.

The official was sympathetic, and agreed to set up a meeting between the investigators and other key personnel to discuss what assistance they might be able to provide. Veale and Conner hoped that a trove of government-sourced evidence would be enough to convince their clients to take a firmer position on the case—a harder line that might then push the police to investigate more seriously. As they took their seats, Veale noted with satisfaction that some fairly serious people had turned up, including specialists in maritime security and counterpiracy operations from the FCO and Ministry of Defence. A representative of the National Crime Agency

was also present. Although the NCA had a mixed reputation—frustrated over the years by its bureaucratic inertia, Conner sometimes called it “Never Caught Anybody”—its attendance was still a good sign.

Veale had prepared a pitch that he figured would have the broadest possible resonance. A fraud against Lloyd’s amounted to “an attack on part of the critical national infrastructure,” he told the group—a threat to a core element of the UK’s position as a nexus of global trade. In order to respond, he said, “We need to unlock the evidence jam.” The people in that room had access to many different types of information that might be relevant: military records from the aftermath of the *Brillante* hijacking, diplomatic cables, and intelligence reports, among other documents. Veale explained that, according to various British laws, official files could be released to the private sector for the purposes of “preventing or detecting a crime,” or for safeguarding the “economic well-being of the UK.” He and Conner were trying to do both of those things, he said. “What we want is to establish a legal conduit for sharing information.”

Some of the officials were hesitant. One wondered aloud why the government should play any role in what he referred to as a “civil matter.” But by the end of the meeting, it appeared that Veale’s arguments about the centrality of Lloyd’s to Britain’s larger interests had sunk in. He left the room hopeful that they’d made a breakthrough, and for the next several weeks he checked his inbox expectantly, looking for an update from the various agencies they’d met with. But none arrived, despite repeated nudges. The evidence jam hadn’t cleared.

Veale and Conner continued on their own, slowly and methodically collecting evidence, bit by tiny bit. Through a source, they got their hands on a transmission sent by the USS *Philippine Sea*, the American vessel that had come to the *Brillante*’s aid after it was attacked. Time-stamped at 5:12 a.m. “Zulu” the next morning—8:12 a.m. in the Gulf of Aden—the message had been written by an officer on the warship, and contained a summary of what naval personnel had learned from the tanker’s crew. It appeared to be drawn from CENTRIXS, an encrypted system that functioned as a sort of

high-seas WhatsApp, used for coordinating operations and identifying pirate activity by the dozens of navies working to protect the sea-lanes.

As Veale read through it, he noticed something surprising. In statements given in Aden shortly after their rescue, *Brillante* crewmen had said the intruders who hijacked and burned their ship had been able to board by claiming to be from “the authorities.” When he first saw the statements, Veale had thought the term was odd, especially because it was used so consistently by different sailors. They didn’t mention a specific agency; it was just “the authorities.” Had the attackers described themselves as being from the Coast Guard? Customs? Police? It wasn’t even clear what country these “authorities” purported to represent. But at the time, the repeated phrase was just one of several things the crew members said that Veale found curious, and he hadn’t dwelled on it.

Now, though, he saw that the US Navy received a quite different description of the ruse employed by the hijackers. “THE ATTACKERS WERE DRESSED LIKE MILITARY MEMBERS AND CLAIMED TO BE FROM THE VESSEL’S ‘AGENT’ AND WERE TASKED WITH PROVIDING THEM SECURITY FOR THEIR TRANSIT,” the *Philippine Sea* officer wrote. “THAT WAS HOW THEY WERE ABLE TO GET ALONGSIDE WITHOUT MUCH ALARM.”

For Veale and Conner, the message raised a series of pivotal questions. The first was about the attackers themselves. A roving band of pirates had no obvious way to know that *Brillante* was expecting a security team—the ostensible reason it was drifting off the Yemeni coast. So how had these gunmen come into that critical knowledge? The second question was related to the crew’s behavior. Why would they give one account to the US Navy, in the immediate aftermath of the hijacking, and a different one to a lawyer in Aden, just days later? Why had they changed their stories?



Veale and Conner’s clients, however, appeared strangely unmoved by the new evidence they were turning up. The person who seemed least impressed was Chris Zavos, the punctilious attorney leading the legal team

for Talbot and the other hull insurers. A graduate of St. Paul's, an ultraprestigious private school on the banks of the Thames, he was the detectives' temperamental opposite in almost every way, and the differences seemed to become more pronounced the longer they worked together. In meetings, Zavos spoke with the precise cadence of a man ever attentive to how his words might be interpreted, and was often accompanied by another lawyer who would take copious notes, as though anticipating that any conversation might have to be cited in court. To Veale and Conner, he came across as so stiff that smiling might cause him physical pain. But Zavos's awkward manner hadn't stopped him from becoming a bona fide insider at Lloyd's, where Paul Cunningham, who'd first introduced him to Veale, seemed to regard him with awe.

Zavos and the insurers' other lawyers had asked the judge handling the *Brillante* case to split it into two trials. The first would deal mainly with "quantum," or the amount at stake. Under the strategy Zavos had helped formulate, their primary defense against Iliopoulos's lawsuit would be to try to shrink it. First, Talbot would apply pressure by arguing that the *Brillante* breached the terms of its policy by lingering in the Gulf of Aden. Failing that, the insurers would claim the ship could have been repaired despite its extensive damage, and that Iliopoulos botched its sale for scrap, off-loading it too cheaply. Their goal was to reduce the amount of money the shipowner could claim he was due to a few million dollars, small enough that a settlement to put an end to the dispute would begin to look attractive to both sides. In insurance cases, that was often how things were done. From Zavos and his colleagues' point of view, the plan made sense: their job was to get the best deal for their clients.

Since only the second trial would deal with the cause of the fire on board, this approach didn't require the underwriters to accuse Iliopoulos of wrongdoing, yet. Under the gentlemanly code of Lloyd's, with its basic assumption that everyone associated with the market was acting honorably (or that any dishonorable acts could be resolved in low-profile ways), insurers simply didn't suggest that major clients had committed fraud unless they absolutely had to. When Veale tried to press the matter, Zavos or one

of the other lawyers would bring up the *Alexandros T*, an ugly dispute that was still rumbling through courts in London and Greece. The vessel at the center of the case was a Greek-owned bulk carrier, loaded with iron ore bound for China, that had sunk in the waters off South Africa. After the ship's insurers rejected the resulting claim, alleging that the *Alexandros T* was sailing with safety flaws that should have been disclosed, its owners retaliated ferociously. They filed nine countersuits in Greece, accusing the underwriters of defamation and fabricating evidence. The litigation would ultimately drag on for more than seven years, rising all the way to the UK Supreme Court, and was interpreted at Lloyd's as a warning about the risks of taking on a well-connected shipowner.

Veale was still surprised that the underwriters weren't ready to fight Iliopoulos. He kept returning to the same principle: if his and Conner's suspicions were correct, a substantial fraud, one of the biggest in maritime history, had been committed against the Lloyd's market, and paying out would only incentivize more of the same. It would also put legitimate funds into the hands of the people responsible—settlement proceeds that could be deposited at virtually any bank in the world, hassle free. In Veale's former line of work there were words for that kind of behavior, and he was certain that respectable Lloyd's members would never want them used to describe how they did business. He couldn't claim to be entirely high-minded about it. As the man hired to find out whether Iliopoulos had perpetrated a fraud, Veale could make a considerable amount of money by taking that effort as far as possible. But there was still a moral dimension that he believed couldn't, or shouldn't, be ignored.

Late in 2013, Veale arrived for a meeting at Talbot's offices across from the neoclassical Royal Exchange, where Lloyd's was housed through the nineteenth century. About fifteen people took their places around a large conference room table: representatives of the *Brillante's* insurers as well as their lawyers, there to discuss the latest developments in the case. After the lawyers spoke, explaining the finer points of litigation procedure, it was Veale's turn to present, and he pulled up a PowerPoint presentation on a wall-mounted screen. He was supposed to be giving a synopsis of his

investigation's progress so far, as well as a rundown of next steps. But in the middle of the deck, he'd inserted a slide that wasn't strictly part of the work he was being paid to do. It contained just one image: David Mockett's burned-out car, photographed just after the bombing that killed him. "It's important to remember," Veale said to the group. "A really decent man was murdered."

The quantum trial, which was held in November and December 2014, ended with a decisive defeat for the underwriters. In a decision handed down the following January, the judge, Julian Flaux, ruled that even though it hadn't sunk as a result of the attack, the *Brillante* had been rendered a "constructive total loss." As far as the legal system was concerned, it would be treated as though it were on the bottom of the ocean, irretrievable. Flaux said he was unimpressed by the allegations made by the insurers up to that point, including that Iliopoulos and his agents had exaggerated the *Brillante's* damage and what it would cost to repair, and racked up unnecessary expenses along the way. Those were small-fry arguments, given the scale of what had occurred, and Flaux seemed to sense that the insurers were holding back. Once, during the court proceedings, he'd observed that they were "willing to wound, yet afraid to strike."

The ruling meant that if Iliopoulos prevailed in the second trial, which would decide what caused the fire on the *Brillante* and who was to blame, the firms that insured the tanker stood to lose as much as \$85 million. That would be a very large bill, even at Lloyd's—and Veale and Conner believed it gave them an opening. The detectives argued that it was time for the insurers to finally get aggressive, by filing a civil fraud case and doing everything they could to help the police pursue Iliopoulos criminally. They still met resistance. During a postmortem meeting they attended after Flaux's decision, the group got into a discussion about evidence—specifically, what the underwriters would be able to prove about the *Brillante* if they decided to fight. Everything they'd learned so far was "circumstantial," one of the attendees said. Incensed, Veale interrupted him.

“Throughout this I’ve heard you all talk about circumstantial evidence,” Veale said. “Do you actually know what that means?”

“That there’s no smoking gun,” the man replied.

“A smoking gun is *the best* example of circumstantial evidence,” Veale said, his voice rising with frustration. It could only be otherwise if someone had witnessed the weapon being fired. “Circumstantial evidence isn’t weaker evidence,” he continued. “DNA and fingerprints are circumstantial evidence.” None were proof, on their own, that a crime had been committed or by whom. They were building blocks, to be combined into the foundation of a persuasive case, one that Veale was confident would succeed if the insurers were willing to make it.

He and Conner kept lobbying for a more forceful approach, bombarding Talbot’s Paul Cunningham and another of the main underwriters, Dean Allen of the Bermuda-based insurer Hiscox, with arguments for why a fraud case was winnable. They weren’t sure if they were getting through. Veale had succeeded in convincing the insurers to formally report the *Brillante* case to the City of London Police as a suspected fraud, and both Cunningham and Allen had spoken of their distress about what happened to Mockett. But the customs of Lloyd’s still seemed to be more powerful than any logic the detectives could muster. There was another factor, just as problematic. Although the insurers were the ones paying the bills, to Veale and Conner it was clear that the lawyers were in control. Zavos, in particular, exuded a confidence that appeared to have convinced his clients it was best to let him take the lead. He periodically told them about some of the many comparable cases he said he’d worked on, with the implication that he knew exactly how to handle this one.

Veale wasn’t persuaded. The only kind of knowledge Zavos really valued, he thought, was legal expertise. But the more he and Conner learned, the more they became convinced that the *Brillante* case was nothing like an average insurance lawsuit. Veale took to regularly challenging Zavos’s statements, asking him to justify his advice. The

lawyer didn't always appreciate it. "I think I'm being questioned here," he declared during one exchange. "We're all under scrutiny," Veale responded.

Conner's relationship with Zavos was even worse. Fairly or not, he saw a set of traits in Zavos that he'd encountered again and again in his dealings with corporate lawyers: absolute certainty, imperviousness to criticism, and a deep aversion to unpleasant conversations. What bothered Conner most was the way Zavos waved away his references to Mockett's death, dismissing it as irrelevant to the litigation. In the legal sense, that was an entirely accurate statement. But to Conner, it couldn't have been more mistaken in the moral one. He found he could barely spend time with Zavos without getting fed up. In his irritation, he began staring intensely at the lawyer during meetings, a habit so unnerving to Zavos that he asked Veale to make Conner stop.

The two investigators weren't the only ones frustrated with the underwriters' approach to the *Brillante*. Encouraged by the formal police report, British law enforcement agencies were trying to gauge whether a prosecution was feasible. But they still weren't sure they had the full support of the insurance market. In a meeting at Lloyd's to discuss the case, representatives of the NCA, the City of London Police, and Financial Conduct Authority—the UK's main financial-market watchdog—stressed that insurers had a legal obligation to prevent fraud and money laundering, one they needed to ensure that they were honoring. Some of the government officials had been surprised to learn that Lloyd's didn't appear to have a central database of its customers, let alone reliable information about who stood behind the shell companies that typically owned ships. "You need to do more," one of them urged.

In 2015, Veale and Conner began to sense the mood changing in their favor, although, since they weren't involved in many of the discussions between the insurers and their lawyers, they couldn't be sure exactly why. Veale had always had the impression that the underwriters viewed cost as the most important factor in their strategy, and the quantum ruling meant that a

settlement to make the *Brillante* affair go away was likely to be expensive. There was also the growing pile of evidence that he and Conner were collecting, even if, to them, the signs of wrongdoing had been clear from the start.

In the spring of that year, the insurers filed new documents at London's High Court, revealing a dramatic change in strategy. To Veale and Conner's delight, the members of the *Brillante* syndicate had agreed to accuse Iliopoulos of fraud, and sought permission to make that argument at the second trial—the one that would determine if they had to pay up. “There was no attack by Somali pirates,” they said in their new pleadings. In fact, they went on, “Any such attack on the vessel was staged with the involvement and connivance of the owner,” and members of the crew: Captain Gonzaga, who'd ordered the ship to drift and given permission for the supposed pirates to come aboard, and Chief Engineer Tabares, who'd been alone with the intruders in the engine room. Drawing on the reports they commissioned from explosives experts, the underwriters claimed the fire that gutted the *Brillante* “was initiated by an explosive incendiary device,” planted by people “acting on the instructions of the owner.” Iliopoulos had been deeply in debt, they argued, giving him a strong incentive to destroy a vessel that carried insurance far in excess of its economic value.

The reasons for the reversal were essentially financial, as Veale had suspected. In a statement to the judge, Zavos provided a detailed map of the logic that the detectives found so strange. “Underwriters have from an early stage been extremely suspicious of the cause of the casualty,” Zavos wrote. But despite those misgivings, they “would have wished to avoid making this allegation, if it was not necessary to do so, e.g. if the quantum of the claim was such that ‘the game was not worth the candle’”—an obscure expression, coined before the advent of electricity, about avoiding card games with stakes lower than the expense of illuminating them. There it was, Veale remarked to himself: a clear statement of the priorities at Lloyd's. Losing the quantum trial, and being faced with a larger bill, “led to

a serious and careful review of all the available evidence,” Zavos explained, “and to the present decision.”

For Veale and Conner’s purposes, the insurers’ motivation wasn’t particularly important. The detectives were eager to get going on a more intense, structured investigation. Without their clients tapping the brakes, they were optimistic about getting to the truth of what happened to the *Brillante*. They arranged a meeting with Zavos, Cunningham, and Allen for a Monday in mid-May. Veale and Conner intended to brief the group on their strategy, which encompassed dozens of “investigative actions”: tracking down potential witnesses in Yemen, reinterviewing the *Brillante*’s crew, and digging into the salvage companies that had responded to the attack, among other inquiries. All of that work might take a year or more, but at the end of the process they were confident they could deliver a decisive body of evidence.

They arrived early, taking seats in the brightly lit lobby of Talbot’s offices. Cunningham emerged a short time later to collect them. His ashen expression struck Veale immediately. He brought them to a meeting room where Zavos was waiting. After Veale and Conner entered, he began to speak about the investigation. “I need to run it,” Zavos said firmly. “I can’t have you going off doing things I don’t know about.” Cunningham was more apologetic, but he reiterated the lawyer’s statement. Everything would have to go through Zavos from now on. Veale wanted to contradict them, to argue that he and Conner had been transparent about their work from the start. But something about Zavos’s tone told him there was no point arguing. The message was clear. They were being sidelined.

CHAPTER 17

MARKED

Dressed in funereal black, the woman standing at Cynthia Mockett's door announced solemnly that she was a police family liaison officer. She seemed very young, Cynthia thought as she invited the visitor inside. FLOs are employed to act as conduits between law enforcement and members of the public affected by crime. They are supposed to offer support, guide families through the complexities of the justice system, and, importantly, update them on the progress of investigations.

It was early 2016, almost half a decade after David Mockett's death; nearly four years since Detective Jonathan Tottman had suggested, in the public setting of a coroner's inquest, that Mockett was murdered to cover up an insurance scam; and three years since Veale and Conner had come to Cynthia's home to tell her they wouldn't let the case go cold. As far as she knew, however, the police were no closer to identifying her husband's murderers. A visit from an officer was a surprise, and Cynthia briefly hoped that it indicated some new developments.

In Cynthia's living room, the young woman sat down on a sofa and placed a briefcase on her lap. She opened it, reached inside, and pulled out some papers: a brochure on how to deal with bereavement. Cynthia sat with her jaw clenched and arms folded as the officer leafed through the pages, showing her pointers about coping with grief. Anger management would

have been more appropriate, Cynthia thought bitterly. But she decided to bite her tongue rather than say what she was really thinking: that a pamphlet on bereavement was worse than useless, except as a reminder of what the police had failed to do. The Mocketts' older daughter Sarah, who happened to be visiting, watched what was unfolding and couldn't stay silent. She tore into the FLO about the inadequacy of the police response and how little information the family had received. Years of pain and rage came pouring out in the direction of the unfortunate officer, who hurried away from the house, clutching her briefcase.

Mockett's death had been hard on the whole family, but especially on his two daughters. With so many questions still unanswered, their grief was formless. It couldn't fit into any shape they recognized as a meaningful response to loss. While they had rich, busy lives and children of their own, neither had been able to fully move on. Their distress compounded Cynthia's own sadness.

She also had more tangible frustrations to deal with. Mockett's partner in the Middle East had dropped out of contact, and she'd been unable to claim on his professional life insurance. The only compensation Cynthia had received was 100,000 pounds from a policy bought through an advertisement in *Reader's Digest*. And she'd had to complain to a consumer-rights agency to get even that. It wasn't enough to keep up the mortgage on the Vicarage, the beloved home where she and Mockett had raised their family. Cynthia knew she'd have to sell the house and leave behind the lush garden and flowerbeds that she'd carefully tended over the years.

Still, Cynthia tried to find solace in her grandchildren, her plants, and her deepening alliance with Michael Conner. The retired detective had begun to visit her regularly in Devon, and they met in London when Cynthia traveled up for the Chelsea Flower Show. No one was paying Conner to help her; assisting Mockett's widow wasn't part of the work he and Veale had been hired to do. But he felt a certain responsibility to Cynthia, who he thought had been treated appallingly. Conner kept her informed about the progress of the insurance investigation, including the

setback of the quantum trial defeat, as well as his and Veale's sidelining by Chris Zavos, the lawyer now running the inquiry. Conscious of his decades of experience in law enforcement, Cynthia had come to rely on Conner to represent her family's interests to the authorities. She knew that he and Veale had been furiously lobbying the police to make a priority of the *Brillante Virtuoso*, and of Mockett's murder.

Veale and Conner did receive occasional hints that British cops were still engaged with the case. A few months after Cynthia's encounter with the family liaison, two officers arrived at her home: a detective sergeant from the City of London Police and a member of the Metropolitan Police antiterrorism unit, which had taken over the Mockett file. Their presence was encouraging. But the policemen, who insisted they were there to help Cynthia, looked uncomfortable. They weren't willing to share any information about Mockett's death or the status of their investigation. If anything, they appeared to be trying to find out what *she* knew.

In the middle of the discussion, Cynthia's phone rang. Her daughter Sarah came in to announce that Conner was on the line. The antiterror officer was visibly irritated. "That man no longer works for the police," he said sternly. Cynthia was furious. "Don't you dare," she hissed. Conner had done more to help her than anyone, and certainly more than the two men sitting in her living room.



While Cynthia fumed at police inaction, Veale and Conner found themselves on the outside of the insurance syndicate's legal fight. Since Zavos made clear he was taking charge, the lawyer had hired his own detectives and consultants to gather evidence in Greece. The two friends had a reasonable idea of what was happening, but they weren't involved. Months passed, and they began spending more time on other projects.

Then one afternoon in March 2016, Veale's phone lit up with a call from Zavos. He was talking into a speaker, with several other attorneys in the room, and sounded shaken. The *Brillante's* owner, Marios Iliopoulos, had somehow gotten hold of forty-five confidential emails sent between

Zavos's team and the Greek lawyers they were working with. Apparently, printouts of the messages, sealed in a large white envelope, had been left for one of Iliopoulos's associates at the entrance to his apartment building. Zavos had no idea who'd put them there, or how that person had obtained them. The documents were then passed to Iliopoulos's legal team in London, who'd been obliged to inform their opponents.

Whether the emails had been hacked or taken in some kind of burglary, their loss represented a major security breach. For one thing, they contained detailed information on the strategy the insurers planned to deploy against Iliopoulos in court. Worse, the Iliopoulos associate claimed the emails showed that the investigators Zavos hired had violated Greek privacy protections as they gathered information. In response, he'd filed a criminal complaint with the Athens public prosecutor, making wild allegations against the Lloyd's market and its agents. Among other things, the complaint alleged that Zavos was somehow an accessory to money laundering, and that the Greek gumshoes working for him were part of a criminal gang.

Those claims were bizarre and scarcely credible. Yet the insurers knew from the infamous *Alexandros T* case that legal proceedings in Greece couldn't simply be ignored. The complaint particularly rattled Zavos and his colleagues at Norton Rose. They'd spent decades climbing to the pinnacle of the British legal profession, a genteel environment where trial lawyers refer to each other as "my learned friend" and, even in the most adversarial cases, the combatants down arms during court breaks to chat about their summer homes in France or crack jokes in Latin. They had never experienced anything like this.

The stakes were even higher for their colleagues in Greece. There, Norton Rose had teamed up with the Piraeus firm of Lallis Voutsinos Anagnostopoulos, led by an attorney named Gerry Lallis, a former merchant captain who'd studied in the UK before building a practice representing insurers in shipping disputes. Captain Lallis was a heavysset man in his sixties, with a mole the size of a quarter on one cheek and thick fingers better suited to a deckhand's duties than to filing depositions. He

was known as one of Greece's leading experts on scuttling fraud, which made him an unpopular figure among some of his compatriots. Through bitter experience, he'd learned how dangerous it could be to go up against Greek shipowners in a Greek shipping town. During his long career he'd been screamed at, threatened, sued, and offered numerous bribes, all while safeguarding a reputation for integrity with his clients in London.

Sometimes the consequences were physical. On a spring morning in 2013, Lallis had been walking from the Piraeus railway station toward his office, as he did every day. Suddenly he felt a sharp impact to his head—and then more blows, which he would describe in a report to prosecutors as a “storm of punches,” delivered with speedy precision. His attacker, a tall man whose face was concealed by a motorcycle helmet, kept beating Lallis after he crumpled to the pavement, continuing until he was barely conscious. Then he calmly turned and walked away. During the entire encounter the assailant hadn't said a word.

Lallis never found out which of his many enemies was behind the assault, though he had his suspicions. In the Greek maritime world, he told his British friends, you had to pick one side or the other. He'd chosen his long ago. It was a stressful line of work, but lucrative. Lallis opted to live a good distance from Piraeus, in a secluded village with his wife and dog.

When Zavos approached him about the *Brillante* case he'd agreed to help, as long as his assistance remained confidential. But the theft of the emails left him exposed. Soon after the leak, Lallis came home to find a single kite, fluttering in the wind, at the entrance to his garden. Someone had tied the string around the branch of an old olive tree. It could have been local kids, Lallis told the insurers' legal team. Or it could have been a warning, identifying him as a target. Days later, Zavos received word of a chillingly specific threat. One of the Greek investigators working for Norton Rose reported that he'd heard Lallis was, as he put it to Zavos, “marked for extermination.” The investigator didn't know the details, but Zavos took the information seriously. He called Lallis immediately, instructing him not to leave his office. Then he called Veale to ask him and

Conner for help. Keeping Lallis alive was well beyond the expertise of a City law firm.

The news made Veale deeply suspicious of who had been hired in Athens. “How the hell does the investigator working for us know about a hit on Lallis?” he thought. But an examination of the man’s loyalties would have to wait. Veale’s contacts in British law enforcement had no jurisdiction in Greece, so he arranged for a team of private bodyguards, paid for by the insurers, to pick Lallis up at his office and escort him home. They placed him in the center of a convoy, with cars full of armed guards in front and behind, plus a motorbike on his flank. Gunning through the streets of Piraeus, Veale hoped they would convince anyone observing that hurting Lallis wasn’t worth the trouble. The security team would keep watch over him for weeks.

Conner took the first flight to Athens he could find, to manage the protection effort. After he arrived, he and Lallis went to meet a senior commander in the economic crime division of the Greek police. At first, the officer seemed concerned that Conner might be a British spy. After Conner set him straight with some lawman-to-lawman small talk, he agreed to sit outside while the officer and Lallis discussed what to do. Greek law enforcement seemed to be taking the matter seriously. Conner was soon invited to a “summit meeting” at a police headquarters, with a dozen or so local officials as well as a representative from the British Embassy. There, the authorities agreed to step up patrols in Lallis’s neighborhood and to assign a detective to check on him. Just as important, the economic crime officer agreed to cooperate with the UK investigation into the *Brillante*.

At the end of the discussion, the officer decided to seal the arrangement in traditional Greek fashion. He produced an unmarked bottle of clear liquid while a captain distributed shot glasses. The spirit was his own personal distillation, he explained through a translator. Oh, shit, thought Conner, who’d given up drinking twenty years earlier. But it seemed unwise to spoil the collaborative mood. Conner raised his glass to join in the usual toast of “*ya mas*”—to our health. The moonshine burned all the way down.

In the London lawsuit, Iliopoulos was stonewalling. Every request by the insurers' lawyers for supporting documentation was refused for one reason or another. The shipowner's attorneys said they had tried their best to acquire records from the *Brillante's* shipping agent, the crewing firm that supplied its Filipino sailors, and the security outfit that was supposed to provide the tanker's escort, among others. In each case, the files had been destroyed, or lost, or the company had ceased operations, or it had stopped responding to letters from London.

Iliopoulos claimed that his capacity to deal with the insurers' requests was reduced because of stress-induced labyrinthitis, an ear ailment made worse by the burdens of the court case. When pressed to explain what happened to a missing electronic archive from one of his companies, the shipowner said he'd given it to a business partner who refused to return it, for reasons so convoluted they defied coherent explanation.

There would be no way to hold a fair trial without more information. The open exchange of documents between defendants and plaintiffs, a process known in English law as "disclosure," is critical to the administration of justice. If it didn't occur, decisive evidence might be hidden, and any court decision could be tainted by unfairness. After months of obfuscation, in early 2016 the judge assigned to the case lost patience with Iliopoulos and his legal team, and ordered the shipowner to come to London to testify in person about the missing archive. If he refused, he risked having his claim thrown out.

Veale and Conner were thrilled. Finally, they would have a chance to come face-to-face with the man at the center of the storm around the *Brillante Virtuoso*.

CHAPTER 18

SUPER MARIO

Liopoulos received his summons at his office in Piraeus, opposite the ferry terminal where he'd built much of his fortune. Centered on a hook-shaped peninsula extending southwest from central Athens, the city of 160,000 is the undisputed center of Greece's shipping industry. Along its densely packed commercial blocks are the offices of virtually every one of the country's maritime tycoons. That, in turn, makes Piraeus the ship-owning capital of the world. Roughly 18 percent of the worldwide merchant fleet is Greek owned, a volume wildly out of proportion to the country's overall economy, which is barely among the twenty largest in Europe. The marine assets controlled from Piraeus dwarf those held by Japan, with 11 percent of the total, and the US, with just 3 percent.

Collectively, Greek shipowners have done better out of the seventy-five-year explosion in international trade than almost anyone else. No geopolitical or macroeconomic event—not the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, or the emergence of COVID-19—has thrown them off course for long. Not even their country's recent financial collapse, which drove unemployment to nearly 28 percent and threatened to split the Eurozone, diminished their power. At the nadir of the crisis, with Greece's government desperate to raise revenue to fend off creditors, the shipowners of Piraeus fought successfully to retain an astonishingly favorable set of fiscal

advantages, some of them written into the Greek constitution. To this day they are largely exempt from corporate taxes.

There's no single explanation for how a small group of businesspeople from a country of 11 million citizens, with no other globally competitive industries, came to exert such outsize power over seaborne commerce. Geography plays a role, of course. Spread across some two hundred inhabited islands, in an archipelago stretching five hundred miles from Corfu to Rhodes, Greeks have depended since antiquity on marine transport. Some of the longer-lived Hellenic shipping dynasties got their start with short runs in the Aegean and Mediterranean, shifting gradually into longer, transoceanic journeys. A history of emigration is also a factor. Ethnically Greek communities have existed since the nineteenth century or earlier in countries like Egypt and Ukraine, predating the more recent waves of arrivals in New York, London, and other world cities. Those widely dispersed populations provided a ready commercial network in key ports, linked by blood, language, and culture to the business community at home.

But the most important element of the story is nimble twentieth-century entrepreneurship. The Second World War devastated Greek shipping, destroying more than 70 percent of the country's commercial fleet by the end of hostilities. But enterprising Greeks soon found a way to replace that lost tonnage: by acquiring surplus Liberty Ships produced for the Allied war effort, which were being sold off in large numbers. Despite the demands of fighting a well-organized Communist insurgency, and the severe poverty of large parts of the population, the Greek government managed to find the resources to guarantee the 1947 purchase of one hundred Liberties by a group of local businessmen—an early example of the influence of shipping concerns over the country's politics. The vessels were awkwardly designed and sometimes of dubious quality, but they had the crucial attribute of being cheap, and therefore easy to pay off. With so many ships available, Greeks soon carved out strong positions in what's known as tramp shipping—running vessels with no fixed schedules, willing

to transport whatever cargo they can find—just in time to be enriched by the booming postwar economy.

Much of the trade they exploited was in oil. As cars became mass-market conveniences in Europe and North America, crude went from the periphery of the shipping business to its very center. In an earlier era, ships collected their cargoes in industrial cities—Liverpool, Philadelphia, Montreal. In the new automobile age, the most important loading ports would include places like Mina Al Ahmadi, in Kuwait, and Ras Tanura, on the edge of Saudi Arabia’s seemingly limitless oil fields. Sixty percent of the growth in maritime trade between 1948 and 1973 was in “liquid cargo,” overwhelmingly petroleum and products related to it.

Moving larger quantities of oil over longer distances required a huge increase in tanker capacity, which a pair of Greek operators were particularly eager to provide. Stavros Niarchos and Aristotle Onassis, the most prominent shipping tycoons of the postwar era, arguably deserve more credit than anyone for the development of the supertanker, which transformed the energy business after its introduction in the 1950s. Contemporaries and bitter rivals, Niarchos and Onassis competed to build the fanciest yachts and to wed the most beautiful women (one of whom, the maritime heiress Tina Livanos, they both ultimately married). They vied to dominate the tanker trade, commissioning larger and larger ships that would dramatically cut the cost of carrying each barrel between continents.

The two men also played a significant role in creating the legal framework that supports and dictates the rules of modern shipping. Their ideas weren’t entirely new. Greek maritime families had long known that obscuring responsibility for what happened in their business could be convenient. In a rare memoir of life inside the industry, the shipping heir Elias Kulukundis described how his family firm, R&K, “had an office in Bermuda which was nominally the head office of the company. Decisions were supposedly taken there and transmitted to R&K in London.” The London office was meant to act only as an “agent,” though in reality the decisions were made there and “telephoned to the Bermuda office, which created a paper trail by sending back a telex” with the same instruction it

had just received. Such small-bore juggling was useful enough in shedding legal and financial burdens. But Niarchos and Onassis had much grander ideas than working up a bit of misleading paperwork. They were among the earliest to grasp the potential of putting their ships and their money entirely beyond the reach of the countries where they lived and did business.

The very first vessel to be registered under Liberia's flag was the *World Peace*, a Niarchos-owned tanker that entered the nominal jurisdiction of that West African state in 1949. He and Onassis quickly became some of the most enthusiastic users of so-called flags of convenience, which allowed them to escape the rules on maintenance, inspections, and sailors' wages that prevailed in the Western world. As with their other innovations, this one was quickly adopted by the rest of the Piraeus shipping fraternity. By 1959, over half the "Liberian" merchant fleet was owned by Greeks, who also piled into the Panamanian registry. Other financial sleights of hand pioneered by Onassis in particular, like dividing the ownership and management of ships into separate companies domiciled in tax havens, became similarly commonplace. Once he had proved the concept, the basic appeal of such regulatory dodges was too attractive to resist: all of the profits, little of the accountability.



Veale and Conner hadn't found it easy to compile a substantive dossier on how Marios Iliopoulos came to be among Piraeus's shipping tycoons. The problem wasn't that he was obscure. Though he didn't emerge from one of the great Greek maritime families, Iliopoulos had been a major purchaser of tankers, with his activities tracked diligently by the shipping press. He was well-known for his other main business, a huge ferry operation linking Piraeus to islands like Mykonos and Santorini, and had clearly accumulated considerable wealth and influence in his home country. But he'd done so with very little of the financial and legal exhaust that businesspeople in less secretive industries generate. None of his companies were listed on a public stock exchange, and when he borrowed money, it was from Greek banks, not international bond markets. Countries like the Marshall Islands, where

some of his assets officially resided, were hardly known for their transparency.

It would also be challenging to get anywhere through quiet inquiries in Greece. Piraeus was a shipowners' town, not the kind of place where a couple of detectives working for the London insurance market could expect a warm reception. The threats to Gerry Lallis, the Greek lawyer assisting the *Brillante* underwriters with their case, were proof enough of that.

But gradually, through interviews with the few people who knew his history and were willing to speak with them, Veale and Conner pieced together a biography of Iliopoulos. His father, Panagiotis, had entered the shipping business in the late 1960s. Niarchos and Onassis were then at the peak of their fame—the best known of the latter's marriages, to the woman formerly known as Jacqueline Bouvier, began in 1968—and ambitious Greeks were entering the industry in large numbers, seeking their own fortunes. The elder Iliopoulos was a goldsmith by training and had no maritime background to speak of. Yet he found that he was a natural. "I have a restless spirit," he would later tell a Greek court, a personality ideally suited to the wide range of financial and technical challenges a shipowner might encounter. Panagiotis reveled in being the ultimate decider on every question about the vessels he operated: "the machinery, the crews, the repairs, about everything," he recounted. He traveled frequently, visiting distant yards to personally supervise repair and maintenance work.

Greek shipping firms are generally family operations, with sons and sons-in-law (it's rarely daughters) expected to join the business and then relocate to wherever its operations demand. But the youngest of Panagiotis's three boys had little interest in joining his father. Marios Iliopoulos's passion was on land: driving powerful vehicles at extreme speed. As a high school student in the 1980s, according to a Greek news outlet, he was known around Psychiko, an upmarket Athens suburb, for roaring down the quiet, villa-lined streets on a powerful motorbike. Almost as soon as he learned to drive Iliopoulos began competing in rally races, competitions that bear little resemblance to the controlled environments of Formula One or NASCAR. Instead of doing laps on a track, rally drivers

hurl their cars along rugged mountain roads, navigating steep climbs and sharp bends. Winning takes considerable technical ability, as well as a degree of courage that can be hard to distinguish from recklessness. While powering down a steep hillside, one mistake can mean the difference between victory and sliding over a cliff.

After finishing high school, Iliopoulos studied economics in the UK and performed his mandatory military service in the Hellenic Navy. He found that nothing about those commitments, let alone joining the family shipping operation, could compare to the high of rallies. “Everything else I did was a pointless chore,” he said later. “I was born to race.” By all accounts Iliopoulos was a talented driver, winning multiple championships in Greece. But Panagiotis didn’t approve of his son putting the rest of his life on hold to keep competing, especially given the constant risk of being hurt or worse. By 1997 Iliopoulos had undergone at least five surgeries to treat injuries from rallying. And he was spurning a secure career, including the prospect of equity in the family business. Yet Iliopoulos insisted on making racing his priority, straining his relationship with his father.

Even if he wasn’t engaged in it firsthand, Iliopoulos learned early on about the harsher realities of the shipping industry. In August 1994 the *Iron Antonis*, an aging freighter owned by the family (and bearing the name of Iliopoulos’s eldest brother), departed the port of Tubarão, Brazil, with a load of iron ore. To operate commercially, merchant vessels require certificates from “classification societies,” private companies that inspect a ship’s condition and verify that its hull and machinery are in working order. The *Iron Antonis*’s certification, issued by the French provider Bureau Veritas, had been withdrawn earlier in the year. A Greek classification society, the Hellenic Register of Shipping, had stepped in to provide clearance, allowing it to sail from Brazil to Shekou, in southern China.

Not long after it left Tubarão, the *Iron Antonis* encountered ferocious seas in the South Atlantic. The crew would have followed their training, sealing hatches and tying down gear, while their captain did all he could to keep the bow pointed into the waves—the best way to prevent them from capsizing the vessel. But the heavy seas kept coming, slamming with

terrifying force onto the *Iron Antonis*'s deck. On September 3, the captain reported that its hull had cracked amid the swells. The vessel was listing badly, he said, and the twenty-four men on board might need to abandon ship. Later that day, the *Iron Antonis* stopped responding to hails. It sank in some of the loneliest waters on earth, about 1,700 nautical miles west of Cape Town. A small, empty lifeboat was all rescuers were able to find.

Despite his resistance to joining his father's firm, Iliopoulos's name was on the *Iron Antonis*'s paperwork, along with those of his two brothers. Greek prosecutors charged all three with the "negligent homicide" of the men on board, claiming they sent the freighter to sea knowing it was in dangerously poor condition. The brothers denied wrongdoing at their trial, which was held in 2000 and 2001 at a utilitarian courthouse near Panagiotis's office in Piraeus. On the stand, Iliopoulos said that he had no role in his father's operations beyond providing his signature when told. When asked to endorse documents, he testified, "I didn't even know what I signed." Panagiotis, who wasn't charged, appeared as a witness for the defense, testifying about his maritime career and denying that he would ever have tolerated an unseaworthy ship in his fleet. "I would never dare to throw a twenty-five-year-old vessel to the wolves," he said.

Iliopoulos and his middle brother, Ioannis, were acquitted. But Antonis, who worked full-time for the patriarch, was found guilty and received a five-year suspended prison sentence. During his appeal, the judges heard testimony from a woman named Varvara Kiourani, the sister of the man who was second mate on the *Iron Antonis*. "The ship wasn't sunk because of the weather conditions as we were initially told, but by those who held the fate of the crew in their hands," she said. Kiourani recalled that in their last phone call, her brother "told me that the ship was a mess," headed for the scrapyards after one more voyage. "We want justice to be served. These maritime crimes need to stop."

In a fortunate stroke of defendant's luck, Antonis had moved to a new house while he was under indictment, informing the court of the change in address. But the authorities sent some official documents about the case to his old home by mistake—an error his lawyers claimed violated Greek law.

The appellate court accepted their argument and overturned Antonis's conviction. He never spent a day in jail.

As best as Veale and Conner could tell, by the early 2000s Iliopoulos had changed his view of working in shipping. He founded his ferry company, Seajets, in 2002, gradually expanding it into a significant presence on the Piraeus docks, a barren patch of concrete that might be transited by more tourists than any other site in Greece. As it grew, he learned to eke out an advantage by playing hardball.

In 2012, for instance, Iliopoulos agreed to buy the *Snaefell*, a seventy-four-meter catamaran operated by a ferry line based on the Isle of Man. After it arrived in Piraeus, he claimed that it was riddled with defects, faults he said would necessitate a significant drop in price. Executives at the company that sold him the catamaran believed Iliopoulos's allegations were, at the very least, heavily exaggerated, since he'd had every opportunity to inspect it during earlier negotiations. With the purchase apparently up in the air, they wanted to bring the *Snaefell* out of Greece so it would be in neutral waters during any renegotiation. But they found they couldn't. Required permits were mysteriously held up, and local oil companies refused to provide any fuel. In the end, the ferry line had to go to court to get the ship released. It and Iliopoulos eventually reached a deal that he found acceptable; despite its alleged deficiencies, the *Snaefell* went on to become a workhorse of the Seajets fleet.

By the late 2000s, Iliopoulos had augmented his passenger operations with a major presence in the oil trade. In 2008, a marine publication reported that he'd gone on a "buying spree," picking up eight older tankers. One of them was the *Elli*, which would later come to grief off the Yemeni coast; another was the *Brillante*, which Iliopoulos acquired for \$46 million, far more than his other purchases. He paid for it with a mortgage from Piraeus Bank, one of Greece's largest lenders, which seemed to have provided Iliopoulos with much of his financing since he came into the industry. Iliopoulos's assets weren't assembled under a single corporate

umbrella, making it difficult for Veale and Conner to determine their full extent. Like other Greek shipowners, he held his vessels inside a wide array of shell companies with generic names: Sea Ventures Shipping, Aegean Jet Company, Karite Shipmanagement, to cite a few. But he was undoubtedly a significant player.

Not that Iliopoulos bore any resemblance to the polished, polyglot operators who dominate the top ranks of shipping. Overweight, with long, stringy hair and an unruly beard, he was certainly no Aristotle Onassis. One negotiating partner recalled being shocked by his manners at a business dinner, where Iliopoulos barked over subordinates and carried on conversations with his mouth full of food. Another businessman arrived for a meeting at his office to find Iliopoulos in a tracksuit, sprawled on a sofa. And while many Greek shipowners serve as prominent patrons of the arts or other worthy causes, his main interest outside of work remained rally racing. Seajets sponsored a major race, the Acropolis Rally, and Iliopoulos frequently competed himself, taking the wheel of a souped-up Ford with “MARIO” printed in huge white letters across the windshield. He posted videos of his performances to Facebook, depicting him skidding around sharp bends at hair-raising speed, trailing clouds of dust. He remained a strong driver even in middle age. The racing press often referred to him by a nickname: “Super Mario.”

The summons requiring Iliopoulos to testify in the *Brillante* case marked him out in a different way from the rest of the Greek shipping world. For decades, Piraeus’s maritime elite had engaged in a vigorous effort to insert layers of intermediation between themselves and what actually occurs at sea. Shell ownership, management companies, crewing agencies—all had the benefit of diffusing responsibility, whether for something as quotidian as paying taxes or as grave as losing a ship and its crew. Being called to appear in a foreign court, where the shipowners of Piraeus had no influence, was extremely rare. Being directly accused of fraud was even more so.

In a statement prepared ahead of his testimony, Iliopoulos made clear that he viewed the allegations against him as an affront. “The suggestion that I arranged for a party of foreign intruders to board a ship and detonate an explosive device is as desperate as it is extraordinary,” Iliopoulos wrote. “I am a respectable businessman, welcomed by such individuals as the Archbishop of Athens and the Vice-President of Greece. Yet I am being vilified,” he continued, “as though I were a criminal.”

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CHAPTER 19

AN UNRELIABLE WITNESS

Marios Iliopoulos marched up to the witness box with the swagger of a professional wrestler approaching the ring, his unshaven features twisted into a scowl, arms swinging by his sides, untucked shirt stretched over an ample stomach. He sat down in front of a microphone in the corner of the stall, a translator at his side. Outside the room, an electronic sign listed the participants in the pretrial hearing—*Suez Fortune Investments Ltd v. Talbot Underwriting Ltd & Ors*—and the day’s date: April 11, 2016.

The space was among the larger venues in the Rolls Building, one of the busiest dedicated commercial courthouses in the world. On any given day, the modern complex on the fringes of London’s legal district might host an indebted shopkeeper declaring bankruptcy, hedge funds fighting over the scraps of long-dead banks, and, in the biggest rooms on the top floors, Russian billionaires suing each other for possession of mining rights in Central Africa. Despite London’s status as an international legal hub, a place where judges are deemed reliable enough to settle the biggest of big-money disputes, some of the capital’s courthouses are a century old and infested with rats. The vast Royal Courts of Justice, for example, is sometimes used in movies for its Hogwarts-worthy spires, winding stone staircases, and halls lined with busts of ancient grandees. By comparison, the Rolls Building can seem as sterile and bright as an operating theater.

Behind Iliopoulos, a contemporary take on the Royal Coat of Arms—a lion and unicorn prancing alongside a decorative shield—gleamed on the rear wall. In place of dusty bookshelves full of legal tomes, there were computer screens and audio equipment. The walls were painted beige, the floors covered with wall-to-wall carpet in a corporate gray.

From his seat, Iliopoulos looked out at a phalanx of attorneys, maybe two dozen in total, divided down the middle by an invisible line separating the opposing legal teams. Unlike in the US, British lawyers fall into two distinct camps: barristers and solicitors, with different skills and training. In the front row were the barristers, trial specialists whose job it would be to address the judge and question the witness. Behind them sat the solicitors, who deal directly with clients and do most of the preparation for a case. The most senior solicitors sat immediately behind the barristers. On Talbot's side they included Chris Zavos, who was absorbed in one of the dozens of ringed binders of documents arrayed on the lawyers' tables, which were so heavy they had to be hauled in on trolleys. Behind were the ranks of junior solicitors, associates, and clerks, whispering and passing notes. All the attorneys wore suits: the commercial courts had long since dispensed with the white horsehair wigs and starched collars still used elsewhere in London. Finally, at the back, there was a single row for spectators, largely empty apart from Veale, Conner, and a gray-haired older woman. Cynthia Mockett had traveled to London to see Iliopoulos in the flesh for the first time.

The judge, a stern, owl-like figure wearing a simple dark robe, was last to appear in the room. Outside it, his name was Julian Flaux. Inside, he was the Honorable Mr. Justice Flaux. The barristers greeted him as "my Lord," in keeping with English tradition. Flaux had a fierce reputation. Lawyers who came before him ill prepared could expect a dressing-down, and he presided over his court with the authority of the most feared teacher at school, the one no student would dare mess with.

Iliopoulos confirmed his identity and swore an oath to tell the truth, leaning in to listen as the man seated to his left translated the court clerk's words into Greek. Despite studying in the UK in his youth, Iliopoulos had

said his English wasn't strong enough to withstand the rigors of cross-examination. The formalities dealt with, Talbot's barrister, Jonathan Gaisman, rose to his feet and began to press the shipowner on the subject of the day's hearing: the missing company archive containing information about the *Brillante Virtuoso's* final voyage. Why had Iliopoulos given up possession of the hard drive that contained it, knowing its contents were likely to be vital to his insurance claim? Why hadn't he made copies?

Iliopoulos argued that his efforts to retrieve the records were hampered by a mistrust of computers. "I'm the kind of person that never touches technology," he explained through his translator. He wasn't even comfortable using a credit card, he said, let alone dealing with electronic archives. Then he pleaded ignorance of the very words Gaisman was using: "I still don't understand the question. If you can just simplify it for me?"

The barrister paced up and down as Iliopoulos spoke, occasionally pushing a thick pair of glasses up the bridge of his nose. As a Queen's Counsel, an honor awarded to only the top barristers, Gaisman was a courtroom veteran, with a deep voice and a bald dome of a head. He made no effort to hide his skepticism of Iliopoulos's answers. The shipowner, in response, radiated contempt for his inquisitor as the day wore on. "Your question is irrelevant, and I disagree," Iliopoulos snapped at Gaisman at one point.

The missing records were from a company called Worldwide Green Tankers (WWGT), one of the myriad off-the-shelf corporate entities Iliopoulos used to manage his fleet. They were said to contain a cache of email communications about the *Brillante* and Iliopoulos's other businesses, though the insurers had never seen it. While Iliopoulos admitted controlling WWGT, he said it was now defunct and the businessman in possession of the archive was refusing to hand it over. He recounted a series of face-to-face meetings in which he claimed to have pleaded for its return. The story seemed to get more complicated with each telling. First, the businessman had agreed to release it, then changed his mind, then expressed concerns that handing it over would leave him open to lawsuits, then refused to discuss the matter any further.

The day ended in a bad-tempered stalemate. The shipowner and the barrister resumed their duel the next morning, with Iliopoulos earning a reprimand from Judge Flaux for failing to give satisfactory answers to Gaisman's questions. "No, no, no," Flaux exclaimed in frustration. "I really am going to draw a line under this. You are not answering the question you have been asked."

Gradually Iliopoulos grew more animated, thumping his fist on the desk in front of him as he squinted in Gaisman's direction. "I'm used to these unreasonable expressions of yours," he said in response to one provocation. He accused Gaisman of misleading the court, and the underwriters of running "secret investigations" in Greece, trying to access private flight records and medical details. "You committed crimes," he said, referring to the Greek criminal complaint against the insurers. Soon Flaux's patience frayed further. He asked Iliopoulos again to focus on what he was being asked. "I'm not the slightest bit interested in hearing you repeating insults to Mr. Gaisman or insults to the underwriters," Flaux declared. "You have come to give evidence."

This sort of open hostility was rarely seen in London's commercial courtrooms, and Gaisman was clearly enjoying himself, relishing the opportunity for verbal combat. At one point, he turned around and leaned over to where Zavos and the other insurance lawyers were sitting. "He's good, isn't he?" Gaisman whispered.

Gaisman steered the cross-examination to the theft of the insurers' emails that had exposed Gerry Lallis. The hacked files had mysteriously ended up in Iliopoulos's hands. In fact, the lawyer who'd found the envelope containing printouts of the messages represented the same businessman who Iliopoulos claimed was refusing to return the WWGT archive. Wasn't it true, Gaisman suggested, that the main beneficiary of the stolen emails, and the subsequent criminal complaint in Greece, was Iliopoulos himself?

At first Iliopoulos was reluctant to engage with the question. "I will not play Mr. Gaisman's game," he protested.

The barrister tried a more direct approach. “I’m putting it to you,” Gaisman said, staring at the witness, that it was “you who sponsored the illegal acquisition of these emails, Mr. Iliopoulos. Would you like to comment or not?”

Iliopoulos answered in a steady voice: “If there is any responsibility for any of the assumptions in the allegations against me, you will be held responsible for those.”

At this, Flaux erupted. “You will not use this court to threaten counsel or English lawyers. You will behave yourself!” he thundered. Iliopoulos tried to explain that he was talking about legal consequences, and that he was merely protecting his reputation, but the damage was done. “You have just, Mr. Iliopoulos, exposed your motive very clearly,” the judge said.

At the end of his second day on the stand, Iliopoulos asked if he could make a statement to Flaux, through his translator. “I’m a very emotional man,” he said. “I would like to apologize for anything that’s not right.” Then he walked down the aisle muttering to himself. Though it was hard to make out, it sounded like he was saying: “Wikipedia . . . Wikipedia.” It had been one of the most extraordinary court sessions anyone present could remember. Conner and Veale were buzzing, chuckling to themselves in the corridor outside. Iliopoulos’s performance was plainly disastrous for his case.

It took fifteen minutes for everyone to file out of the courtroom and into the elevators, headed for the lobby of the Rolls Building. The courthouse had a central entrance hall decorated with a large drawing of old and new London, overlaid together in a panorama. Iliopoulos, with his legal team in tow, passed a line of counters where clerks milled around, either fetching or delivering bundles of paperwork. The space was narrow enough that the two sides of a lawsuit couldn’t help but rub shoulders with each other on the way out. As Iliopoulos made for the exit, he spotted Zavos and approached the lawyer for a brief, animated conversation. Later, Veale and Conner would learn that he’d asked Zavos, with his conspicuously Hellenic name, if he spoke Greek. Zavos said he didn’t.

It was only as Iliopoulos passed the metal detectors that he noticed four police officers wearing stab vests waiting at the edge of the lobby. They were from the City of London Police. “Mr. Iliopoulos?” the tallest of them said. “I’m arresting you for conspiracy to commit fraud.” The shipowner looked surprised, but offered no resistance as they led him outside, toward an unmarked blue sedan. Veale and Conner, who suspected the arrest was coming, had been waiting on a street corner to get an unobstructed view. They watched in silence as Iliopoulos was guided into the backseat and driven away.



The police had planned the arrest carefully. As soon as Iliopoulos was in custody, a team swept his hotel room, looking for documents or electronic devices that might contain evidence about the *Brillante*. Detectives were waiting for him at a bunker-like police station in the City, where they asked him to empty his pockets. True to his courtroom testimony about avoiding technology, Iliopoulos wasn’t even carrying a phone. Officers also found nothing of substance at his hotel. It was as though he’d been expecting the room to be searched.

In an interrogation room, the detectives tried for hours to get Iliopoulos to talk. Yet to each of their questions, his response was the same: “No comment.” He’d clearly decided to give them nothing, perhaps betting the police didn’t have enough evidence to hold him. That turned out to be a shrewd decision. He was released that night without charge, and was soon on a plane back to Athens. The British police had taken their shot at Iliopoulos, and missed.

But the drama of his appearance at the Rolls Building had other consequences. A few days later, Flaux oversaw another hearing in the Talbot case, in which the judge made his feelings about Iliopoulos clear. “He demonstrated himself an aggressive and arrogant man,” Flaux told the shipowner’s lawyers. “He was rude to everyone here, including me.”

Iliopoulos’s barrister made a final plea for understanding. “Yes, he gets upset,” she said. “Yes, he takes the case very personally.” Iliopoulos felt the

London insurance market was mounting a campaign against him, she went on. “He takes exception to the allegation that he had the ship deliberately set on fire.” Flaux was unpersuaded. In his written judgment, issued several weeks later, he delivered a scathing assessment of Iliopoulos’s testimony, describing him as “evasive and non-responsive and, on occasions, aggressive and threatening.” Overall, Flaux had formed a clear view that “he was not telling the truth.” He dismissed the convoluted explanation offered for the missing archive as a “fabricated story” and “a complete invention.”

As for Iliopoulos’s promise to make sure the insurers and their agents were “held responsible” for any allegations against him, the judge was unequivocal: “With this intemperate and menacing evidence, Mr. Iliopoulos lost any remaining shred of credibility.” It was clear, Flaux wrote, that his real intention was to build up a case against the insurers in Greece, the same diversionary tactic that had been employed in the *Alexandros T* affair.

Since Iliopoulos had deliberately breached a court order requiring him to deliver the archive, Flaux ruled that his claim against Talbot and the other insurers in the hull syndicate would be “struck out.” His participation in the *Brillante* lawsuit was over. The litigation, however, was far from dead. In the confusing netherworld of insurance law, the owner of a wrecked ship wasn’t the only one who could pursue compensation from Lloyd’s. Instead, an owner’s claim could be “assigned” to another entity that had suffered a loss when the vessel was destroyed.

That’s precisely what happened in the case of *Suez Fortune v. Talbot Underwriting*. Iliopoulos’s company had financed the \$46 million deal to buy the *Brillante* with a loan from the Greek lender Piraeus Bank. It was later refinanced, leaving him owing more than \$60 million. At some point after 2011, the bank had decided it was not going to be repaid and wrote off the entire debt. As a result, it was suing the Talbot syndicate for about \$80 million on the basis that it was “co-assured”—entitled, in other words, to continue the claim on the *Brillante*’s hull policy without Iliopoulos. In a twist so confusing that only Lloyd’s insiders could contemplate it without inducing a migraine, Piraeus Bank *also* had separate insurance covering

losses on its loan book. That meant that even if the bank lost the *Brillante* case, it could reclaim most of the money from a different policy. The upshot: *Suez Fortune v. Talbot Underwriting* had become an argument about which group of insurers would be left holding the bill.

Zavos and his colleagues were pleased with Flaux's ruling. Veale and Conner, however, were more circumspect. Between the destruction of the money-losing *Brillante*, Piraeus Bank giving up on collecting his loan, and no longer facing the burden of participating in a costly lawsuit, Iliopoulos was, at least, tens of millions of dollars better off. That was before whatever he might have received out of the more than \$30 million paid to the *Brillante*'s salvors. "Not a penny lost in Greece" was how Conner summed it up. Iliopoulos's position had improved so much that he and Veale suspected his disastrous performance in London might have been intentional, to execute an elegant exit from the legal proceedings. "It's genius," Conner told anyone who would listen.

But the insurers' legal team had other priorities. They still had a trump card to play against Piraeus Bank. If they could prove that the *Brillante* had been destroyed through the "willful misconduct" of its owner, the hull insurance policy would be declared void. But for that to happen, they needed positive evidence of fraud. Five years after the attack, they still had almost none.

Iliopoulos's arrest in London was big news in Greece. In the days that followed, an Athens-based lawyer at Zavos's firm, Norton Rose, was contacted by a man called Christos. (His name was not disclosed in legal documents describing these interactions and has been changed here.) Christos said he was representing another individual who'd seen media reports of Iliopoulos's legal troubles and claimed to have important information about the *Brillante*. But, Christos made clear to the lawyer, that person would need financial compensation before he agreed to help the insurers.

Paul Cunningham called a meeting in London to discuss the offer. After the email hack and the threat to Gerry Lallis, everyone working on the case was wary. Veale fretted that this new source could be a plant, sent by Iliopoulos to trick them into handing over cash so he could accuse the insurers of bribery. Still, Veale was keen to meet Christos and his client to sound them out, and didn't think it was the type of encounter that was best handled by a lawyer. Zavos, however, was adamant that he should be in charge.

Apparently, Christos and the other man were seeking as much as \$10 million. There was no way the insurers could consent to such a demand, but Conner urged them to ignore the numbers. "Don't even talk about the figures," he told Cunningham. The most important thing was to sit down with the guy to find out whether he was for real. If anyone knew how to handle complicated witnesses, it was Metal Mickey. After some debate, Cunningham agreed to a compromise. Veale and Conner would fly to Athens to meet the source, accompanied by John Liberopoulos, the local Norton Rose lawyer who'd received the first approach. The two detectives decided to give the man a code name to protect his anonymity in case of another security breach, as they would have during their years at the Met. He would be known as X-Ray.

CHAPTER 20

BEARING GIFTS

Veale and Conner arrived in Greece a few days before their meeting with X-Ray. They needed time to assess what they were walking into. It was early September 2016, and despite the country's economic troubles, Athens was lively, its cafés crowded with prosperous residents returned from summer retreats on the islands. The venue the detectives had chosen for their rendezvous was familiar to every well-heeled Athenian. Located right on Syntagma Square, the city's central plaza, the Hotel Grande Bretagne was a five-star palace favored by statesmen and film stars, with a reputation for discreet luxury—even if, in recent years, its managers had been periodically forced to pull down metal shutters to protect guests from chaotic antigovernment protests taking place outside.

Veale and Conner hadn't selected the Grande Bretagne for its amenities. They were more interested in its security profile. They liked that it was busy and public, with several popular restaurants and a stream of people coming and going throughout the day. It was also across the street from the Greek parliament and a stone's throw from several embassies, which guaranteed a heavy police presence nearby. Even the most determined criminal, Veale and Conner figured, would hesitate to plan an ambush there. If X-Ray really had crucial new information on the *Brillante* case, it wasn't inconceivable that someone would try to stop him from

sharing it, perhaps violently. Nor could they be sure that he wasn't secretly working for Iliopoulos, sent to lure them into a trap.

The same level of scrutiny applied to picking a meeting place within the hotel. Ideally it would be somewhere relatively inaccessible, forcing attackers to navigate a substantial chunk of the building to reach it—and, just as important, to get back out. After studying the Grande Bretagne's floor plans, Veale and Conner settled on a small conference suite on a mezzanine level above the lobby. The room had thick wooden doors, and the detectives noted with satisfaction that they opened slowly even when pulled very hard. If assailants tried to burst in, that momentary delay could buy them just enough time to get themselves and X-Ray onto the floor.

As a further precaution, they were staying at a different hotel in town, in case the location of their appointment leaked. Neither spoke much as they arrived at the Grande Bretagne on the morning of the meeting, stepping from the square into a lobby decorated with gilt-edge paintings of nautical scenes. Both Veale and Conner tended to get quiet before an important engagement. In their preparatory conversations, they had gamed out the likely scenarios, formulating a clear plan for dealing with X-Ray, assuming they got to the point of actually speaking. They would be friendly but firm, making clear that they, not he, would decide exactly how the meeting would proceed. What Veale called "silly games"—providing inconsistent information, waffling about the veracity of an account, threatening to walk out—would not be tolerated. The only objectives that mattered were those of the investigation, and if X-Ray wanted money he would have to meet them. "We are going to drain him for everything he knows," Veale told his clients. Conner used a different shorthand for how he hoped the relationship would work. "He should live to regret the day he ever met us," he said.

In the meeting room, the pair went over their plan a final time with John Liberopoulos, the Norton Rose lawyer. Although Veale and Conner would have preferred to be on their own, with full control of what happened on their side of the table, Zavos had insisted Liberopoulos sit in. They hoped he wouldn't say much. As the clock neared 10:00 a.m., Liberopoulos

went to the lobby to wait. Soon he came back, accompanied by X-Ray and his adviser Christos. Everyone introduced themselves. A marine engineer by training, X-Ray's name was Vassilios Theodorou. Over six feet tall, with huge arms, long hair, and a rough beard, Theodorou hadn't been hard to pick out in the lobby. He looked almost like a real-life version of Bluto, the hirsute villain in the *Popeye* cartoons. This was a guy who could look after himself, Veale thought as he sized Theodorou up.

The five men sat down around a rectangular table. Theodorou and Christos told the detectives that they didn't want any notes taken; they were willing to have only an informal conversation to gauge whether they wanted to go further. Veale politely refused, explaining that he needed to have at least a limited record of what was said. He was willing to accept their demand, however, that nothing discussed in the meeting would be used as evidence in court. His and Conner's priority was to determine what Theodorou knew—and to verify that he hadn't been sent by Iliopoulos to intimidate or entrap them, or otherwise interfere with their investigation. If his knowledge was as significant as he claimed, and he really was willing to help the insurers, they could conduct more structured interviews later.

Speaking in a mixture of English and Greek, with Liberopoulos translating, Theodorou began by explaining how he came to be involved with the *Brillante*. He said that in 2011 he'd been working in Cuba when he got a call from Vassilios Vergos, the limping Greek salvor whose company, Poseidon Salvage, had set up a branch in Yemen. There was lucrative employment for him in Aden, Theodorou recalled Vergos saying—a salvage job that “hadn't happened yet.” Theodorou flew back to Athens, where he said he'd attended a meeting with Iliopoulos to plan what would happen to the tanker. He'd then gone to Yemen to work with Vergos, where he claimed to have been privy to the most intimate details of the operation. As a member of Poseidon's salvage crew, Theodorou said he'd been one of the first people on board the *Brillante* after the crew fled the burning ship, its deck so hot that it singed the soles of his boots. Yet despite providing Vergos with what he described as crucial assistance, Theodorou said he'd never been paid.

Veale and Conner had been in the investigative game long enough to know that it was critical to keep a poker face when interviewing an informant. Showing obvious surprise or enthusiasm could influence what a source said next, or give him unhelpful ideas about the value of his information. They kept their expressions fixed as Theodorou continued his story. But privately, they were both thinking the same thing. If he was telling the truth, they were on the verge of a breakthrough.

Theodorou knew he needed to prove his bona fides, and had brought some evidence. After taking a laptop from his bag, he pulled up a series of photographs depicting the salvage of the *Brillante*. Though they didn't say it, all of them were new to the detectives. Theodorou told them he had more than 750 in total. Before he would consider parting with the archive, or providing a comprehensive statement, he wanted some assurances. In the years since the attack, he said, Iliopoulos had threatened him repeatedly to keep quiet. He added that Vergos had warned him that if he ever revealed what he knew, "we'll end up in jail, but you'll end up in the ground." If the insurers wanted his help, Theodorou would need immunity from prosecution and assistance securing a new identity. Of course, there would also need to be a great deal of money involved—"millions," as Christos put it.

Veale and Conner couldn't make any guarantees on behalf of law enforcement. But money was something they might be able to provide, given time to verify the accuracy of what Theodorou had told them. Soon afterward they drew the meeting to a close. They'd gone some way toward establishing his credibility, and that he was willing in principle to cooperate. For a first interview, that was more than enough. The detectives escorted Theodorou and Christos into the lobby and out to the street, to make sure the two men weren't seen hanging around the hotel.

Back in the meeting room they waited for Liberopoulos to leave. After he walked out, Veale and Conner looked at each other for a moment in silence, then burst out laughing. The weight of the last several days had lifted. Finally, they had found a real source. In London, Zavos and the other lawyers had endlessly debated experts' reports, arguing over whether this

explosives specialist or that marine engineer made a more persuasive case. As well credentialed as they were, none of those experts had even a speck of firsthand knowledge. None of them was there. Theodorou was, and he could substantiate what the detectives had so far only surmised.

Conner opened up his notebook to record all he could remember while it was still fresh. After being asked not to take notes at all, he hadn't wanted to spook Theodorou by writing too much during the meeting. "Motivation: revenge and money," he wrote.

Veale needed to get his hands on some cash. It was March 2017, some six months after their first meeting, and he was preparing for another conversation with Theodorou. This one would occur on neutral ground: a hotel in Zurich, where he and Conner could be more confident they weren't being watched. Switzerland had other advantages. As they explained to Theodorou, who feared being detained if he left Greece, its status as a non-EU country meant it was beyond the scope of a European Arrest Warrant. British police had no power there.

In the intervening months they had learned a great deal from the Greek. Theodorou claimed to have actually bought some of the guns carried by the supposed pirates who boarded the *Brillante*, paying 1,500 euros for three Kalashnikov-style rifles in Aden before the attack. Much of the damage that had rendered the vessel useless, he told them, had been inflicted by Vergos's salvage team—himself included. Rather than trying to save the ship, he said they'd gone around the vessel smashing open tanks and pipes, providing plenty of fuel for the fire that the gunmen had started. The salvors' firefighting efforts had been entirely for show, he said; their job was to ensure that the *Brillante* was consumed by the blaze.

Despite all he'd told them, Veale and Conner still didn't have Theodorou's full cooperation, nor did they have access to the photographs that could corroborate his account. They had suggested he go to the police; if he gave a formal statement to British law enforcement, the insurers might be able to obtain it via a court order. But Theodorou said he had no interest

in doing so unless Veale and Conner could guarantee he wouldn't be prosecuted. They couldn't, obviously, which left money as their only lever. During their second meeting, Christos had suggested a reward of 10 percent of the insured value of the *Brillante*, in exchange for the photos and full download of what his client knew. That amounted to the better part of \$10 million, a figure Veale and Conner viewed as preposterously high. Theodorou's adviser then made a series of other proposals, all in the millions. To each one Veale responded with a mock-outraged "fuck off," though in their notes, which might have to be entered into evidence one day, they employed a gentler euphemism: "immediately rejected." At times the discussions had grown tense. "The only reason we're here is because my client is willing to help you," Christos remarked at one point, exasperated. Conner corrected him. "The only reason we're here is because you blew up our ship."

Though they were still far from an agreement, the detectives had succeeded in talking Christos and Theodorou into a much more realistic range of numbers, and Veale thought they might be able to close a deal during their upcoming meeting. To show they were serious he wanted to arrive with a pile of banknotes, big enough to look impressive. That was how Veale found himself early one morning at London City Airport's foreign exchange counter, asking for all the US dollars they had.

The clerk wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. Veale repeated the request: He wanted as much cash as they could give him. The staff on duty began cleaning out their drawers. The total amount of American currency they had on-site turned out to be about \$5,000, in bills as large as \$100 and as small as \$5. The clerks formed the bills into a brick secured with plastic cling film, and Veale zipped it into his backpack. After it went through the bag scanner at security, one of the guards pulled him aside. Even before a flight to Switzerland, departing from a terminal favored by the bankers of Canary Wharf, an Escobar-style stack of bills was something airport staff didn't see often. Though it was perfectly legal to carry any amount under 10,000 euros onto a plane without making a declaration, Veale had a white lie ready anyway. His wife's birthday was coming up, he told the guard, and he

planned to buy her a watch in Zurich as a gift. He didn't want to spoil the surprise by having the transaction show up on their joint credit card. To help sell his cover story, he'd even put a Rolex catalog in his bag before leaving home. After consulting with a colleague, the guard waved Veale through to his gate.

Conner was flying separately, traveling with Paul Cunningham, the underwriter from Talbot. Conner had argued with Veale about the wisdom of bringing Cunningham on the trip. Theodorou had good reason to be nervous about helping the insurers, and discussions with him needed to be conducted with extreme delicacy. Any mistake might scare him off, perhaps permanently. Cunningham would have no idea how to carry himself, Conner worried; he handled insurance claims, not confidential sources. He'd never dealt with an informant in his life. But Veale thought it was important to have a representative of the insurers hand over the money, and directly receive the information it purchased. Cunningham was coming, he told Conner.

The three men met up at a hotel in Zurich, where the detectives unwrapped the cash and began restacking it on the bed. To make more of an impression, they informed Cunningham, they wanted to put the hundreds on the outside, hiding the tens and fives in the middle. Cunningham was clearly nervous, filling the air with jittery small talk as they worked. To keep the mood light Veale and Conner joked around, talking about how Ray Charles, the blind soul legend, insisted on being paid for gigs in \$1 bills so he couldn't be cheated.

To give Cunningham time to settle in, and Veale and Conner a chance to assess the risks to themselves and Theodorou, they'd again arrived a couple of days before their meeting. Among other tasks, they wanted to visit an old friend of Conner's, a prolific gun collector, to quiz him on Swiss firearms laws. If someone flew in from Greece looking to do harm, how easy would it be for him to get a gun? But they also took the opportunity to rib Cunningham a bit—partly to pierce his anxiety, and partly because they couldn't resist making him the straight man in their ex-copper Laurel and Hardy routine. "I'll take the Sig," Veale said, theatrically,

as Conner's friend showed off his cache of weapons. "Mick will have the Glock. Paul, what do you want?" It took Cunningham a long moment to realize Veale was joking.

For their discussion with Theodorou, they'd booked a meeting room at a blandly contemporary Radisson overlooking Zurich Airport, Switzerland's primary international air hub. There were plenty of police in the vicinity, and Veale appreciated that the hotel's elevators, situated in a central atrium, had glass doors, so he could see who was coming up. He'd mentally mapped the route to the fire escape in case they needed to get out in a hurry. Conner and Cunningham waited in the reception area for Theodorou to arrive. Accompanied again by Christos, he strolled in at the appointed hour, looking tough and confident. The last thing Conner wanted was for his client to feel intimidated. "Imagine him in prison," he joked to Cunningham as Theodorou approached. "He's just another bare bum in the shower." The underwriter broke into a grin.

After some pleasantries in the meeting room, Cunningham put the money on the table. "This is just to cover your expenses," he said. Christos moved to take the stack of bills, but Theodorou stopped him, pushing it back toward Cunningham. Accepting the cash, everyone knew, would create at least some obligation, which made Theodorou pause. It was a scenario that Veale and Conner had planned for. Following instructions they had given him beforehand, Cunningham pushed the money forward again. This time Theodorou didn't stop Christos.

Once the money changed hands, Veale knew he had an opening. He asked Theodorou to open his Fujitsu laptop, with access to his database of photos. Before discussing further payment, Veale explained, the insurers needed to take copies of some of them to verify their authenticity. From his backpack he pulled out a USB key, still in its stiff plastic packaging, as well as a penknife to open it up. Christos flinched in his seat at the sight of the knife, prompting Theodorou to burst into a laugh that eased some of the tension in the room. Taking control of the laptop, Veale plugged in the USB. He would be allowed to download only a small part of the directory, a sample set of twenty-three photos and videos from the *Brillante* salvage.

For the rest, Christos said, the insurers would need to hand over a lot more money. As Christos emphasized the point again and again, Veale shot Conner a glance: they weren't going to get any further that day.

After wrapping up the discussion, Veale, Conner, and Cunningham returned to their hotel. Cunningham was pale with fatigue and nerves, and the detectives bought him a beer to calm him down. As they drank, Cunningham asked Veale what he would have done with his knife if Theodorou had gotten violent. "I'd have stabbed him," he deadpanned.

At his desk in London, Veale had time for a detailed examination of the photos he'd downloaded. He ran them through a forensic program called Proof Finder, to confirm they were taken when Theodorou said they were: the day after the attack on the *Brillante*. Viewed sequentially, they showed something remarkable. Early on July 6, the inferno that began several hours before appeared to have died out, with only faint wisps of smoke visible from the salvage tugs attending to the tanker. Yet in images taken later that day, thick black plumes billowed from its hull. In between, it appeared, the salvage crews had reignited the fire, just as Theodorou said.

While the photos were tantalizing, Veale and Conner would need more from Theodorou. They thought he wanted to make a deal. Theodorou was a heavy smoker, and during their meetings Conner always accompanied him for cigarette breaks outside, chatting with him about his girlfriend, his tax problems, and anything else that was on his mind. Theodorou seemed impressed by Conner's police background, and his familiarity with the seamier sides of business. During one of their exchanges, he told Conner that he'd be a valuable asset in the Athens underworld. Conner was pleased by the comment. It was a sign that he'd succeeded in building a rapport, a skill he'd honed over decades handling sources. Theodorou reminded Conner of many of the informants he'd dealt with as a cop. He was a chancer, a percentage man, instinctively weighing the prospects for financial gain in any situation. He wasn't someone who would give up tens of thousands by insisting on millions. "Tell me, Michael," he'd once asked.

“Will I get anything?” Conner gave him the only truthful answer: “I don’t know.” Theodorou replied that he wouldn’t have believed Conner if he said anything different.

But in two further meetings, they still couldn’t get to an agreement. At one point, in May 2017, Theodorou suggested he’d accept \$65,000 for the full image database. That was a sum Veale and Conner could work with. But afterward Christos corrected him. In fact, he said, the price was \$3 million. They held a final discussion that July, back in Athens. In a meeting room at the Grande Bretagne, Christos kept insisting on seven-digit figures. He also added a new twist. “We’re not stupid,” he said. He and Theodorou knew the insurers would try to use the photos they already had in court, whether they came to a final accord or not. To make that more difficult, he claimed the images Theodorou had allowed Veale to download had been selected carefully: “Some good, some not so good, some to confuse.” The same was true, Christos said, of what his client had told them, although Theodorou himself insisted that he’d been truthful. The only way to get a clear account would be to pay up.

There was nothing else to say, and Veale and Conner were soon on a flight back to London. They were deeply frustrated. Theodorou had helped fill in some gaps in the story they were trying to piece together, and provided a taste of evidence that could make a real difference. But they were still a long way from knowing the full truth about the *Brillante* or the murder of David Mockett—let alone being able to prove it.

CHAPTER 21

I'M NOT AFRAID

The town of Donges sits near the very end of the Loire, where the silty flows of France's longest river enter the Atlantic. It has none of the medieval charm that can be found farther upstream: no handsome stone buildings or gracious boulevards, elegant bistros or fairy-tale fortresses. Instead, the primary feature of Donges is its oil refinery, one of the largest in the country. Allan Marquez, the former *Brillante Virtuoso* crewman, had gotten a good view as his vessel approached in July 2017, not that there was much to see. A vast collection of pipework and exhaust towers, the facility sprawled heedlessly across the river's right bank, ringed with a perimeter of razor wire that gleamed in the summer sun. Marquez's arrival, on one of the hundreds of vessels that moored there every year, was routine. France's domestic oil reserves are minimal, and to produce the gasoline demanded by its consumers the Donges refinery relied on a steady flow of tankers making their way up the estuary—all of them crewed by men like Marquez.

After months on the oceans, it would be Marquez's last port for a while. He was booked on a flight to Taipei, connecting onward to Manila for a well-deserved break. Trips home are momentous events for Filipino seafarers, not only because they're a rare chance to spend time with the families for whom they work so hard. The visits also serve as occasions to distribute the relative prosperity afforded by their wages, and, in performing

that ritual, to show off a bit. Gifts would be all but obligatory, for children and parents of course, but also aunts, uncles, cousins, friends—concentric circles of obligation for every returning sailor. The women might be hoping for perfume; the men, cigarettes and watches, the kids, T-shirts bearing the names of foreign brands or places. While Marquez was home, few of the relatives he spent time with would be likely to reach into their pockets. Whether for a meal in a restaurant or tickets to the cinema, it was understood that the visiting seafarer picked up the bill. It could get expensive, but the opportunity to help his family was what drew Marquez to the sea in the first place. The isolation, the long hours, the imperious captains—there was no other reason to endure it all. He would remain in the Philippines for a little over a month before beginning his next assignment.

Shortly before his flight, Marquez saw that he had a Facebook message from someone he didn't know—a reporter at Bloomberg, based in London. "I'm working on a story," the note began, "about a ship called the *Brillante Virtuoso*." The name got Marquez's attention. For over half a decade he'd tried not to think about his time on the vessel. Assigned to the evening watch on the night the *Brillante* drifted off the Yemeni coast, awaiting the arrival of its security team, Marquez had been the first crew member to spot an unidentified boat approaching. He was the one who'd been told to extend a ladder and let the men inside come aboard, initiating the chain of events that would force Marquez and his crewmates to flee for their lives. It had been the most harrowing experience of his maritime career.

The journalist and a colleague—the authors of this book—had been trying to reach Marquez for weeks. They'd read the statements he gave to investigators, revealing his small but critical part in the events of July 2011, and wanted to speak to him before publishing their article. He could easily have ignored the message. In addition to the psychological impact of reliving what happened to him, Marquez had his livelihood to consider. Shipping is not an industry that looks kindly on employees having unauthorized conversations with the media, and his wife wouldn't want him doing anything that could jeopardize the work their family depended upon.

Manila's manning agencies employed thousands of seafarers, any of whom would be happy to replace Marquez at a moment's notice.

But something inside Marquez made him want to respond—a feeling more powerful than his fear. Later that day, he picked up the phone to call the reporter who'd contacted him. The journalist had barely spoken when Marquez's words began pouring out. He'd been keeping his story to himself for a long time.

"I'm afraid of the owner of the vessel," Marquez said, "that they would kill me if I told the truth." He spoke rapidly, in uneven but comprehensible English. "They said they would kill my family."

The reporter tried to get Marquez to slow down, asking who, exactly, he was referring to. "Do you mean Marios? Marios Iliopoulos?"

"The Greek owner," Marquez replied. "When I made a true statement, they said make it new."

The reporter again asked Marquez to clarify. "The man who threatened you, the owner, are you certain it was Marios Iliopoulos?"

"One hundred percent sure it was Mario," Marquez replied, using the shortened version of the shipowner's name. "He came, he looked for me, and he said, 'Change your story.' Or he will kill me." Terrified, Marquez said he'd lied in his statements to investigators, altering the details as he was instructed. It had taken him months to shake the trauma. "For a long time, I couldn't sleep," he said. "I was afraid for my family."

The reporter sent Marquez a photo of Iliopoulos, standing on the sidelines of a rally race, asking if he was sure the image matched the man who had told him to change his account. Marquez said it did—and that now he wanted to go on the record with the full truth. Several times, the reporter asked Marquez if he was sure he was comfortable being quoted by name in a story that would be read widely, including, certainly, by Iliopoulos. Marquez insisted, in that and subsequent conversations, that he was. In messages over Facebook he explained why. "im afraid to God," he wrote. "how long i can hide the truth in my conscience." He said he was ready to accept the consequences for speaking out. "As of now," he said, "im not afraid to die."

Early on a Saturday morning, in late August 2017, Marquez left his house in a modest subdivision on Manila's northern outskirts and boarded a train toward the center of the city. The article quoting him had been published in *Bloomberg Businessweek* the month before, prompting a flurry of calls to Marquez from London. A couple weeks earlier, a detective from the City of London Police had flown in to interview him at the British Embassy. Now he had an appointment with a group of men representing the *Brillante's* insurers, who were waiting for him at the Dusit Thani hotel in Makati, Manila's financial district. They wanted Marquez to provide formal testimony, explaining exactly what happened to him on board the ship and afterward—and to identify where his previous statements were false.

Marquez knew what he was doing was dangerous. The oceans are perilous. Hundreds of seafarers are killed or go missing every year—crushed by heavy loads, scalded by faulty boilers, swept away by rogue waves. No police force in the world, let alone insurers from Lloyd's of London, could guarantee his protection at sea—where the loss of one more sailor, who happened to have crossed the interests of a powerful shipowner, might hardly be noticed. But his determination to tell the truth hadn't flagged. Like many Filipinos, Marquez was a devout Christian, and had come to think of his choice in religious terms. After committing the sin of lying, he now had a chance at redemption.

In the lobby of the Dusit Thani, Chris Zavos was getting anxious. It hadn't been easy to book time with Marquez; he had to finish a training course before returning to duty, and was free only on a weekend. Their session was supposed to begin first thing in the morning, but at 10:30 a.m. the sailor still hadn't arrived. The underwriters had hired an interpreter—Marquez's English, while serviceable for most occasions, wasn't quite up to a British legal proceeding—and she called him on his mobile to check where he was. "Will he be here?" Zavos asked.

Richard Veale and Michael Conner were trying to stay relaxed. Compared to much of what they'd dealt with in their investigation of the

Brillante, a tardy witness was hardly a crisis. They were more perturbed at being stuck with Zavos, who needed to be present to collect a formal statement. Their relationship with him had been steadily worsening, to the point that Conner, who'd never been good at hiding his opinions of authority figures, spoke with Zavos only when absolutely necessary. It didn't help that some months earlier, Conner had written an angry email to Veale describing the lawyer as a "scorpion" determined to undermine them—and then sent it to Zavos by accident.

But as the morning ebbed away, the detectives began to get impatient too—and to worry that their witness might be having last-minute doubts. "I'm going to walk out," Conner announced, to see if he could spot Marquez in the metro station. He returned not long afterward, accompanied by Marquez and a man the sailor introduced as his cousin. Marquez wanted him to sit in as he gave his statement. No one had a problem with that, but still, Marquez seemed wary, anxious enough that Veale felt they needed to treat the next few minutes with extreme care. Marquez was an ordinary seafarer whose involvement in the *Brillante* case was the result of simple bad luck. It was important to make him feel comfortable, and not as though he were being treated with suspicion.

Once they got to the suite Veale had reserved for the meeting, he called room service to send up cake and coffee while Conner chatted with the Filipinos about their families, the weather, the traffic—anything but international maritime conspiracy. After a little while, it felt to Veale like Marquez was ready to begin the interview. He admitted that much of what he'd told investigators previously was fabricated. "I am still scared," he said through the translator, "but I believe I am less at risk if many people know about my story." With Veale, Conner, and Zavos taking notes and occasionally interjecting to ask for clarifications, he told them what really happened.

From the start, Marquez said, he'd been suspicious of the men he was instructed to let on board the *Brillante*, and initially refused a superior officer's order to lower a ladder to them. When he argued with the officer, he was told that "if I did not lower the pilot ladder, I would be written in the

book for insubordination.” He found the insistence odd at the time; why would anyone be so determined to let armed men onto the ship? But he followed the order, and his immediate questions were quickly consumed by the events that followed.

It was only later, onshore, that Marquez realized something deeply unsettling was afoot. After a few days on the USS *Philippine Sea*, the *Brillante* sailors were taken to Aden to await flights home. Marios Iliopoulos had flown in, installing the men in a hotel by the airport. Iliopoulos knew his insurers would require testimony from the crew, and shortly after arriving at the hotel they were instructed to write out their recollections. Marquez did as he was told, and prepared a longhand statement describing his experience.

Not long after he handed over the document, Marquez said, Iliopoulos and Nestor Tabares, the *Brillante*'s chief engineer, appeared at the door of his room. (Unaccustomed to shoreside accommodation, he referred to it as a “cabin.”) Tabares had Marquez's statement in his hands. As Marquez looked on, unsure what he'd done to attract the attention of the shipowner and a senior officer, Tabares began tearing up the paper. He “told me to write another statement,” Marquez recalled. He wasn't to refer to his doubts about letting the gunmen on board, or to mention that he'd been ordered by the captain to lower a ladder. And he needed to change his recollection of a particular detail: who the crew believed the apparent pirates to be when they were allowed onto the ship. Marquez said Tabares ordered him “to say the intruders said they were the authorities”—and not, as the crew told US Navy personnel immediately after their rescue, the security team with whom they planned to rendezvous. From that point onward, Marquez and the other sailors used “authorities”—though it was unclear exactly which authorities they were referring to—when describing how the men who boarded the tanker had identified themselves. (Tabares would say in later court testimony that he had no recollection of threatening Marquez.)

As Marquez spoke, Veale and Conner felt that an important piece of the puzzle was clicking into place. There was no reasonable way for true pirates to have known the *Brillante* was expecting a security detail. Claiming that

the attackers posed as the “authorities,” by contrast, dealt with that logical problem. Since getting their hands on US Navy records that exposed the inconsistency, the detectives had been trying to account for this crucial change in the crew’s stories. Now Marquez was providing an explanation for how it happened—and, even more important, implicating Iliopoulos in the fabrication of evidence. Before he wrote his new statement, Marquez said, the shipowner “told me not to tell anything” to investigators. Iliopoulos’s words, he said, were: “I will kill you and your family if you tell them what you know about what happened on the ship.”

The same menace followed Marquez home. While they recuperated in the Philippines after the attack, the *Brillante* crew were summoned to a hotel on Manila’s waterfront promenade to provide another, more extensive round of statements. Before he could enter the building, Marquez said, Iliopoulos and Tabares intercepted him. That the Greek had even been in Manila at the time was news to Veale and Conner; as far as they knew, the only people handling those interviews were lawyers. Iliopoulos and Tabares again told him “not to say anything about what happened,” Marquez said, or even reveal to anyone that Iliopoulos was in town. He recalled that Tabares was carrying a pistol on his belt—the Philippines has a vibrant gun culture—and touched it suggestively as he spoke. (Tabares denies that this occurred.)

Veale was trying to watch Marquez’s expression closely. The insurers had no power to compel his testimony, and he was free to leave at any time. Aside from providing an honorarium that amounted to a few hundred dollars, they weren’t even paying him to be there. Push too hard, Veale worried, and he might walk out, taking with him their chances of using his evidence in court.

Around the middle of the day, Veale spotted an opportunity to lift some of the pressure on his subject. “Why don’t we go down to lunch?” he asked. Grateful for the break, the group trooped into the Dusit Thani’s buffet. With stations for Italian, Indian, and pan-Asian dishes, it was a typical five-star affair of luxurious abundance—or abundant waste, depending on one’s perspective. Having access to that kind of spread was a new experience for

Marquez and his cousin, and Veale couldn't help but laugh as they piled their plates with more shrimp and grilled meat than he'd ever seen anyone consume. It was another reminder of a reality he hoped Zavos would keep in mind: Marquez was from a very different world. They needed to tread lightly.

There was much more to get through, and Veale, Conner, and Zavos's discussions with Marquez continued over the rest of the weekend. One of Marquez's most important tasks was to go over the audio from the Voyage Data Recorder, the black box that recorded conversations on the *Brillante* bridge, to corroborate his account of events there. It was laborious, time-consuming work, and Zavos sat with Marquez well into Sunday night listening to the tapes. Veale had stepped out when, around 9:00 p.m., Conner came and found him. Zavos was getting impatient with Marquez, he said, demanding the sailor give more precise answers when he was clearly exhausted. If it didn't stop, Conner warned, "We're going to lose Allan." Veale walked briskly back into the room. "Allan, thanks so much," he said, making clear they were done for the day. "We'll get you a cab home."

Marquez returned at 7:30 the next morning, a national holiday in the Philippines, to complete his testimony. Later that day, Zavos took him through the formalities that would render his words into a document fit for presentation to a London judge. Marquez signed all ten pages of his official statement in a looping script, placing his final signature below the standard boilerplate of a witness before an English court: "I understand its contents to be true to the best of my knowledge and belief."

Marquez noted in the document that he would have liked to provide more extensive assistance, identifying all the instances where his previous accounts were inaccurate. But there wasn't enough time. He'd signed a new, nine-month contract, and he was about to go back to sea.

CHAPTER 22

ZULU 2

Marios Iliopoulos thrashed his Audi R8 LMS up a winding route that started at the bottom of a hill in Ritsona, near Athens, and ended at its rocky summit. Painted candy-apple red, with a “MARIO” decal across the top of the windshield, the Audi screamed in protest as Iliopoulos pushed its engine to its limit. As he approached a hairpin bend, its rear wheels started to skid out toward spectators gathered behind a reinforced barrier, but Iliopoulos kept the vehicle glued to the road. The crowd applauded as he roared by.

Ritsona is the site of one of the oldest and most prestigious rally races in Greece, where competitors test their skills against an unforgiving course: barren rocks on one side and a steep drop on the other, the Aegean shimmering in the distance. Inevitably, not all of the participants get to the finish line. Each year, a handful make a mistake that sends them spinning into a ditch if they’re lucky or careening off a cliff edge if they’re not. For the 2017 event, organizers had placed large sandbags on the most dangerous corners to reduce the risk of calamity. Bombing up the hill at ninety kilometers per hour, most drivers take around five minutes to finish. Iliopoulos completed the course in an impressive four minutes and seventeen seconds, placing third out of ninety-nine competitors. In a public letter to fans afterward, he compared his car to a purebred racehorse, speedy on the flat but ill suited to the slopes. His preferred vehicle, a four-wheel-

drive Ford, had been out of action because of a broken suspension, he explained. The backup Audi was “stropy and wild,” but nonetheless “breathtaking.”

After the unpleasantness of the London court case and his arrest, Iliopoulos had returned enthusiastically to what brought him the most joy: cars, the kind with engines so powerful they sound like a jet taking off. There was no sign of the stress-induced illness he’d complained of a year earlier. Instead he gave the impression of a man enjoying the life of wealth and privilege to which, as a successful shipowner, he’d long been accustomed. Iliopoulos’s marriage began breaking down in about 2012, he’d said in one of his witness statements for the insurance lawsuit. Now he seemed free of romantic troubles, photographed at parties in the company of a blond marketing director from Seajets, his ferry business. In June 2017, a little over a year after he’d testified in London, Iliopoulos’s company sponsored the Acropolis Rally, the biggest racing event in Greece. Next to the Seajets stand and a tent emblazoned with his name, Iliopoulos performed the Zeibekiko, a traditional dance that’s supposed to convey an embattled man struggling through suffering, overcoming it with a display of masculine defiance. A huddle of young models wearing short PVC skirts and sunglasses crouched in a circle to clap as Iliopoulos staggered back and forth, awkwardly slapping his thighs to the Greek folk music blaring from speakers nearby.

The only public sign of the trouble in London was a message posted on his racing team’s Facebook page. Iliopoulos thanked his supporters and paid tribute to his brother Ioannis, who’d recently died. Then, referring to himself as “the warrior Mario,” he said cryptically that he’d been fighting “the establishment” not just in sport but in his personal and professional life. “I am used to dealing with evil and mud on all levels,” he said. “Jealousy and envy is a subconscious process. All of you are my strength, energy, passion and driving force in my soul to keep on fighting for our ideals.”

Veale and Conner watched the exploits of Super Mario, as he was called in the racing press, from afar, occasionally with amusement, mostly in disbelief. Given that Judge Flaux had just called him an aggressive and arrogant liar, and the real possibility that he could be facing criminal charges in the UK, they had half expected the shipowner to lay low. “He doesn’t care,” Veale remarked to Conner as they watched the YouTube footage of him dancing. They tried not to let his antics distract them. There was a lawsuit to win.

Flaux’s decision to throw out Iliopoulos’s claim against his insurers left them in an odd position: having to prove fraud against someone who was no longer involved in the litigation. Technically, it was now a dispute between the Talbot syndicate and Piraeus Bank, which had loaned Iliopoulos the money to buy the *Brillante*, and claimed the Lloyd’s insurers were responsible for covering what it lost with the vessel’s destruction. Iliopoulos no longer had any obligation to answer questions or share evidence, nor provide explanations that could be picked apart in court. And the bank could justifiably claim to have no direct knowledge of what happened on board. Proving that an owner destroyed his own ship was hard enough; Zavos and his colleagues could count on one hand the number of times anyone had recently managed that in a London courtroom. Now they needed to do it against an opponent who didn’t even have to play the game.

With Veale and Conner’s help, the insurers had assembled a huge volume of evidence, including a formal statement from Allan Marquez claiming that Iliopoulos had forced him to lie about what happened on the *Brillante*. But they knew their arguments would have to be airtight, strong enough to overwhelm the legal and procedural obstacles that had sunk so many previous fraud cases. Marquez’s testimony, while damning, wouldn’t be enough.

Nor would what Veale and Conner had learned from Vassilios Theodorou, the shaggy-haired salvor who’d tried to sell them his photo archive. His arrival, far from corroborating the insurers’ allegations, had in fact exposed a damaging rift within their team, just when it most needed to pull together. Everyone knew that Theodorou could never be called as a

witness at trial. His piratical appearance alone was likely to unsettle a judge, quite apart from his demands for cash, his dubious motivations, and the fact that his own adviser had discredited his evidence by claiming some of it was “not so good,” in order to confuse things until Theodorou got his money.

As far as Veale was concerned, that was fine. They could treat Theodorou like any other underworld informant, as a source of information that needed to be verified independently, not as a witness of fact. But the other members of the team, specifically those with law degrees, didn't see it that way. They were more interested in what they could learn from professional experts, hired to review documentary evidence that already existed. Some of them had never so much as set eyes on the *Brillante*. “The experts weren't there!” Veale told Zavos, exasperated. Even the surveyors who'd boarded the ship off the United Arab Emirates had been inspecting a badly damaged crime scene, caked with soot and so hot that spending more than a short time belowdecks risked exhaustion. Theodorou had been present while the *Brillante* burned, Veale kept saying. Yet Talbot's attorneys seemed quick to dismiss him.

One telling example of the difference between Theodorou's evidence and the experts' analysis was the question of whether a bomb had exploded on board. All the expert witnesses agreed that a conspicuous dent, discovered just outside the *Brillante*'s engine room, was the result of an explosive device. But Theodorou had been insistent: there was no bomb. The men who attacked the tanker, he said, had just filled a couple of jerry cans with gasoline and set them alight. In the combustible environment of an engine room, that had been enough, he claimed. It seemed like a pointless thing to lie about, since Theodorou had already admitted to helping the blaze spread by smashing open fuel tanks. But Talbot's lawyers couldn't believe their hired specialists would get it so wrong. “Petrol isn't explosive,” one of them objected. “How do you think a car engine works?” Conner shot back.

Whenever the two detectives tried to argue the point, someone would remind them that they weren't experts, at least not of the kind that corporate

lawyers were used to consulting. That irked Conner in particular, who'd served in Northern Ireland, investigating attacks by militants, and worked on a government inquiry into a gruesome explosion on a nuclear submarine. If there was a bomb, he pointedly asked, why was there no evidence of fragments from the device? They shouldn't have been too difficult to find: when a Pan Am 747 was blown up over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in 1988, investigators had been able to pick pieces of the mechanism out of gardens more than thirty thousand feet below.

As that and other conflicts simmered, at least one member of the legal team felt that Veale and Conner had developed an inflated sense of their importance to the case—and that they were increasingly behaving like “bullshitters,” determined to put themselves at the center of every decision. The lawyers were confident that they knew how to win a lawsuit. In their eyes, running around after criminals was at best a distraction, and at worst a significant waste of resources. Veale's firm, EBIS, was being generously compensated for its work. Combined with legal fees, the *Brillante* dispute was burning through money. An executive from one of the insurance companies joked privately that he didn't want to be responsible for getting Veale and Conner rich.

For their part, the detectives felt that when it came to criminal conspiracies, they were the experts. They had decades of law enforcement experience between them. Zavos and Paul Cunningham, the Talbot claims manager, had never even contested a scuttling case before. Veale tried to convince them that normal litigation procedure—an exchange of letters and evidence, followed by the measured testimony of professors and forensic scientists and skilled legal analysis by barristers—wouldn't work against people willing to torch an oil tanker.

At one point, Veale requested approval for a trip to the Gadani shipbreaking yard in Pakistan, where the *Brillante* had been torn apart for scrap. Theodorou claimed to have stashed the tanker's sprinklers there, part of a vital firefighting system that he said had been filled with concrete to stop it from working. If Theodorou was telling the truth, the sprinklers, with identifying serial numbers, could offer evidence that the fire was planned in

advance. When Zavos refused to give Veale and Conner permission to go, the rift between the lawyers and investigators widened into a chasm.

In the summer of 2017, while Iliopoulos was roaring around the mountains in superpowered cars, Veale and Conner returned to Greece to meet some of their sources. By then the two were spending almost all their time either working on the *Brillante* or talking about it, sometimes bickering like an old couple. They spoke so often on the phone that their wives started to joke about them having an affair. Sometimes it felt like they were going in circles. Every new lead either fizzled into a dead end or yielded so many avenues of investigation that it would take weeks to chase them down. There were too many potential witnesses, scattered to the four winds, and too few reliable ones.

On their trip to Greece, Veale and Conner learned about another man who, like Theodorou, had boarded the *Brillante* in the immediate aftermath of the hijacking. He was “close to home,” their source said.

“What does that mean?” Veale asked.

“He’s in London.”

The man’s name was Dimitrios Plakakis. He was a former computer technician and financial controller who’d somehow ended up in business with Vassilios Vergos, the ex-diver whose ramshackle salvage outfit had, according to Theodorou, helped destroy the *Brillante*. Veale and Conner traced Plakakis to the flat where he was staying and sent some old colleagues from the Met to do surveillance. They came back with photographs of a slender, bookish man in glasses, talking into a mobile phone—Plakakis. To conceal his identity, Veale decided to refer to him by a code name, Zulu 2. He didn’t look like much of a criminal, and so the detectives figured the best approach would be to show up on his doorstep and put him on the spot.

It was the sort of thing they’d done countless times together as police officers. Still, Veale was cautious. For all they knew, Plakakis might have been a captive, watched over by a team of Greek enforcers. He and Conner

drove past the flat a few times to get a sense of the street scene, then went to the local library to scan the electoral register, which could tell them who else was living there. Veale also pulled the building plans from the land registry to work out where the entrances and exits were located.

Conner knew they had to inform the City of London Police that a potential witness to the *Brillante* attack was on their doorstep. He called a detective he'd met to tell him they had located Plakakis and planned to visit him. Better to be transparent, Conner thought. But instead of expressing gratitude or curiosity, the detective insisted they couldn't contact the Greek. "We can," Conner said angrily. "This is a courtesy call. We don't need your permission." He hung up. At no point in his career had Conner let orders from his supposed betters overrule his instincts. He wasn't about to start now.

Plakakis's flat was on the second floor of a grand Victorian house in a wealthy part of town. The detectives approached it on a July morning, walking casually down the tree-lined street. They split up, Conner going to the front door while Veale stayed on the sidewalk, checking to see if anyone appeared in a window. There was no answer when Conner knocked. "Dimitrios!" he called out. Still no response. Veale crept around the back as Conner kept knocking. There he noticed that the doors to the patio were wide open, letting in the summer breeze.

After a silent nod to each other, the pair tried an old cop trick. "There's no one here," Conner hollered, loud enough to make sure he could be heard. Then he walked down the road a few paces before suddenly turning around. Plakakis was peering out from behind a curtain. Their eyes met, and Conner curled his index finger to beckon the man down. Standing at his front door, Plakakis was shaking. Conner reached out and took both his hands. "You don't need to be afraid," he said. "We are gentlemen. We are from the insurers."

They had a brief conversation on the doorstep, as much as the two detectives thought Plakakis could handle. Once he realized they weren't there to harm him, he began to relax. But he also made clear he couldn't talk further without first checking with the police. "I need to talk to my

handlers,” Plakakis said. Veale and Conner exchanged a brief glance that, in the telepathic understanding shared between old friends and longtime partners, they both knew to mean, basically, *holy shit*. As they walked away from the house, Conner turned to Veale in amazement. “Fucking hell,” he said. “Handlers!” Neither man had any inkling that Plakakis had already spoken to the cops. The City of London Police didn’t seem to know anything about it, even though they were supposed to be investigating the *Brillante*. Veale and Conner soon learned that Plakakis’s handlers were from the National Crime Agency. Whatever the nature of their relationship, it was sensitive enough for the NCA to have kept it from their colleagues in London’s Square Mile.

The next day, Plakakis called Conner on his mobile. He’d talked to the NCA and was apologetic. “I’ve been told I mustn’t speak to you,” he said. While he was keen to tell his story, Plakakis said, he was only prepared to do “what is legal.”

Veale and Conner’s efforts to find out why the NCA was interested in Plakakis got nowhere. The agency didn’t want to cooperate with private investigators. But eventually their contacts at the City of London Police revealed that Plakakis had agreed to come in to give a detailed statement for their fraud probe. The interview had lasted for several hours. Concerned about his safety, Plakakis asked the police to keep his identity a secret and signed the statement using a pseudonym, Theo Blake, apparently picked at random.

After the leak of the insurers’ emails in Greece, Veale and Conner were reluctant to tell the Talbot legal team too much about Plakakis, in case the information found its way to Piraeus. They kept to themselves, for example, exactly how they found him, attributing the tip to a loose network of informants they called RITA, a catchall acronym for “Regional Investigative and Tasking Activities.” RITA was one source and RITA was twenty sources, was how Conner later described it: “That’s how you protect people.”

But when Zavos heard that Plakakis had provided a statement to the police, he spotted an opportunity. He knew that private-sector lawyers could

apply for court orders requiring law enforcement to disclose evidence relevant to a lawsuit. There were technical hurdles to clear, and the insurers would have to book a day in court, but it might offer a way to get Plakakis's testimony and use it at trial. It would be several months before the strategy paid off. But eventually, the judge ordered the police to submit the statement as evidence in the *Brillante* trial. When it finally arrived, the document was a revelation. Not only did it provide minute detail about an audacious fraud that was planned in Greece and executed in Yemen. It contained alarming new information about the death of David Mockett.

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CHAPTER 23

TWO GREEK GUYS

According to the account that Plakakis gave to the police,^[*] he'd stumbled into a position near the center of what happened to the *Brillante*. Conner was instinctively skeptical of stories like it; over the years, he'd met plenty of people who claimed they'd never wanted to get involved in whatever situation he was investigating. But something about Plakakis's manner suggested that he was being truthful. In his fear and bewilderment, the Greek didn't seem like someone who'd known exactly what he was getting into.

Plakakis had grown up in the 1980s in Piraeus, where he proved himself to be an excellent student, particularly in math. He relocated to the UK in 1991, moving in with an aunt and later studying for a master's degree in financial mathematics at City University, a brief walk from the trading floors and sleek offices of London's ancient banking district. The City was in the middle of the long boom that began with Margaret Thatcher's deregulation campaign, and that was where Plakakis wanted ultimately to make his career. But when he returned to Britain in 2001 after completing his mandatory Greek military service, he found he couldn't get hired. Sharp as he was, Plakakis hardly stood out among the thousands of young Europeans then flooding into the British capital. It took him almost a year of fruitless searching to find a job, though it was a long way from the City, both physically and spiritually. Hellas Helvetia, where Plakakis

worked as a financial controller, had its office in a scruffy district on the north side of Hyde Park, and its business was property management—finding tenants for apartments and dealing with formalities like boiler inspections.

Plakakis struck up a friendship with one of the firm's clients, George Costoulas, a Greek diplomat in his sixties, who owned a London flat that Hellas Helvetia managed for him. Despite an age difference of decades, the two men became close, talking regularly on the phone and meeting during Plakakis's visits to Greece. In one of their conversations, Plakakis mentioned that he was thinking about a career change. He was working sixty or seventy hours a week and had begun to wonder if it was time to leave London and try his luck somewhere else, or perhaps return home permanently.

As it happened, his older friend had a proposal for him. Though he was nearing retirement, Costoulas was still popular at the foreign ministry in Athens and had been offered a job as Greece's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. In Abu Dhabi he would need a private secretary, someone he could rely on to manage his professional commitments and help him with day-to-day organization. Would Plakakis be willing to do it? After giving it some thought, he decided that he was. It wasn't a huge risk, he reasoned. The post would probably be Costoulas's last before he retired, and a couple of years living on the Persian Gulf would be an exciting change while Plakakis figured out what to do next.

He soon moved to the UAE, living in the Greek Embassy and accompanying Costoulas to all of his engagements. While the economic relationship between Greece and the Emirates was hardly critical to either country, there was still investment to chase and flesh to press, and Costoulas spent much of his time making connections with businessmen. In September 2006, Plakakis accompanied his boss to a meeting with an entrepreneur named Sharif Ba'alawi. Plakakis liked him immediately. Thin, with a gentle face and a neat beard, Ba'alawi struck Plakakis as polished and educated, but also street smart, like a man who clearly knew how to operate in difficult environments. Though he had lived for decades in

Dubai, Ba'alawi was of Yemeni and Somali extraction, and seemed to be invested in a wide range of businesses in both countries: logistics, sugar trading, real estate. He apparently even had a stake in a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Mogadishu.

In conversation with the Greeks, Ba'alawi mentioned a new venture he was considering. Ships passing the Yemeni coast often needed to refuel. Coming into port for "bunkering," as the process of refueling a merchant vessel is called, cost time and therefore money. That created an opening, Ba'alawi explained. Vessel managers would pay a premium to avoid the delay, and with a license from the local authorities and a small tanker, it was possible to buy oil from the refinery in Aden, then resell it at a markup five or ten miles offshore. But Ba'alawi needed an employee with experience bunkering ships to help run his new operation. Plakakis happened to know another man with the right background. Spying an opportunity, he was soon working with the bunkering expert to help set up the new company, which would be called Adoil.

By 2009 Plakakis had relocated to Aden, where he would be paid \$5,000 a month to manage Adoil's daily operations. He'd never lived anywhere like it. Harsh and only lightly governed, it was nothing like Abu Dhabi, let alone London. In the city center, Victorian buildings left by the British had been neglected to the point of rot. Even the newer structures, exposed to the dusty wind, looked battered, as if decades of wear had been concentrated into a few years. Plakakis spoke little Arabic and had only a faint understanding of Yemeni customs; in his dealings with locals, he relied heavily on one of Ba'alawi's brothers, who was based in Aden.

He was nonetheless happy to be there. Despite appearances, the city was a promising place to operate, with a location critical to maritime commerce and considerable margin for profit, as long as you had some connections and an eye for opportunity in the liminal spaces of its economy. Aden's drastic unfamiliarity was also part of its appeal. Plakakis had wanted a change from managing flats in West London, and he'd certainly got it.

He'd only been in his new job a couple of days when he was introduced to Ahmed Nashwan, a tall, well-fed Yemeni with a distinctive gap between his front teeth. Nashwan was one of Adoil's local shareholders, and from what Plakakis gathered he was a powerful man. Rumored to be a veteran of the Republican Guard, the branch of the Yemeni military closest to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Nashwan, Plakakis was told, came from the politically dominant north and had extensive connections in Sana'a. Bureaucratic tangles were a constant concern for Adoil, and Nashwan seemed to have a unique ability to untie them. Whether a problem involved the police, port authorities, or politicians, he was almost always able to resolve it. Plakakis didn't quite know how Nashwan managed to jolt usually uncooperative officials so effectively, but he was pretty sure it wasn't with polite requests. The Yemeni could be more than a little menacing. He was always carrying a gun when Plakakis saw him, and was a prodigious chewer of qat. When he was high on the leafy stimulant, Plakakis thought, he seemed at once vacant and volatile. "He was a feared person," Plakakis would tell police years later.

Plakakis was in a restaurant, about a month after he arrived, when another Greek, a thickset man who walked with a noticeable limp, came over to say hello. He introduced himself as Vassilios Vergos, and, to Plakakis's surprise, he was also in business with Ba'alawi and Nashwan, who were investors in the local branch of his salvage company, Poseidon. Plakakis was pleased by the coincidence. What were the odds, as he later put it, that there would be a pair of "Greek guys in the middle of nowhere"?

Vergos lived on one of Poseidon's boats, and Plakakis began visiting him frequently. Often, the salvor hosted him for Greek meals that he prepared in the tiny galley, simple affairs of grilled fish or stew that, for a man so far from home, felt like the height of luxury. Vergos was hopeless with technology, and in return for his hospitality, Plakakis began teaching him to send emails and make Skype calls, the two men sitting shoulder to shoulder as Vergos fumbled with the mouse. They also tried to push business each other's way. When he spoke to ships' captains and port agents about bunkering, Plakakis might mention that Poseidon was

available for services like underwater cleaning. The company could also furnish security details, putting groups of armed Yemenis sourced by Nashwan onto a Poseidon tug called the *Voukefalas*—named, rather grandiosely, for the horse that Alexander the Great rode into battle—to escort passing ships.

Plakakis soon learned that Vergos had an extreme emotional range. With people he deemed friends he was garrulous and genial, greeting them with kisses on both cheeks and warm exclamations of “Brother!” Anyone who crossed him, though, was a *malakas*—a hard-to-translate Greek insult, roughly equivalent to “wanker”—and subject to furious tirades. Vergos had led an eventful life, and when they ate together he liked to recount boastful tales of his diving exploits, sexual conquests, and, most of all, his long career in the salvage business. The salvor’s limp, Plakakis learned, was the result of a case of the bends after a dive went wrong, so severe that he was lucky to live through it. Though he’d rarely worked anywhere outside Greece before coming to Aden, Vergos had handled a broad range of maritime mishaps: grounded ferries, sunken yachts, stranded tankers. Once, Poseidon had helped retrieve the wreckage of a helicopter from more than 250 meters beneath the surface, which the company said was the deepest recovery ever performed in Greek waters.

One of the stories Vergos shared with Plakakis, according to what the younger man told police, was that of the *Elli*, the Iliopoulos-owned tanker that ran aground near Aden in 2009, then split in half catastrophically, resulting in a substantial claim against its London insurers. Poseidon had set up its Yemeni subsidiary only weeks before the grounding, and its tugs had been able to race to the scene. As he recounted his involvement, Vergos made a frank admission. The timing, he said, had been no coincidence. He’d known before leaving Greece that the *Elli* would soon require his services. “In the salvage business I don’t wait for things to happen,” he told his friend. “I make them happen.” Plakakis, who knew next to nothing about the workings of Lloyd’s or the salvage industry, was confused. How could a salvor know in advance about an accident? It wouldn’t be long before he understood what Vergos meant.

Despite Plakakis's efforts, Adoil was a failure, crippled by disagreements between its Greek and Yemeni investors. Yet moving oil around the Gulf of Aden was still an attractive business, and Vergos wanted to start an operation of his own, which he suggested Plakakis could run. In 2010 the two men were back in Greece, holding meetings at Poseidon's headquarters, near the Piraeus docks, as they looked for a bunkering vessel.

Since getting to know each other in Aden, their relationship had evolved from a friendship to a loose commercial partnership, and Plakakis accompanied Vergos to many of his meetings, looking for opportunities. While Plakakis enjoyed their time together, he'd concluded that Vergos's swaggering manner—in Athens he drove a red Hummer, hardly a practical vehicle for the city's narrow streets—masked a deep insecurity. Many of the men at the top of the Greek shipping world came from storied maritime families, tracing their roots to idyllic Aegean islands. Vergos, by contrast, grew up in Levaia, a village of just nine hundred people in Greece's agricultural north, which many residents still called by its former name: Lakkia, or "pit," possibly in reference to a nearby coal mine. The place was so removed from the sea that Vergos hadn't even been taught to swim as a child. He wanted badly to be counted among the salvage industry's elite, entrepreneurs whose gleaming fleets were stationed all over the world, ready to respond at a moment's notice to the most difficult accidents. Plakakis got the sense that Vergos intended to prove himself their equal.

The two men were at Poseidon's offices one day when Vergos received a call from Iliopoulos. There was something the shipowner wanted to discuss, and Vergos brought Plakakis along with him to Iliopoulos's nearby office. At first the talk was about selling the wreck of the *Elli*, but at a couple of points, Plakakis remained in his chair while Vergos and Iliopoulos stepped away to discuss something in private. Afterward Vergos handed Plakakis a sheet of paper. Printed on the page, Plakakis realized, were the names of several vessels. "This is the list Iliopoulos gave me," Vergos said. "One of them will be the next *Elli*."

Plakakis would later claim that he hadn't paid much attention to the remark; Vergos was a big talker, and Plakakis was much more focused on their new bunkering business. He returned to Aden in early 2011 to get it running. Vergos had found a small tanker, the *Sweet Lady*, that they planned to use after making some repairs. As he stepped on board for the first time, Plakakis's heart sank. Poseidon had salvaged the vessel after an accident in the Red Sea, and in the photos Vergos showed him it seemed to be in reasonable shape. But close up it was a mess, heavily waterlogged and totally unready for use. Getting it into working condition, even with the help of some of Poseidon's Bangladeshi crewmen, would be a huge job. The only good news was that Plakakis would have a skilled partner. Vergos had brought an engineer into the project, with far deeper marine expertise: Vassilios Theodorou, whom Veale and Conner would later get to know in Athens.

The two men slept in one of the *Sweet Lady's* filthy cabins and rose at dawn each day, downing a cup of sludgy coffee before getting to work. The labor was exhausting, but Plakakis needed to get the vessel seaworthy as quickly as possible. He wasn't being paid a salary—instead, Vergos had promised him a 20 percent stake in the bunkering business in exchange for rendering the ship operational—so every day the *Sweet Lady* remained in its berth was a day of lost money. Plakakis was covering costs out of his own pocket, expenses that were climbing steadily into the tens of thousands of dollars, and had grown frustrated, particularly because Vergos seemed distracted by other concerns. He wasn't even in Yemen. After one of Poseidon's Greek personnel, a grandfatherly sailor named Spyros Protogerakis, hurt his leg in a crane accident, Vergos had flown back to Athens to make arrangements for his treatment, leaving Plakakis to run the salvage business in his absence.

After a little over a month away, Vergos reappeared in Aden in the spring of 2011. On one of his first days back, he summoned Plakakis and Theodorou to a meeting. Plakakis could see the delight on his face; the salvor clearly had news that he couldn't wait to share. Vergos explained that he'd been given a "job" by Iliopoulos. It was a grand plan; if it succeeded,

he said, they'd all be rich. This time, however, a grounding like that of the *Elli* wouldn't work. No one would believe that particular lightning could strike twice.

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CHAPTER 24

THE JOB

Plakakis spent his time in Aden largely offshore. When not working on a salvage, Poseidon's vessels sat at anchor, lashed together in the middle of the harbor a couple of miles from land. In one direction, he could see the dun-colored buildings of the city center, rising on rocky slopes away from the water's edge. On the opposite side, he could make out the gantries of the city's container terminal, on a pancake-flat island that had been reshaped to orthogonal dimensions to accommodate ocean freighters. The unofficial flagship of Poseidon's flotilla was the *Vergina I*, a blue-and-yellow barge that carried a thirty-five-ton crane for use in salvage missions. It was controlled from a large open-plan cabin, where Plakakis sometimes worked during the day. Vergos was usually there, too, and Plakakis noticed that, since returning to Aden in April 2011, he had added a new element to his routine. Just before six o'clock each evening, he would grab a cheap cellphone from one of Poseidon's Bangladeshi crewmen, loaded with a prepaid local SIM card. A moment later it would ring, with Iliopoulos or one of his associates calling from Athens. Portions of the discussions that followed appeared to be in a crude code; sometimes Vergos referred to the arrival of something he called "the wolf." But beyond that precaution, he made little effort to hide what he was talking about, speaking at full volume with little regard to who might be listening.

Plakakis was in no doubt: Vergos and Iliopoulos were making preparations to destroy a ship, somewhere off the Yemeni coast.

Plakakis would later say to police that he wanted no involvement with the plan, and told Vergos not to expect him to be an active participant. He'd come to Aden to start an oil business, and while that might bring him into some ethical gray areas, what Vergos was contemplating was in another category. Nor, Plakakis recalled thinking, would he have ever wanted Iliopoulos as a coconspirator. The shipowner struck him as mercurial and untrustworthy. And it wasn't as though Vergos had any power over Plakakis. They were partners in the fuel venture, not boss and employee.

Yet despite his refusal to help, Plakakis told detectives that Vergos seemed unconcerned about how much he learned about the operation. Getting into the city from Poseidon's vessels required a trip in a small motorboat, but Vergos's old diving injury made it difficult for him to climb in and out of the craft. In May and June 2011, he asked Plakakis to ferry him to a series of onshore appointments. The younger man used the time to pick up groceries or spare parts, trying to keep clear of the violence that was becoming a regular concern in Aden, before bringing Vergos back to the floating crane at day's end. Vergos was happy to tell him what he'd been up to: meeting with Sharif Ba'alawi, the Yemeni-Somali businessman; Ahmed Nashwan, the qat-chewing fixer Poseidon employed to iron out bureaucratic problems; as well as various government officials, who were all involved in what he called "the job." From overhearing Vergos's calls, Plakakis had learned that Iliopoulos wanted it organized quickly, complaining that he was losing \$20,000 per day operating the ship in question. He'd also surmised that Nashwan expected a payment of \$2 million to cover his role, and to secure the cooperation of Aden's power brokers. If the Greeks wanted to operate on Yemeni turf, then the Yemenis would need to be cut in.

Vergos soon dropped any pretense of secrecy among the men he worked with. Early in the summer of 2011, he gathered Plakakis, Theodorou, and the older sailor Protogerakis, who'd returned from Greece after getting his leg patched up, around a table on the *Vergina*. Vergos was

in an upbeat mood, eager to impress his colleagues with the scale of the plan he'd helped devise. It was evening, and Aden's lights were blinking on across the water as he began to speak. The vessel they were waiting for was a supertanker, Vergos boasted, not some little ship. It would be attacked by supposed pirates, who would round up everyone on board apart from the captain and chief engineer. The chief engineer would then show the intruders where to detonate a grenade in the engine room, ensuring that the ship was badly damaged, if not effectively destroyed. For weeks, Vergos had been reminding Protogerakis to make sure he had a Lloyd's Open Form, the standard contract for salvaging a vessel, close at hand. Poseidon would handle the recovery, positioning it for a generous award from the Lloyd's market.

Organizing the attack had required complex preparation, Vergos explained, not least to deal with the most fundamental problem: finding a group of pirates willing to do it. For one thing, there weren't any in Yemen. The country had plenty of terrestrial bandits, but piracy in the Gulf of Aden was an overwhelmingly Somali phenomenon. And even if some bona fide pirates could be found, they would be too difficult to control. What was to stop the gang from simply taking the ship for themselves? Vergos told Plakakis and the others that he'd found a solution. The "pirates," he said, would be men from the Yemeni Coast Guard, sourced by Nashwan.



Plakakis had learned enough about Yemen not to be shocked by the idea of employing agents of the state for a bit of unconventional freelance work. Set up in the aftermath of 9/11, as President Saleh attempted to ingratiate himself with the US, the YCG was supposed to be a government showpiece, a capable counterterrorism force that would secure a nearly two-thousand-kilometer coastline. Eager to build the service's capacity, the US government had provided it with more than a dozen patrol boats, and American naval experts trained its sailors. It received about \$30 million of Pentagon funding in 2009 alone.

Yet no amount of financial assistance could protect the YCG from the spiraling disorder Plakakis had witnessed in Aden—or the avarice of officials looking to take advantage of the chaos. In the final phase of the Saleh regime, the YCG was so short of money that it sometimes couldn't afford fuel for its vessels. Early in 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that it had begun renting out boats and crews for antipiracy escorts in the Gulf of Aden, putting assets paid for by US taxpayers into the service of private shipowners—and, almost certainly, YCG commanders. (A Yemeni government official interviewed by the *Journal* claimed, laughably, that revenue generated by such commercial missions went only to the state, and “didn't enrich anyone personally.”) In those circumstances, taking an assignment posing as pirates, rather than stopping them, was not so great a leap.

As the date of the operation approached, Plakakis became increasingly determined to get out of Yemen. The bunkering business that had brought him to Aden was going nowhere. Even after he'd sunk most of his savings into the project, the *Sweet Lady* remained a wreck, and he felt betrayed by Vergos, who still hadn't paid him a cent. He booked a flight to Athens for mid-June. But Vergos said he wanted him to stay—probably, Plakakis would later conclude, to keep an eye on him until the *Brillante* job was complete.

To convince him, Vergos tried appealing to Plakakis's compassion for a member of the Poseidon team. Despite his treatment in Greece, Protogerakis's leg still hadn't healed. Every day, Plakakis had been gently lifting his bandages to clean the gash below his knee, pulling away the gauze with all the delicacy he could muster. The wound suppurated with thin, yellowish fluid, and an aureole of angry reddish skin had developed around its perimeter. Plakakis had come to like Protogerakis, and was worried that he could be in the early stages of a severe infection. His anxiety was something Vergos could exploit. “If you don't stay for me, stay for Protogerakis,” the salvor said.

Plakakis realized he was trapped. If he didn't take care of his colleague, he wasn't confident that anyone else would, and in the grubby conditions

offshore that neglect could be catastrophic. Reluctantly, he canceled his plans to depart. With little to do other than look after Protogerakis, he settled into an irritable funk. He started sleeping late, trying to kill time until he could leave. Yemen had brought Plakakis only disappointment, and he just wanted to go home.

In the close quarters of Poseidon's rusty vessels, however, he couldn't ignore what was about to happen to the *Brillante*. The salvage crew was working long hours to get ready, and Plakakis had a front-row seat. On the afternoon of July 5, he and Vergos were on the deck of the *Vergina*. A small ship was heading out to sea, pushing away from the ash-dark peaks that framed Aden's harbor. Plakakis recognized the gray hull: it was a YCG patrol cutter. Vergos motioned toward the vessel as it slipped past. "That's the boat that's going to do the job," he said.

That night, Vergos instructed the Poseidon crew to get to bed early, to be ready to leave in the early hours of the morning. The firm's salvage tug, the *Voukefalas*, had already been stocked with food and water for an extended deployment. At around 3:00 a.m., Plakakis heard an urgent message burst from the radio. "Help, help, help," he would recall the voice saying. Somewhere in the littoral darkness, the *Brillante* was on fire.

Plakakis refused to go with Vergos and the rest. He stayed on the *Vergina* after the *Brillante* attack, alone apart from a Bangladeshi crewman who'd been too sick to join the salvage. Scanning the headlines with an erratic internet connection, he saw that the cover story appeared to have sold: the shipping press was reporting that the vessel's near destruction was the work of pirates, almost certainly Somalis. Plakakis had spent several tedious days on board when one of Poseidon's boats appeared on the horizon, moving steadily toward the barge. The salvors needed to use the *Vergina*'s crane, and the boat would be pulling it out to the *Brillante*.

Plakakis had nowhere else to go, and he remained on board after the Poseidon sailors connected their towline, beginning the ponderous journey out to the tanker. Vergos and Theodorou were there when he arrived, weary

from long days working on the skillet-hot deck. Vergos was on edge. In the hours immediately following the raid, Iliopoulos had demoted him from what he assumed would be his position as the *Brillante's* primary salvor, relegating him to a subcontractor's role. He'd be reporting to a larger, better-funded Greek firm called Five Oceans Salvage, which had been appointed to lead the operation. Vergos had protested furiously, bellowing that he wouldn't allow another company to have access to the vessel; an incapacitated tanker full of oil was a rich prize, one that Vergos didn't want to share. But Iliopoulos's decision was final, and Vergos had no choice but to accept his diminished status—subordinate, once again, to the salvage industry's big men. He'd been in a foul temper ever since.

Shortly after Plakakis arrived, a fishing trawler pulled up alongside the *Brillante*, mooring next to one of Poseidon's boats. Dusk was approaching as one of its passengers, a broad-shouldered British man with a bald, sun-worn head, clambered off. Thanks to his years in London, Plakakis spoke better English than the other Greeks, and he helped David Mockett get oriented. Mockett's survey wouldn't begin until morning, and Plakakis showed him to the bed on the *Vergina* where he would spend the night. Though he was still new to the world of salvage, Plakakis understood Mockett's role: to evaluate the condition of the ship and send a report back to Lloyd's, where its insurers would decide whether to pay out.

Before everyone turned in, Plakakis joined Vergos and Mockett for dinner. Around the table, the men got to talking about their families, and how they came to be in such a remote part of the Middle East. Both Vergos and Mockett had grown daughters in their home countries, and the surveyor mentioned that he had a crop of grandchildren, whose exploits delighted him when he was in England. That prompted Vergos to turn to Mockett with some unsolicited counsel. "At your age," he said, "it's better to stay with your grandchildren." Why run around a dangerous place like Yemen? Vergos repeated the advice: "You can go back to your country and enjoy your grandchildren."

Toward noon the next day, Mockett descended from the *Brillante* to the floating crane, his survey complete. To Plakakis, it was obvious that he was

perplexed by what he'd found—or, perhaps, not found. In earshot of many of the salvors on board, Mockett remarked that he'd seen no evidence of a strike by a rocket-propelled grenade, or of pirates firing their weapons on the tanker—both key elements of what had reportedly occurred. “Everyone could see on his face that he was not happy about what he had seen or what he had been told,” Plakakis recalled later. A short time afterward Mockett was gone, steaming back to Aden on the same trawler that had brought him out.

There was little need for Plakakis to stay on the *Brillante*, and he also caught a ride back to the city. More salvors were arriving from Greece, and he helped them get organized, buying provisions and driving to the airport to pick up a team of guards, who would protect what remained of the vessel during its tow to the UAE. He also needed to stop by Nashwan's office to pick up some cash for expenses. When the Yemeni saw Plakakis walk in, he detonated with rage, screaming at his visitor in rapid-fire Arabic. Plakakis could make out only some of what he said, but he did pick out the words “Vassilios”—Vergos's first name—and “*kalabush*,” a colloquial term for handcuffs. Only later did he learn why Nashwan was so angry: he apparently hadn't received the \$2 million he'd been promised by Vergos, money that Plakakis assumed he needed to pay off others in the Aden hierarchy. (Nashwan denies that he had any role in the *Brillante* hijacking and says he never threatened Vergos. Ba'alawi has also denied wrongdoing. No court has ruled that they were involved in the tanker's destruction.)

Plakakis still had no dry-land place to stay, and he had taken a temporary bed on a Five Oceans tug that was waiting in Aden harbor. He was on a motorboat between that vessel and the port when the driver told him there'd been a bombing in the city center. A Westerner had been killed. Plakakis asked the driver, a young Yemeni, to repeat the name of the victim again and again. He was stunned. Surely, he thought, the man must be referring to someone other than the surveyor Plakakis had met just days earlier. His first instinct was to call Vergos to tell him the sickening news. But when he picked up, the salvor already knew. “I told him to stay with his grandchildren,” Vergos said.

Plakakis's story was by far the fullest account of the *Brillante* plot that Veale and Conner had obtained. But they were also certain, even if they could persuade him to aid the insurers, that they didn't want him to testify. In his decades as a cop, Conner had always tried to avoid putting informants on the stand, even—or perhaps especially—when they knew a great deal about an alleged crime. The first and most important reason was simple prudence: appearing in court could expose them to considerable danger. Though provisions exist in English law to protect the identity of witnesses, Conner never wanted them to be the only thing standing in the way of violent reprisal. The second issue was strategic. In the unpredictable environment of a trial, a skilled defense lawyer could push almost anyone into wavering on key details, or undermine their credibility by exposing unrelated misdeeds. After a couple days of cross-examination, even the most robust testimony could start to get wobbly.

Both of those concerns applied to Plakakis. It would be much better, Veale and Conner agreed, to ensure his name got nowhere near the legal proceedings. But if Plakakis was willing to cooperate, they could use him as a secret guide for further investigation. He could direct them to key documents, emails, and financial transactions, which the insurers could demand be disclosed. He knew the names of nearly everyone involved in the *Brillante* operation, people who could be interviewed or called as witnesses. And, not insignificantly, he had extensive knowledge of how Iliopoulos, Vergos, and the other players operated, intelligence that could help Veale and Conner dig into their affairs. He could be an invaluable asset without ever stepping into a courtroom.

They were dismayed to learn that the underwriters' legal team had other ideas. In November 2017, a few months after the detectives appeared at Plakakis's door, Chris Zavos submitted a statement to Nigel Teare, the judge who'd taken over the *Brillante* case, requesting a delay in the proceedings. "I became aware of the existence of a further potential witness in late July this year," Zavos wrote. The insurers needed time to seek a

formal statement from him, and, they hoped, to make arrangements for him to “give evidence at the trial,” with precautions to protect his identity. That idea was alarming enough for Veale and Conner, but Zavos and the other lawyers soon decided they wanted to go further, by asking the judge to order Plakakis, whose name was still a closely guarded secret, to testify openly. An identified whistleblower, Zavos argued, would add far more weight to their argument than anonymously sourced information. As a lawyer, his first priority had to be securing a favorable result for his client, and that meant using a real name.

Veale and Conner were horrified. Even after years on the case, they felt the insurers and their representatives were treating it like an ordinary commercial dispute. For someone in Plakakis’s position, the stakes were much higher than whether a Lloyd’s claim paid out. The pair practically begged Zavos and Paul Cunningham to reconsider. “People aren’t disposable,” Veale nearly shouted during one discussion. But Zavos insisted. In early January 2018, Veale circulated a memo that laid out his views, referring to Plakakis by the code name he and Conner used for him: Zulu 2. “It is the case that one man was murdered,” Veale said. “Zulu 2 knows all the main players.” If his identity was revealed, his life would be “in immediate danger,” along with those of his wife and child. “The only safe option,” Veale concluded, “is to corroborate all that he says and leave him and his family in safety.”

CHAPTER 25

DON'T LEAVE THE HOUSE

The same day Veale sent his memo warning of the danger to Plakakis, Michael Conner took a train into central London for a dinner at the Little Ship Club, the City's sole yacht club. It was the sort of place where briny older men wearing blazers and striped ties took their wives to enjoy some rip-roaring nautical fun. There was a bar, decorated with oil paintings of wooden ships and long-dead admirals, and a notice board offering classes on rope handling and weather prediction. Members particularly enjoyed the lively sea shanty night, downing pints as they belted out sailors' laments from a time when Britain ruled the waves.

Conner was there as a guest of Roy Facey, David Mockett's old friend who'd been evacuated from Yemen after his murder and had been trying to use his expertise on the country to help the detectives. Facey gave a speech that night about his work for the Aden port authority, in front of a little Yemeni flag on a stand. Conner didn't want to interrupt Facey in full flow, so he reached into his pocket to turn off his phone. Over dinner, the two men shared stories. Facey spoke about his regret at having to leave Yemen, his fond memories of the people and the delicious food. He particularly loved fasoolia, a spicy bean stew served for breakfast, and hadn't had it since. It was funny, he said, the things people missed. Conner brought Facey up to speed on the latest developments in the *Brillante* case. He left the club at about 11:00 p.m. and walked out into the frigid night air.

As he crossed the Thames at Southwark Bridge, Conner was absorbed by the view. On either side of the river, he could see the City's present woven into its past. To his left were the ramparts of Tower Bridge and a decommissioned Second World War battleship, HMS *Belfast*, bristling with guns. Trains clattered past on a railway bridge downstream. Behind him, a cluster of twinkling skyscrapers obscured the insurance district and One Lime Street, the building where Veale and Conner's clients kept the Lloyd's money machine turning.

It was only when he arrived at Waterloo Station that Conner switched on his phone. The screen showed a missed call from Zulu 2. Conner decided it was too late to call Plakakis back and resolved to deal with it the next day. He got home after midnight, and went to sleep giving little thought to what the Greek might have wanted. At about 10:00 a.m. the following morning, his phone rang again: another call from Zulu 2. This time Conner picked up. Plakakis didn't wait for him to say hello. "Michael, Michael, they are outside my house," he stammered. "They are here to kill me."

In an instant, Conner snapped into concentration. He told Plakakis to stay calm and explain exactly what was happening. He would try to help if he could. In his terror, Plakakis was speaking too fast, stumbling over his words, but gradually Conner was able to piece the situation together. It had started late the previous night. Plakakis was visiting his mother in rural Greece, along with his wife and their three-year-old son. Around midnight, the house phone rang. A woman was on the line, announcing that she wanted to speak to Plakakis, who was outside. Call back in ten minutes, his wife said.

When she told him about the call, Plakakis was wary. Hardly anyone knew where he was staying, and he'd made a point of not giving out his mother's number. The phone rang again. This time, Plakakis listened in silently on another handset as his wife answered. "I'm Mr. Iliopoulos's secretary," the woman said. The shipowner wanted to speak to him. Plakakis's wife said he wasn't in, apologized, and hung up.

Now Plakakis was more than suspicious. There was the lateness of the call, and the timing: not long after Zavos had publicly informed a London court about the existence of a new witness in the *Brillante* case. “That’s it,” Plakakis said to himself. “They know.” After he couldn’t get through to Conner, he’d lain in bed awake, trying not to imagine the consequences of being exposed as a police informant.

The next morning, Plakakis heard car engines outside. He looked through a window to see a pickup truck and a gray sedan idling a little way up the road. Inside were a group of bulky-looking men. Peering more closely while trying to remain hidden, he was sure he could see the stocky figure of Vassilios Vergos, his former business partner from Yemen. (Vergos denies that he was present.) As Plakakis watched, the house phone rang. Plakakis ignored it, his heart pounding. It rang again, and then again. A horrifying thought occurred to him. The men were listening from the street, trying to work out which address the phone number connected to. They were trying to find him.

Plakakis had called his contact at the City of London Police, but the detective didn’t seem in a great hurry to act. After he pleaded for protection, the officer solemnly informed Plakakis that the force was going to hold a “gold command” meeting to decide how best to respond. While this was the top rung of operational procedure, it wasn’t much comfort to someone with potential assassins at his door. Also, the gold meeting wouldn’t be taking place until after lunch. Plakakis feared that he and his family might be dead by then. “What the fucking hell is wrong with them?” he cried through the phone to Conner. “What does that mean to me?” Conner tried to speak slowly and calmly. “Go to the middle of the house,” he instructed Plakakis. “Get plenty of water. Keep the child quiet. And don’t flush the toilet. I’m getting help.”

Conner called Veale and quickly agreed on a plan. They would use the same armed security team that had protected Gerry Lallis, the Piraeus lawyer, two years earlier. Conner got his man on the phone and issued his orders. “Get there as soon as you can,” he said. “When you arrive, use the codeword Zulu to identify yourselves, then wait for further instructions.”

The Greek outfit were serious operatives. Armed and highly trained, they wore sunglasses and jeans and zoomed around the country in blacked-out cars like a private SWAT team, guarding politicians and businessmen. Conner knew the group leader as “George.” They left Athens as quickly as possible, beginning the two-hour drive to Plakakis’s mother’s village.

Conner called back to tell Plakakis that help was on the way. Since they last spoke, the house phone hadn’t stopped ringing. Plakakis’s wife would pick up the receiver and slam it down, only for the ringer to go off again. He told Conner that he could see the men outside pointing into houses, including the one he was in. He didn’t know if they were armed. “Michael, I have a hunting rifle. I’m going to shoot anyone that comes,” Plakakis said. Conner thought back to his time in the police. He’d lost informants before. While he was hunting Turkish drug gangs in North London, they would dispatch anyone suspected of being a snitch with a hail of bullets. He grimaced at the memory. “Make sure it’s loaded,” he told Plakakis. Jesus, he thought as the words left his mouth. What if he has to use the gun?

While Conner fielded calls in his living room, his wife overheard him and asked what was going on. After he told her about the situation, she reacted with English poise. “Oh dear,” she said. “Would you like a cup of tea?” She put the kettle on. It was only lunchtime, but Conner’s cell was already almost dead. He plugged it into the wall and sat on the sofa, his landline also within easy reach, figuring he’d need both.

The landline rang—it was a detective from the City of London Police. “My boss told me you’ve got to stand down what you’re doing,” the officer insisted. “He needs to talk to your squad directly.” The British cops had learned of Conner’s plan and seemed very concerned about who’d authorized the Greek bodyguards to carry out an armed operation directed from London. Conner replied that they couldn’t speak to his security team, and he wasn’t prepared to give them the number. He’d concluded that the police were too bogged down in procedure to be of any help. “Tell your boss this is a fast-flowing situation that I am handling as I have many times before,” he said.

As Conner spoke, his cellphone buzzed: it was George, the leader of the Greek team. Conner could hear their sirens howling in the background. “We are going very fast,” George said. They had eight men in two vehicles, and another group was on its way to pick up a third: a van large enough to collect Plakakis’s whole family. Conner warned him that the men on the scene might have weapons, but George didn’t seem concerned. “Yes, yes, yes,” he said, and hung up.

Conner played out various scenarios in his head. It was possible the men had been sent to kill Plakakis, as he feared. It was also possible the authors of the *Brillante* attack had a different strategy, and they were there to bring him back into the fold—perhaps by giving him a choice between violent retribution for talking, or money in return for his silence. Or perhaps Iliopoulos simply wanted to have a frank discussion about how foolish it was to help British law enforcement investigate a fellow Greek, and had sent heavies to reinforce the point.

There was another possibility, albeit a bizarre one. Plakakis might have been making the whole thing up in order to secure protection, or inflate his own importance. After all, Conner only had one person’s word for what was happening. He called again to check in. “Michael, they are standing outside the house now,” Plakakis said. His voice sounded strange, distant and dreamlike. “Why did this happen to me?” he asked. “This shouldn’t happen to me.” Conner had dealt with terrified people many times before during his career. Plakakis’s fear was real, he concluded. Whatever was happening in Greece, it wasn’t an invention. Conner made a note in his phone, which he was using as a logbook: “Mental state deteriorating.”

Then Conner’s home phone rang once more. The City of London officer was on the line again. “I’m really sorry. I cannot take no for an answer. My boss wants the phone number of your team leader. Now.”

“You’re not having it,” Conner snapped back. “We’re in the middle of a live operation.”

“You can’t run a live operation. You’re a civilian.”

“You’re also a civilian in Greece. So’s your boss,” said Conner, reminding the cop that his jurisdiction didn’t even extend outside central

London, let alone to the Greek countryside. As a compromise, Conner suggested his team could deliver Plakakis's family safely to a hotel in Athens. "Then you can have them," he said. "Only once they're safe."

Conner spoke to Plakakis again. The men in the cars had driven a short distance away and were waiting atop a hill, he said. Greece was two hours ahead of London; it would be evening soon. Conner didn't like the idea of Plakakis being left to fend for himself in the darkness. With Plakakis on one line and George checking in on another, he laid out the next steps.

"Is there a church in town?" Conner asked.

"Yes," Plakakis replied; it was located on a busy road, by a row of cafés.

"Ask your mother to drive to the church." Conner figured that no one would bother to follow an elderly woman. George and the security squad would be there. When George identified himself as Zulu, Plakakis's mother should reply that she was Zulu too. Then she would lead them back to the house. "They're ten minutes away," Conner said.

As soon as they'd finalized the plan, Conner received another call from the City of London detective, telling him again to stop whatever he was doing. "We're about to do the handover," Conner barked. "It's right now." He hung up.

Even though he was setting it up on the fly from his living room, Conner was reasonably confident the operation would go smoothly. If the men were still waiting for Plakakis, he figured they would abandon whatever they had been planning to do after seeing two carloads of security operatives pull up. But there was no way to be sure until it was done. The moments seemed to slow down as Conner sat with one phone in hand, the other on the table next to him, sipping his tea and imagining the scene that was unfolding in Greece.

When Plakakis's mother arrived at the church, she found George leaning up against the side of his car. He gave the gray-haired woman a cheerful wave. "I'm Zulu," he said. "I was meant to tell you that!" she replied. The security expert and the grandmother shared an awkward laugh. He got back in his car and the convoy followed her to the house. When they

arrived, George's team fanned out with guns drawn. There appeared to be no one around, and they hustled Plakakis and his wife, son, and mother into the back of their van. Moments later, George called Conner. "Zulu 2 and family all safe," he said. "Four, repeat four, safe." They were on the move. Conner thanked George and dialed the police detective to give him the good news. "You are really lucky," the officer said. Yeah, you're welcome, Conner thought.

Once they arrived in Athens, the Plakakis family checked into a hotel, where Veale had reserved them a room. They were booked on a flight to the relative safety of London the next morning. Greek cops, contacted by the City of London Police, arrived to keep an eye on them. Conner had been on the phone almost continuously for more than twelve hours, and he grabbed a brief stretch of sleep at home. He was up again at 3:00 a.m., heading for the airport to take the first flight to Athens.

After he arrived, he took the security team out for drinks. Conner didn't touch the alcohol himself, but he watched in satisfaction as George and his crew shared beers and shots, marking the end of a successful mission.



Plakakis would be forever grateful to Conner for his decisive intervention. But despite knowing that the *Brillante's* insurers had funded his rescue, he was furious with the Lloyd's syndicate. He believed they had put him and his family in danger by revealing the existence of a "new witness." That statement could only have referred to him, Plakakis felt, and once the word got out, he was a marked man.

Angry as he was, Plakakis needed money. He was now estranged from many of his business contacts in Greece, and for his own safety he would need to remain in the UK, where he had scant connections, indefinitely. About a week after arriving in London, Plakakis asked detectives from the City force to inform the insurers that he might be willing to help them in their lawsuit. During the first few months of 2018, Zavos and Talbot's Paul Cunningham met him several times to discuss the possibility.

Plakakis told the pair that he wanted to enjoy the same standard of living in Britain as he would at home. Although he didn't want to "suggest anything embarrassing," he reminded them that if he provided evidence in their case, he would have to "live with the consequences for years to come," and needed compensation. On the advice of his attorney, whom the insurance syndicate had hired in order to make him feel more secure during the negotiations, Plakakis proposed a figure of 8 million pounds. That was impossible, Zavos and Cunningham responded.

The insurers had to tread a fine line. It was routine to cover the expenses involved in testifying at a trial, and paying witnesses for lost earnings is permitted in English lawsuits. But large sums are frowned upon as an affront to the integrity of the court, and they couldn't allow the promise of financial reward to taint evidence. Piraeus Bank's lawyers would seize any opportunity to portray Plakakis as an opportunist, willing to tell the insurers what they wanted to hear in exchange for cash. They proposed 250,000 pounds as a compromise. Plakakis thought about it and declined. He needed to survive in one of the world's most expensive cities, and his career was in tatters. Boiling at the injustice of what he'd been through, Plakakis proved to be a difficult negotiating partner. When agitated, he was prone to ranting, reminding everyone that he'd tipped his life into chaos by telling the truth. The discussions dragged on for weeks without agreement, before Plakakis's lawyer abruptly announced that his client was no longer willing to cooperate.

But Plakakis's run of bad luck wasn't over. Zavos and his colleagues had more moves to play. First, they persuaded a judge to issue a witness summons requiring Plakakis to appear at the London trial and provide evidence. He was legally obliged to comply. Then the judge announced that he'd made a decision on the insurers' request that Plakakis be identified by his real name, rather than the pseudonym, Theo Blake, that he'd previously used.

Over the opposition of Veale, Conner, the police, and of course Plakakis himself, Zavos and the legal team argued that the rescue operation in Greece showed that anyone who might want to harm Plakakis already

knew who he was. As one of the insurers' barristers put it at a court hearing, "The cat is already out of the bag." The judge agreed. "I find it impossible to resist the conclusion that revealing his true identity . . . will not give rise to a risk to Theo Blake over and above that which already exists," he wrote. He then scheduled the trial to take place in early 2019.

Almost eight years after he first set foot on the deck of the *Brillante Virtuoso*, a vessel he never wanted to see in the first place, Plakakis still couldn't escape it.

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CHAPTER 26

JUDGMENT

On an overcast morning in February 2019, Cynthia Mockett walked down a short, dead-end street toward the Rolls Building, off London’s Fetter Lane. On the sidewalk outside, knots of young legal clerks carted overstuffed boxes of files on metal trolleys, a task performed before the start of daily business at the capital’s courthouses. Cynthia entered through a set of glass doors, passing the spot where, a little less than three years earlier, officers from the City of London Police had arrested Marios Iliopoulos. After making her way upstairs she sat down in the back of a brightly lit hearing room, which had been set up with a series of plasma screens for viewing photos and documents. There was a buzz of anticipation as the two platoons of lawyers, seated at tables piled high with stacks of paper, waited for the proceedings to begin.

At least some of the insurers’ attorneys wanted to keep Cynthia away from the Rolls Building, with one telling Conner that her presence wouldn’t be “helpful to our case.” On that, as with so much else, the detectives and the lawyers disagreed. But the courtroom was public, with anyone free to enter, and she’d decided to attend anyway. Cynthia was determined to hear the whole story of the events she believed had led to her husband’s death, not just the small pieces she’d been allowed so far.

Just before 10:30, everyone stood as Justice Nigel Teare, a sixty-seven-year-old with a fuzz of snow-white hair on either side of his bald scalp,

emerged from his chambers, taking his seat at the front. A moment later the lead barrister for Piraeus Bank, Peter MacDonald Eggers, opened the proceedings with a polite “Good morning, my Lord,” and proceeded to summarize the key questions of *Suez Fortune Investments Ltd & Piraeus Bank AE v. Talbot Underwriting Ltd & Others*. The case, MacDonald Eggers said, concerned a ship that “was commandeered by armed intruders, who later detonated an incendiary explosive device which caused a substantial fire, resulting in the vessel’s total loss.” Those facts were not in dispute. What the bank and the insurers disagreed on was the motive for the intruders’ actions. Like nearly all civil trials in England, this one would be decided by a judge, not a jury, and it would be up to Teare to determine if the men who boarded the *Brillante Virtuoso* were sent by Marios Iliopoulos, or whether the shipowner and his bankers, who’d given him the money to purchase the vessel, were in fact their victims.

With his direct claim against Talbot and the other underwriters thrown out after his menacing testimony in 2016, leaving Piraeus Bank to continue the suit without him, Iliopoulos would have no say in the matter. He wouldn’t even be appearing in court. Shortly after the start of the day’s session, MacDonald Eggers explained that, although Iliopoulos had not been charged with any offense, he had been advised by his criminal lawyers not to participate in the trial. Since Piraeus had written off Iliopoulos’s loan, concluding he was unlikely ever to pay it back, he didn’t have a financial incentive to take part, either. Iliopoulos was debt free and had no reason to care who ended up covering the loss of the *Brillante*. And he was safely in Greece, unlikely to come to the UK while prosecution was even a remote possibility. There was apparently nothing anyone could do to force him to give evidence.

Conner was sitting near Cynthia in the area set aside for spectators, surrounded by perhaps a dozen others. Even without Iliopoulos, the trial was still the culmination of more than half a decade of his and Veale’s work. If the verdict went against them, their clients would have to hand over as much as \$77 million, a very large award even for Lloyd’s—and an embarrassing black mark for Veale’s business. The implications went

beyond the payout, though, and the fact that Iliopoulos would walk away unscathed. With a loss for the insurers, the whole maritime world would see that it paid to continue scuttling ships, risking sailors' lives in the process.

There was also the matter of law enforcement. Despite Iliopoulos's professed justification for not coming to London, the detectives had very little confidence that police were treating the *Brillante* with the seriousness it deserved. They'd received no indication that charges of any kind were imminent, and whatever investigations had been under way seemed to have stalled. But if the judge clearly ruled that the attack on the vessel was faked—a decision backed by the enormous volumes of evidence they'd helped the insurers amass—Veale and Conner believed the cops might be embarrassed into action. After years of fruitless efforts to get the Metropolitan Police more interested in Mockett's assassination, Cynthia was holding out hope that they were right.

The task of convincing Teare that the destruction of the *Brillante* was a fraud would fall to Jonathan Gaisman, the barrister who'd also represented the insurers when Iliopoulos was on the stand in 2016. With his soft features, Gaisman didn't look imposing, but he had a reputation as a fiercely effective courtroom advocate, with a list of past clients that included the BBC, the Royal Bank of Scotland, and even the government of Russia, defending it against investors in an oil company that had been effectively seized by the Kremlin. (Demonstrating the gymnastic flexibility prized in the British legal fraternity, Gaisman had also advised the financier Bill Browder, one of Vladimir Putin's most tenacious critics.)

Gaisman's specialty was in handling cases of extreme complexity, and the *Brillante* dispute certainly qualified. It would take until midsummer to get through all the hearings, during which he and MacDonald Eggers would present evidence from specialists in marine engineering, salvage, piracy, accounting, and shipboard security, as well as a topic the lawyers called "Yemeni criminality." There would be detailed analysis of Iliopoulos's financial circumstances in the months before the *Brillante*'s last voyage, and of the precise chronology of Poseidon Salvage's response to the attack, the speed of which, the insurers suggested, implied foreknowledge. There

would be a mind-numbing debate over what was referred to as “the detachment of the drain-cock,” an issue that Gaisman viewed as critically important. A spout on an oil tank had broken off at some point after the *Brillante* fire began, but was later reattached—evidence, according to Gaisman, that someone was trying to cover their tracks.

Veale questioned the wisdom of spending so much time on technical evidence, and on the lengthy questioning of expert witnesses about the minutiae of engineering diagrams and close-up photographs. It would be too easy, he feared, for the trial to get bogged down in angels-on-a-pin details, at the expense of what he believed was an indisputable overall picture. Still, the lawyers had insisted they knew better. As Veale sometimes complained to his partner, they seemed to think that “unless something’s written down on a bit of paper, it didn’t happen.”

Instead of the endless back-and-forth between experts, Veale and Conner were focused on the other parts of the proceedings, which they hoped would make the strongest impression on Judge Teare. For the first time since the *Brillante* was attacked, a court was about to hear from people who were actually there.

“Captain Gonzaga, can you see me and hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want to take you back to the beginning of the last voyage of the *Brillante Virtuoso*.”

The video link to the Shangri-La Hotel in Manila, eight time zones away, was patchy. Sometimes the image froze for several seconds, and there was a noticeable lag before questions from Gaisman, in the courtroom in London, reached the other end of the line. If it couldn’t be fixed, Teare suggested Gonzaga’s appearance might need to be abandoned. But the testimony of the *Brillante*’s captain was critically important, and after some modest improvement, Teare gave his permission for it to proceed.

Some of Gaisman’s first questions to Gonzaga were so simple that it was hard to discern what he was getting at. Early in his cross-examination,

he asked the Filipino to describe some of the equipment on the tanker's bridge. "What instruments did you have on the bridge to enable you to see in what direction you were sailing?" Gaisman asked. Gonzaga replied that he had used nautical charts, as well as the Automatic Identification System, a platform for tracking the movement of vessels.

"I rather assume," the lawyer said, "you would mention that there was a gyrocompass on the bridge"—a spinning dial that indicates a ship's heading at all times. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Was there also a repeater display on the control panel, which showed you what the heading of the vessel was?"

"Yeah, you can see the repeater also."

"If, say, the second officer came on the bridge at the beginning of his watch, it would be very easy for him to see what the heading of the ship was, wouldn't it, straight away?"

The response came back from Manila without hesitation. "Yeah, we can see by looking at the gyro."

"And at the repeater display on the control panel, correct?"

"That's correct, sir."

Gaisman moved on, his questions sharpening. At one point he asked Gonzaga to imagine a "suspect boat drill," a practice run for responding to the approach of an unidentified vessel. Such drills were a standard part of maritime security training, and the *Brillante's* crew had conducted one just a couple of months before they ran into trouble. Suppose, Gaisman said, speaking slowly to ensure that he was understood, "During this drill a young officer had put his hand up" to ask a question. "Supposing he had said, 'If the people in the boat have rifles and we can see that they have rifles, would that be something which should increase our concern or diminish our concern?' "

"Increase concern," Gonzaga replied.

Gaisman continued. "Supposing they didn't just have rifles but they also were wearing masks, that would increase your concern even more, wouldn't it?"

At the reference to masks, Gonzaga seemed to grasp where Gaisman was trying to take him. According to the captain's own earlier statements, the men who attacked the *Brillante* had carried assault rifles and covered their faces with surgical masks. And yet Gonzaga had allowed them to come on board, claiming afterward that he believed them to be "the authorities." Suddenly, he began to backtrack. "No, sir," Gonzaga said. Masks wouldn't alarm him. They might be worn "because sometimes it's dust," or to protect against disease—an explanation that, well before the emergence of COVID-19, would have struck few in the courtroom as credible.

Gaisman was trying to show that Gonzaga had ignored every conceivable antipiracy procedure on the night in question, defying his documented training as well as common sense. As the lawyer continued to push him to explain his behavior, Gonzaga's answers became even more strained. "So if somebody tells you that there's a small, unlit boat approaching," Gaisman asked, "it doesn't cross your mind that they might be pirates?" Not necessarily, Gonzaga explained. "Because sometimes there's a small boat coming [to] sell fish." Nocturnal fishmongering—in one of the most dangerous waterways in the world, no less—was a new one, and Gaisman seemed genuinely startled by the claim. "Selling fish in the middle of the night?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's in my previous experience, sir."

"It would be a rather high-risk area just to sell a few kingfish or John Dory, wouldn't it?" The notion seemed too ridiculous to spend more time discussing. "Anyway, let's go on."

Gaisman shifted to what happened later, after the attackers had boarded the *Brillante*, when Gonzaga was alone on the bridge with some of the gunmen. Repeating what he'd previously told investigators, Gonzaga testified that the apparent pirates had ordered him to sail to Somalia—although not, curiously, toward any specific point in that country, which has more than three thousand kilometers of coastline.

With that statement on the record, Gaisman sprang his trap. The ship's navigational logs, he reminded the court, showed that Gonzaga had in fact

steered it southwest, toward Djibouti—a placid East African state, fortified with US and French military installations, where it would be distinctly unwise to turn up with a hijacked oil tanker. As Gaisman pointed out, real pirates—experienced seamen, with deep knowledge of oceanic navigation—“would be likely to notice if the vessel was being steered in the wrong direction, wouldn’t they?” After all, Gonzaga had helpfully confirmed, in his earlier testimony, that there were multiple instruments on the bridge showing the *Brillante’s* heading. The only explanation, Gaisman said, was that no one had any intention of taking the *Brillante* to Somalia, and the ship’s captain knew it.

Under a battery of questions, Gonzaga insisted that the gunmen watching over him “didn’t know when I sailed wrong direction.” Gaisman responded curtly: “So you say, master.”

Gaisman’s questioning lasted for four days, time he used to dismantle even the most anodyne elements of Gonzaga’s story. Although Judge Teare, a model of judicial inscrutability, didn’t betray his impressions of the testimony, it was clear to Veale and Conner that the cross-examination had scored point after point for the insurers. Still, they were wary of getting too confident. Their reluctant star witness hadn’t yet testified, and they couldn’t be sure of what he was going to say.



Dimitrios Plakakis was surrounded by cops. Beamed into the Rolls Building by video link from an undisclosed location, he sat at a table flanked by officers from the City of London Police. Their presence was meant as a warning to anyone intending to hurt him, though it had the unintended effect of making Plakakis appear especially vulnerable. Balding and bespectacled, he looked even more slight than usual. A lawyer for the City force was in the courtroom to monitor his testimony, ready to intervene if he said anything that might compromise his security.

Gaisman had almost no questions for Plakakis, apart from asking him to verify that he was “Theo Blake,” the anonymous whistleblower who’d given a long statement to police in 2017, describing everything he’d

witnessed in Yemen. Plakakis confirmed that he was, and that the statement, which had been entered into evidence for the civil trial, remained accurate. After just a few minutes, Gaisman asked Plakakis his final question: “Are you attending this court voluntarily or because you have been told to do so by a witness summons?” Plakakis replied that he’d been ordered to appear. “It’s not voluntarily,” he said.

Gaisman took his seat, yielding the floor to MacDonald Eggers to conduct his cross-examination. “The question I have for you,” MacDonald Eggers said after some preliminaries, “is why are you giving evidence today only because there’s a court order—a witness summons? Why aren’t you giving it freely and voluntarily?”

Plakakis spoke English with a heavy Greek accent, and a translator was standing by in case he asked to switch to his native language. But no one had trouble making out his answer, even if his syntax was sometimes unconventional. “I didn’t want to expose my name, I didn’t wanted to expose my life,” he said. “Unfortunately, for reasons that they had nothing to do with me, police said the underwriters, they decided to give my evidence, to expose my identity, and to find myself in the position I’m here.” If it had been up to him, Plakakis said, he would never have testified.

Trying to cast doubt on Plakakis’s motives, MacDonald Eggers asked him to explain how he first made contact with the police. Had he approached law enforcement, or vice versa? Plakakis said he’d taken the initiative of going to the police; he believed that he’d witnessed something fundamentally wrong and had a responsibility to come forward—an obligation to his “dignity as a human being,” as he put it in his statement.

But if Plakakis had intimate knowledge of a criminal fraud, MacDonald Eggers continued, he could have reported it immediately after it occurred in 2011. Why wait years to tell anyone? “You have to understand me,” Plakakis replied. “I was living on the floating crane inside the Aden port, in the sea. It wasn’t a case like you go next door to the police and you report something.” He had waited until “the time was safe for me”—when he was in London, confident he was beyond Iliopoulos’s reach.

MacDonald Eggers kept pressing. Plakakis left Aden a month after the *Brillante* attack, he said, and “had every opportunity, without any fear for your security, to bring this to the attention of the authorities or the police at that time.” It was a revealing statement. Like the insurance lawyers who’d so frustrated Veale and Conner, MacDonald Eggers seemed almost willfully blind to the realities of places less well ordered than the City of London. “There was no trust to report the case to the Greek authorities,” Plakakis said, because Iliopoulos was “a Greek oligarch,” with untold influence in Athens. “I was afraid about my life.” Vassilios Theodorou, the Poseidon crewman who later met with Veale and Conner, had tried to tell a lawyer what he’d witnessed, Plakakis continued. As a result, “he found himself hiding from the world in the Greek mountains.” But “I didn’t have any mountain to go. I was trying to live a life as a normal person.”

MacDonald Eggers moved on to the next part of his strategy: to try to show that the conspiracy described by Plakakis wasn’t plausible. This was a central plank of Piraeus Bank’s argument—that the fraud alleged by the insurers was too complex, and involved too many people, to have really happened. “Just so I understand it,” MacDonald Eggers said, “this alleged conspiracy involves Mr. Iliopoulos and his associates; that’s correct?”

Plakakis replied that it was. “And Mr. Vergos,” he added.

“The master and chief engineer?”

“Yes.”

“Members of the Yemeni Coast Guard?”

“Yes.”

The list stretched on, taking in the businessman Sharif Ba’alawi, the Yemeni fixer Ahmed Nashwan, and various others in Greece and Yemen. “That’s a very large number of people,” MacDonald Eggers declared skeptically. But Plakakis was emphatic. “I was there. I know exactly what happened. I witnessed the thing,” he said. “Your belief may be different, because you have different interests. What can I do about that? It’s 100 percent true, my whole statement, line by line. I lived through that story. I lived through that in my life. I have damaged my life big time because of this. So I have not any reason to lie.”

Plakakis answered MacDonald Eggers's questions for the entire day, speaking in long, digressive bursts that prompted Teare to ask him to keep his replies to the point. For a man who'd needed a court order to testify, he had a remarkable amount to say, and a detailed rebuttal to every attempt to cast doubt on his story. The next day, the bank's lawyer continued to needle him, attempting to pick at his credibility. In his police statement, Plakakis had said he'd known the *Brillante* operation would be dangerous: he feared that the oil on board could explode, or cause a spill on the Yemeni coast. If that was true, MacDonald Eggers asked, "Why didn't you warn someone about these dangers before it happened?"

Again, Plakakis asked the lawyer to consider his circumstances. "I have to remind you I was in the middle of the sea. It wasn't in a flat here in Kensington to call by police station."

"But you had all means of communication available. You could have communicated with anyone, including the insurers, or the police."

Plakakis had remained patient through most of the questioning, but now he began to get angry. "Forgive me for being rude," he told MacDonald Eggers. "Mr. David Mockett, he knew how to communicate and he's where he is." He continued: "Don't ask me questions why I didn't do what I didn't do . . . whatever I did was correct because I'm still alive today. That's all I know."

Neither MacDonald Eggers nor Teare said anything in reply. On a flimsy chair at the rear of the courtroom, Cynthia Mockett was sitting quietly.



The hearings continued for fifty-two days, many of them taken up with microscopic cross-examination of technical specialists with no direct knowledge of what occurred on the *Brillante*. As Veale and Conner had feared, the proceedings felt at times like they were completely detached from the actual events—a procession of paid expert witnesses answering questions that focused, for example, on patterns of damage to the tanker's pipework. "Now, bearing in mind," MacDonald Eggers asked during one

memorably futile exchange, “that that angle iron supporting both the pipe which leads to the side flange and then it is bolted to that pipe below, which of course, if it is bolted, that may be, as you say, exerting a downward force on the angle iron, that collapse or that sagging could create tensions and forces within the pipework system which leads to the separation of the flange from the valve body?” The witness’s reply: “Well, that was the point I was making.”

On the final day, Gaisman got into a debate with Teare on whether “knowledge and belief are different things,” which culminated with the insurers’ lawyer engaging in a bit of amateur theology. “I mean, religious belief,” Gaisman declared, “is obviously one example where, except in the cases of people who are very fortunate in their gifts, you believe what you don’t know. ‘*Credo ut intelligam*’ ”—I believe, in order to understand—“as Augustine said.” The attorneys on both sides of the courtroom tittered with amusement.

It was tempting for the detectives to feel the decision was sure to go their way. The insurers’ key witnesses had held up well, and they believed they had an overwhelming body of evidence on their side, even if some of it had been clouded through overlong dissection. But overconfidence, they told themselves, would be a mistake. The reluctance of the Lloyd’s market to accuse its clients of fraud was only part of why underwriters so rarely took scuttling cases to court. They were also exceedingly difficult to win, with insurers required to prove not only that a vessel was intentionally destroyed but that its owner was directly responsible.

For Cynthia, the trial was notable for how much weight was given to her late husband’s work. It wasn’t just Plakakis’s reference to him. Both sides had cited Mockett’s survey, and his photographs were entered into evidence, unchallenged. Every time she saw them being used, she felt a little better. During a break in one hearing, Gaisman took the time to approach her. “There is no doubt that your husband knew exactly what he was looking at,” he told Cynthia.

In October 2019, the legal teams returned to the Rolls Building, where Judge Teare would hand down his verdict. No one could accuse him of failing to consider the matter thoroughly. His written judgment ran to more than 130 single-spaced pages, beginning with a detailed summary of the known facts of the *Brillante* case and running through his assessment of key witnesses. Veale and Conner scanned it as quickly as they could, looking for hints of Teare's conclusion, which might be buried deep inside the document. They found it, finally, beginning from paragraph 472. "The armed men who boarded *Brillante Virtuoso*," Teare wrote, "had no intention of hijacking the vessel for ransom and only pretended to be pirates." He'd concluded that Captain Gonzaga and Nestor Tabares, the chief engineer, "assisted the armed men in their task," serving as key players in a conspiracy to which "Mr. Vergos of Poseidon was party." The next lines were the ones the detectives found most satisfying to read. "I do not consider that there is a plausible explanation of the events which befell *Brillante Virtuoso* which is consistent with an innocent explanation," Teare said. And he had no doubt about who was responsible: "The orchestrator of these events was the owner of *Brillante Virtuoso*, Mr. Iliopoulos."

For the lawyers and Talbot's Paul Cunningham, the verdict was met with intense relief. They'd all put their reputations on the line by confronting a shipowner so directly. Zavos had even been accused of organizing illegal investigations in Greece, in a criminal complaint that also named Conner. Such an emphatic ruling from Teare was the best possible outcome, a vindication of all the risks they'd taken. Yet the codes of the London insurance world still applied. None of the *Brillante* insurers wanted to put out a press release trumpeting their victory; it was better, they thought, not to draw excessive attention.

Veale and Conner, for their parts, had mixed feelings about the judgment. Veale recognized it as a professional triumph. Yet he was stung by a sense of regret. There were important witnesses and pieces of evidence he hadn't been allowed to pursue. He thought about Sharif Ba'alawi, who was in business with both Vassilios Vergos and Ahmed Nashwan. At one point Ba'alawi had made contact with someone at Lloyd's, suggesting he

was willing to talk. But Zavos never granted his permission for Veale and Conner to seek an interview with him.

For Veale, the missing puzzle pieces were a source of insistent bother, compounded by the knowledge that the verdict might have little or no direct impact on Iliopoulos. With his *Brillante* debt to Piraeus Bank written off, the shipowner was free and clear. Veale's side had won, but he wasn't quite sure he could put the case behind him. Conner, meanwhile, responded to the decision with a shrug. "Not a penny lost in Greece," he said, repeating a line that had become something of a catchphrase when he talked about the *Brillante*. It was a curious sort of victory that allowed the losers to walk away with their position improved by tens of millions of dollars.

After he'd read through the judgment, Conner called Cynthia at her home in Devon to break the news. When he told her what Teare had written, she began to cry. Listening to her, Conner realized that, despite his own ambivalence, the verdict was the closest Cynthia had come to a validation of her husband's life and death—maybe the closest she would ever come. It meant something, even if that meaning had to be found amid insurers and financiers squabbling over the cost of a ship. "David was right," she said through her tears. "I knew he was right."

CHAPTER 27

THE CAPTAIN

In late 2020, about a year after the *Brillante Virtuoso* judgment, Richard Veale was back working for the Lloyd’s market—on a new case, with a different syndicate of insurers, and a different kind of villain on the other side. The attorneys on his team were gleefully speculating about how damaging it would be if a judge in London’s High Court ruled against their opponent. He would be dragged through the mud in the shipping press, they predicted, and there would be a critical report in *Lloyd’s List*, the industry journal that has chronicled the marine world’s triumphs and disasters since 1734. (Despite the name, the publication is independent from Lloyd’s.) The lawyers assumed this would be devastating for the businessman. Veale disagreed. He had two words for them: “Marios Iliopoulos.”

As far as Veale could see, Super Mario was doing just fine, even after the decision in London. If anything, he was thriving. Just two months after Judge Teare ruled that Iliopoulos had orchestrated one of history’s most audacious maritime frauds, a Seajets ferry won “Ship of the Year” at the Lloyd’s List Greek Shipping Awards. Iliopoulos accepted the prize with a speech at a glitzy ceremony in Athens. Some of the most respected names in the industry were in attendance, alongside a clutch of Greek politicians that included the country’s deputy minister for sport and culture. Wearing a black suit and crisp white shirt, Iliopoulos praised the vessel’s record-breaking speed and environmentally friendly turbine engines. “At Seajets,

our goals are fully aligned with the goals of all Greeks who want to see Greece, this country with its huge history and culture, smile again and fill the hearts of all Greeks with pride and joy,” he beamed. “We believe that society cannot exist without respecting, living, breathing together.” Iliopoulos had also won plaudits for his response to the wildfires that tore through the Greek mainland in 2018, killing more than a hundred people and displacing thousands. He’d hired cranes to clear the roads, donated food supplies, and organized special events to provide “psychological support to children affected by the tragedy,” according to a press release issued on his behalf.

None of the controversies buzzing around the shipowner seemed to matter. Like irritating flies, he managed to brush them away, never letting them interfere with his business. Back in 2014, Veale had identified another oil tanker that belonged to Iliopoulos’s fleet: the *Despina Andrianna*. Proving it wasn’t easy. The vessel’s ownership was convoluted even by the standards of modern shipping, further obscured by a so-called back-to-back transaction, where an asset is bought by one offshore shell, then immediately sold to another. Veale figured it out when he spotted the signature of a Seajets employee—a woman who’d been seen accompanying Iliopoulos to social events in Greece—in the *Despina*’s paperwork. The entity that owned the ship also shared a phone, fax number, and Piraeus address with Worldwide Green Tankers, a known Iliopoulos shell. When Veale saw that the former captain of the *Brillante*, Noe Gonzaga, had posted a picture of the *Despina* on his Facebook page, he had no doubt who the real owner was.

At the time, Veale passed on the details of his discovery to his contacts at Lloyd’s, then thought little more about it. But five years later, in 2019, the US Treasury Department announced sanctions against the *Despina Andrianna* and associated companies, alleging that they had been running embargoed Venezuelan oil to Cuba, to the benefit of President Nicolás Maduro’s brutal regime. Though Iliopoulos wasn’t named in the order, even indirect international sanctions are among the most serious red flags for corporate compliance departments. Ignoring them can lead to billion-dollar

penalties and criminal prosecution. The whole point of sanctions, especially when applied with the global reach of the US government, is to freeze their targets out of the machinery of international finance. Yet Iliopoulos's ventures continued to operate, seemingly unconstrained.

When COVID-19 brought global trade and tourism to a halt in 2020, many maritime businesses faced ruin. Iliopoulos, with typical bravado, saw an opportunity. He bought at least six passenger vessels, at fire-sale prices, from desperate cruise operators whose businesses had shut down. Within a few months he'd sold two for scrap, earning three times the \$9 million he paid, according to estimates by trade publications. Like the *Brillante* before them, the *Columbus* and the *Magellan* were dismantled by hand and stripped of recyclable material at Indian and Pakistani shipbreaking yards, some of the world's most dangerous and polluted workplaces. Because of the human and environmental cost, it's illegal for European companies to send vessels to either country to be broken down without first removing all potentially hazardous waste, but the rules are easily skirted by transferring ownership offshore. The other four liners that Iliopoulos bought during the pandemic were, at the time of writing, laid up in Greek ports awaiting their fate. Given his talent for turning old ships into money, they should earn him a healthy return.

Most remarkable of all, Super Mario kept doing business at Lloyd's, according to several sources who asked not to be identified because the contracts aren't public. The Seajets fleet and his bargain cruise ships can't sail without protection, and the world's most important insurance market isn't in the habit of turning away customers. Most of Iliopoulos's vessels are registered for third-party liability insurance with something called the American Steamship Owners Mutual Protection and Indemnity Association. In plain English, the American Club, as it's known, is a kind of global shipowners' collective, pooling resources to cover the cost of damage caused by ships involved in accidents. There are limits to how much clubs like it will pay out, though. For anything major, members of the American Club have to claim extra funds from a reinsurance policy bought through Lloyd's. (A spokesman for the group said that its relationship with Seajets

is “routine, unremarkable and legitimate.”) To some in the Lloyd’s orbit, selling insurance, even in this roundabout way, to someone who’d deliberately wrecked at least one tanker, and probably two, was hard to stomach. To others it wasn’t so surprising. The same moral flexibility had allowed the market to survive scandals and financial mishaps for more than three hundred years.

The newest threat to the occupants of One Lime Street was the novel coronavirus, which was expected to cost Lloyd’s members at least 6 billion pounds as companies claimed on policies covering unexpected business interruption. Globally, the insurance industry responded with increasingly creative ways to avoid having to compensate clients. Early in the pandemic, an American law firm asserted that since the virus was microscopic and could only survive temporarily outside the human body, the damage it caused wasn’t physically quantifiable. Insurers seized on the defense enthusiastically. The first of hundreds of lawsuits to decide the issue began in December 2020, when a New Orleans restaurant sued in Louisiana District Court for the money lost when it was forced to close. The defendants were listed as “Certain Underwriters at Lloyd’s, London.” The industry’s pugnacious attitude toward that and similar claims offered a sharp contrast to its historic ambivalence about scuttling. In the UK, Lloyd’s members took a test case on COVID-19 payouts all the way to the Supreme Court, and lost.

The pandemic caused one of the worst years in living memory for London’s insurers. Lloyd’s had to close its historic Underwriting Room twice in 2020, forcing underwriters and brokers who’d spent a lifetime making deals face-to-face into unfamiliar digital interactions. It was awkward but it worked, just well enough. The market kept on going, even as the Lloyd’s corporation, which operates it, swung from a 2.5 billion pound pretax profit in 2019 to a 900 million pound loss in 2020.

Still, Lloyd’s would endure. It had weathered storms before. “Actually, when we get under the skin of the results, and get out of Covid, we’re really encouraged,” chief executive John Neal told the *Financial Times*. From the

market's point of view, he said, the next few years offered "really solid trading conditions."

On a balmy summer afternoon, Cynthia Mockett and Michael Conner made the short drive to Drake Memorial Park, a hillside cemetery near Cynthia's Plymouth home. As they arrived, shadows stretched out from scattered pine trees over the rows of simple plaques laid flat in the earth. Cynthia and Conner followed a neat gravel path through a manicured lawn. There, amid patches of wildflowers, was her husband's plot, marked with an embossed metal slab.

DAVID JOHN MCKETT

27 MARCH 1946–20 JULY 2011

DEVOTED HUSBAND

DAD AND GRANDAD

ALWAYS MISSED

LOVED FOREVER

"Good afternoon, Captain," Conner said after a few moments of silence looking down on the grave. Then he got down on all fours and began carefully trimming the overgrown grass along the edges with a set of small shears.

The *Brillante* had left its mark on Conner. He was charged in the criminal complaint lodged in Greece by one of Iliopoulos's associates, accusing the insurers and various agents of trying to access private information. While the actions in the complaint had nothing to do with him, he had to take it seriously. So did Veale, who wasn't named as a defendant, but was described in the filing as a "critical and important person" to the case. Conner risked detention under a European arrest warrant, and they were forced to hire Greek defense lawyers at considerable cost. The Talbot syndicate, after initially indicating it was willing to cover Veale and Conner's legal bills, suddenly withdrew the offer. Veale's firm happened to

have a separate corporate insurance policy against legal action—but the insurers refused to pay out. The pair had to split the cost themselves.

Conner was left fuming, tens of thousands of pounds out of pocket. His friendship with Veale had also been strained. The two men had argued fiercely about the debt, and Conner felt let down. Then, without explanation, the Greek complaint was dropped. Conner returned to working as a consultant for Veale. They slipped quickly back into their old double act—Metal Mickey and the Accountant, the tough guy and the technician—chasing scammers and swindlers around the world for clients in London’s financial district. They were often hired by law firms, though after watching Conner interact with Chris Zavos, Veale tried to keep his partner’s contact with attorneys to a minimum.

After Conner finished pruning the grass, Cynthia laid down some fresh flowers. “He always told me he would be the first to go,” she said. David would joke that he had to die earlier, because he couldn’t bring himself to go on without her. Remembering his words, she smiled. Her husband had wanted to be an organ donor, she told Conner, but that wasn’t possible because of the damage caused by the bomb. Instead, she’d agreed to allow the pathologist who’d conducted his autopsy to use his remains to train other forensic scientists. It seemed fitting. “Evidence, dear boy” was one of Mockett’s favorite phrases. Cynthia often came to the cemetery alone, to talk to him. She liked to tell him what was happening with the *Brillante* case, and to update him on what the police were doing. “We haven’t forgotten about you,” she would say.

Not that there had been much recent news. In fact, as far as Cynthia knew, there was none. The City of London Police’s fraud investigation into the *Brillante*, the one that led to Iliopoulos’s arrest outside court, appeared to have sputtered out, with no charges ever brought. As for Mockett’s death, the UK Foreign Office had kicked the case over to the Metropolitan Police antiterror unit. There it had remained ever since, apparently gathering dust.

In 2018, Cynthia wrote to her local Member of Parliament, Sir Gary Streeter, who said he would try to help. His letters to various police leaders, bearing the House of Commons logo, yielded a handful of meetings and

replies expressing condolences, but also making clear it was up to the Yemeni authorities to investigate a murder in Yemen. Given the country's descent into civil war, mass starvation, and disease, that was as good as saying it would never happen. In Yemen, Mockett's death was just one tragedy among millions. "I am afraid that it looks as though both the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police have made up their minds," Streeter wrote to Cynthia in 2020.

Soon after they first met, Conner promised he would help Mockett's widow see the matter through to the end. Now it wasn't clear what sort of ending they could hope for. Conner felt the clearest course to justice could be to use the UK's laws on criminal proceeds, which allow the confiscation of money earned from illegal activities, to pursue the architects of the *Brillante* attack. Whether it was securing a simple fraud conviction, charging Iliopoulos with the deliberate destruction of a vessel, or freezing bank accounts and seizing ships, he believed there were things the British police should have done—and still could. In Cynthia's mind, any response would have been better than what she'd witnessed so far. It was bad enough that the people responsible for destroying the *Brillante* had escaped punishment, financial or otherwise. She'd received no apology, no compensation—not even a payout from Mockett's corporate life insurance—and no satisfactory answer to the question of what her husband had died for.

No longer able to afford the upkeep of the Vicarage, Cynthia had moved out of the family home and into a bungalow nearby. The garden was much smaller, but she kept busy maintaining a colorful display of flowers and growing tomatoes in her greenhouse. It was David who'd encouraged her to take a course in botany, years ago, while he was out of the country working. Although she walked with a slight limp, the result of a hip operation that left one leg shorter than the other, Cynthia could get around the garden briskly, accompanied by a tortoiseshell cat who followed her as she tended the plants.

A few weeks after the *Brillante* lawsuit ended, Cynthia wrote to the chief executive of Talbot, the lead member of the Lloyd's syndicate that

insured the tanker's hull. "Congratulations on winning the case," she said. "It was my husband, David Mockett, who inspected the vessel after it had been attacked. His evidence was used during the recent trial." Mockett's report had helped the syndicate defeat a fraudulent claim worth \$77 million, she went on. "I am told that Talbot spent £28 million on legal fees. It seems only just that my daughters and I receive some compensation for our loss. Of course, no amount of money can replace David, [but] it would greatly assist my family in our difficult circumstances." She never received any reply.

Cynthia and Conner walked among the trees as the sun slowly set on Drake Memorial Park. Without upright tombstones, the cemetery had a bright, open aspect that she had always enjoyed. She normally spent much of her time there in quiet contemplation, but as she talked to Conner in the fading light, insects swirling overhead, she began to grow angry. She'd lived apart from David for most of their marriage, while he was at sea or in the Middle East. "He was an exciting man," she said. "Nothing was ever dull with him. The stories he could tell . . ." She shook her head, as though she still couldn't quite accept the reality of his absence. Mockett's retirement was supposed to be the start of a new phase in their lives, one they could finally spend together. "I've been robbed and cheated of years with my husband," she said, her eyes blazing. "It's not right." Conner nodded but said nothing. "It's not right," Cynthia repeated softly. The two of them walked slowly up the driveway toward the exit, leaving the cemetery empty as the sun disappeared behind a smoky haze of white cloud, draping the hills in shadow.

AFTERWORD

One day in early 2017, the authors of this book walked the short distance from Bloomberg’s London newsroom to the Royal Exchange, in the heart of the City, to meet two men who, we’d been informed, could tell us all about the *Brillante Virtuoso*. The source who’d set up the rendezvous was too nervous to reveal their names or put us in direct contact with them. “This is a bigger situation than you know,” he’d told us a few weeks earlier, glancing over his shoulder anxiously. So how were we to spot the men we were supposed to meet? “One of them has an unusually large head,” the source said.

The Royal Exchange is one of central London’s grandest meeting places. Entering through a row of stone columns inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, we crossed into a central atrium, open from gleaming floor to glass roof. In years past, it would have echoed with the shouts of merchants, futures traders, and, for part of its history, the Lloyd’s of London insurance market. Today it is little more than a luxury shopping mall, selling jewelry and overpriced British condiments. We took a seat at one of the café tables in the center of the room and began joking about the cranial proportions of the people milling around.

“Is that them?”

“No, his head is only slightly bigger than average.”

“That one looks large, but is it unusually large?”

By that time, we'd been investigating the *Brillante* for several months, work that would lead to a feature published in *Bloomberg Businessweek* later in 2017. We knew little of Marios Iliopoulos, and nothing of the dramatic events, involving a pair of Greek whistleblowers, that were just then beginning to unfold. We'd both covered fraud and highly sensitive legal cases before, but we could feel that this story was different. Hardly anyone wanted to talk about it, and those who did insisted on remaining anonymous. No one knew whether the police were investigating, or what the insurers planned to do. It all seemed like a shameful secret.

Finally, our guests arrived. Or, at least, a man fitting the right description appeared, and, after we waved awkwardly, joined us with his companion. Over the next hour or so, they described an intervention by American special forces, a brutal beating in Greece, and at least one other, unrelated fraud connected to the *Brillante*. They explained that Mockett wasn't even the only Briton to have died in Yemen. The two men could give us no proof of any of it, but insisted that, with enough investigation, we would find it was all true. We left the meeting not quite sure what to believe.

By the time we began researching for this book, it was remarkable how many of those stories had turned out to be accurate. David Mockett's friend Roy Facey *had* been extracted from Yemen by an armed American team. Gerry Lallis, the Greek insurance lawyer, had indeed been beaten in Piraeus. The *Brillante* was at the center of not one but multiple frauds, including an apparent attempt to rip off Chinese tax authorities by mislabeling the tanker's cargo. (The architects of this entirely separate ruse must have had no idea the oil was never intended to reach its destination.) And another British citizen really did die in Aden not so long after Mockett: the lawyer Roger Stokes, who worked on behalf of at least one client with a financial interest in the ship, and later sustained a fatal head wound at his home, under circumstances that have never been fully understood.

All the while, the insurance industry has maintained a stubborn silence. Every one of the insurance companies mentioned in these pages declined to formally comment about their roles in the *Brillante* affair. (Allianz, which

was part of the group covering the tanker's cargo, said in a statement that it has a "zero-tolerance principle for fraud and corruption" and investigates suspicious claims thoroughly, but couldn't discuss the case.) The Lloyd's market itself went one better. When we sent a document outlining the contents of the book to its media relations team, inviting feedback, they confirmed receipt—and then never responded. The actions of criminals, these organizations seemed to have decided, were none of their business; the less said, the better.

This mindset might have been best exemplified by one of the many London lawyers who has worked for Iliopoulos. Toward the end of our project, we called him to ask whether there was anything he could say about the *Brillante*, even considering the restrictions of attorney-client privilege. Commenting wouldn't be proper, he said: "The case has been resolved in a satisfactory fashion by a senior judge of the realm. I have nothing further to say about it." When he was told that Cynthia Mockett didn't think the matter was satisfactorily resolved, the lawyer responded angrily. "I know nothing about that. Nothing at all," he declared.

It's possible to argue that the *Brillante* case struck a blow against fraud. After all, the insurers did decide to reject Iliopoulos's claim. They didn't have to. Another group of Lloyd's underwriters might have elected to negotiate a settlement and avoid the embarrassment of a trial. On the other hand, many of the people involved believe the lack of criminal or financial penalties for the perpetrators exposed a severe weakness in the system that enables global trade. The *Brillante*, they say, is an open invitation to other crooks, just as the *Salem* was forty years ago. The lesson: maritime fraud is profitable, and even if you are unlucky enough to get caught, you're unlikely to be prosecuted.



Some months after our meeting at the Royal Exchange, we made an important reporting breakthrough: interviewing Allan Marquez, the crewman who let the supposed pirates on board in 2011. After we spoke to him, Marquez asked to be put in touch with the *Brillante's* insurers in

London, who he hoped might be able to protect him from Iliopoulos. We agreed to make the connection. Within hours, someone from the insurers' side told the City of London Police that we had reached a potential witness in their investigation of the shipowner. We were promptly asked to a meeting at the agency's headquarters in Guildhall, one of the oldest civic sites in the City.

It was a tense time. We had concerns about Marquez's safety, and—unbeknownst to us—the police and insurers were dealing with the emergence of Dimitrios Plakakis and Vassilios Theodorou, who would later play important roles in unraveling the *Brillante* fraud. In a conference room, we sat down opposite two detectives and a police spokesman, who asked if we were planning to use Marquez's name in our upcoming article. We said we were considering it, and that the sailor had told us he was eager to speak out publicly. That was unacceptable, one of the detectives said. In the view of the City force, there was a clear danger to Marquez, and they needed to carry out a full risk assessment before he could be identified in print. He added that if we refused to comply, the police might seek a court injunction to block our story from being published—a legal tool used periodically in the UK.

We were taken aback by the demand. Marquez's name and role in the events of July 2011 were already in the public domain. Statements he'd given to private-sector investigators were disclosed in US litigation related to the *Brillante*, accessible to any of the millions of people with a login for the federal court records system. Not only had the City of London Police never attempted to contact Marquez, they'd never even read those statements. When we asked what legal precedent the detectives planned to use to block the identification of a witness who'd already been identified, one of them replied, "We'll find one." They had a room full of lawyers downstairs, he said.

After consulting with Bloomberg's legal team and sending a Filipino colleague to meet with Marquez and make sure he was comfortable going on the record, we published his comments in our *Businessweek* story. In the end the police didn't try to stop us; either they changed their minds or they

were bluffing. Not long afterward, a City of London detective flew to Manila to finally interview Marquez. But the crewman’s account, which shed alarming new light on the case and implicated Iliopoulos in the fabrication of evidence, didn’t lead to a breakthrough in their investigation. Instead, the inquiry appears to be dormant at best. One of the lead detectives left to join the compliance team of a British bank; another died of COVID-19. At the time this book was finalized, we knew of no law enforcement agency, anywhere in the world, that was seriously looking into either the *Brillante* fraud or the killing of David Mockett. The Metropolitan Police, whose counterterrorism unit previously examined the latter, said in a statement that there were very limited circumstances in which British officers could investigate a murder overseas. “The Yemeni authorities have overall responsibility for the homicide investigation,” a spokesman said. The force offered its condolences to the Mockett family.

Cynthia Mockett and Michael Conner haven’t given up on their campaign for justice. In November 2021, Cynthia’s Member of Parliament, Sir Gary Streeter, introduced a brief debate in the House of Commons about her husband’s death and the *Brillante Virtuoso* case. It was late afternoon and the historic chamber’s benches were nearly deserted after a busy session debating women’s rights and a looming energy crisis. Streeter, reading from prepared remarks, described the attack and its aftermath. “It was all a massive fraud that Captain Mockett was in the process of uncovering—for that, he was killed,” he said. Streeter called on the Minister for Security to encourage the British police to do what Conner had long urged: to treat the burning of the *Brillante* as an act of piracy, allowing the perpetrators to be prosecuted under UK maritime law. The evidence was there waiting to be used, in London and Athens. “Even now,” Streeter said, “it is not too late.”



For insurance executives and police officers in London, it may be embarrassing, or difficult, to confront the reality of maritime fraud. But in Yemen, asking questions about the *Brillante Virtuoso* can be considerably

more challenging. One after another, Yemeni journalists we tried to hire to assist with research were initially enthusiastic—but then, once they learned more about the nature of the project, said they were too busy, or simply fell out of contact. A writer we approached elsewhere in the region was warned by a Yemeni friend not to take the assignment, because it could put her in danger. “These are bad people,” the writer was told.

There are probably only a handful of people alive who know the details of what happened to David Mockett. One of them may be Sharif Ba’alawi, the Yemeni-Somali businessman who acted as a middleman between Aden’s Greek salvors and their local partners. When we reached him by phone in 2017, Ba’alawi responded to almost every question with blank denials, telling us he knew nothing about the attack on the *Brillante* or Mockett’s assassination. He was simply a contractor, he said, providing food and diesel for salvage crews. We later learned that he’d been jailed in the United Arab Emirates, apparently accused of trading with Yemen’s Houthi movement, which some regional governments consider a proxy for Iran. Despite repeated attempts, we were unable to contact him in prison.

With Ba’alawi out of reach, we focused on finding Ahmed Nashwan, the gun-toting Aden fixer who, according to both Plakakis and Theodorou, was at the center of the *Brillante* plot. He wasn’t easy to track down. Some of our Yemeni contacts thought he’d been killed, one of the more than 200,000 dead in the country’s ongoing civil war. But just weeks before our book deadline, we reached one of Nashwan’s former employers, who unexpectedly set up a meeting in Cairo, where Nashwan now lives along with a significant chunk of the Yemeni diaspora.

Like Ba’alawi, Nashwan denied any wrongdoing, saying that he was “an ordinary citizen,” not a “big successful businessman.” While he confirmed that he was in business with the Greek salvor Vassilios Vergos, Nashwan insisted that he had no involvement with the hijacking of the *Brillante*, and no idea who killed Mockett. Somewhat improbably, given Mockett’s prominence in Aden, Nashwan claimed not to even know who the Briton was. “I do not ask for people’s blood,” he said. “I swear to God almighty: I did not participate in the extortion of the insurance company.”

At one point in our reporting, a legal expert shared an anecdote about a Greek shipowner he'd worked with. There had been an accident involving a tanker, which was spilling oil into the Atlantic. The lawyer asked what went wrong. "Do you want the truth about what happened, or the facts?" the shipowner replied. To him, the two were rarely the same. The facts were what happened; the truth depended on your perspective, and your interests.

We heard many versions of the truth about the *Brillante Virtuoso*: from private investigators, police officers, judges, insurance executives, officials in far-flung ports, Filipino sailors, and Arab businessmen, each with different and sometimes contradictory recollections. Before we could complete this project, we wanted to hear from the men who were said to have devised the plan to destroy the ship, putting in motion everything that followed.

Vergos never agreed to an interview, so in the summer of 2021 we sent him a detailed letter inviting him to comment. His first response, delivered over WhatsApp, was a crying-with-laughter emoji. In a brief phone conversation afterward, he did not deny working with Iliopoulos to torch the *Brillante*; indeed, as Judge Teare pointed out in the 2019 trial, he never denied it at any point during the insurance litigation. He did, however, accuse Plakakis and Theodorou of fabricating allegations against him, describing them as people who "imagine things in order to blackmail." As for David Mockett, he said, "How would I know who killed him?" It was a violent period in Aden; as Vergos correctly pointed out, innocent people were dying regularly on the city's streets. "I'm really sad about the gentleman who lost his life," he said.

Beginning in 2016, we tried repeatedly to open a line of communication with Iliopoulos. One of his lawyers told us he was passing on our requests, but had "no instructions" to help us beyond that. Another claimed he didn't know how to contact his former client. We sent emails and letters to his companies, but Super Mario ignored them all.

Then, just two days before our *Businessweek* feature was due to be published, we received a letter from a London law firm that specializes in "reputation management" and said it was acting for Iliopoulos. We were

warned that our article might contain “outrageous allegations” against their client, including the “unfounded” suggestions that he was in any way responsible for the destruction of the *Brillante* or Mockett’s death. The lawyers said that Iliopoulos vigorously denied such allegations, and threatened us with legal action if we published an article that contained them. After we ran our story, we never heard from them again.

In 2021 we wrote to the shipowner’s employees, a close associate, and a public-relations agency he had worked with recently, including an eight-page memorandum listing eighty-one points on which he was welcome to comment. In reply, we received a brief letter from Carter-Ruck, another firm of libel specialists, which was now representing him. “Our client categorically denies any allegations of wrongdoing and does not propose to respond to baseless allegations,” it said.

One of our attempts to reach Iliopoulos, however, did reveal something about how he operates—and how determined the shipping industry can be to obscure the connections between what goes on at sea and the men who profit from it. In addition to emails, we sent printed copies of our memo, in English and Greek, by courier to Seajets’s headquarters in Piraeus. There is no doubt that the ferry line is controlled by Iliopoulos: he is routinely described in the Greek media as its owner, and in 2016 he testified in London that it belonged to his family. Company press releases have described him as either its chief executive officer or “head of strategic planning and development.”

We were surprised, then, to get a call from a befuddled courier-company manager shortly after sending the documents. Seajets was refusing to take delivery, he said. At their offices, staff had insisted that they knew of no one named Marios Iliopoulos at that address.