

SEA OF FIRE

On the Beach

After the excitement of the test, the day ends down on the beach. They watch the lights of the passing ships while enjoying a feast that the twins prepare “Indian Style” by steaming shellfish over hot coals in the sand. They even gathered the fresh oysters and clams that are the highlight of the meal. It’s all “five star.” And TK gets to try out his latest invention, Miracle Whip tartar sauce, which he and the girls have developed with scientific zeal, if not precision (simultaneously creating a laboratory-sized mess in Nerissa’s kitchen).

But it tastes great, at least as far as TK and the twins are concerned. Everyone else kind of passes in favor of the old, unimproved tartar sauce, or even just a little lemon and pepper. And the shellfish are truly delicious! Soon everyone is relaxing, watching the stars or the fire, or listening to the bark of the seals and the lapping of the waves.

Without warning, the idyllic evening is brought to abrupt end by TK’s excited shout, “Look, there’s a fire out there!” Everybody else see the flames immediately. They look like they’re out toward the middle of the strait, in the shipping lane the supertankers use as they go back and forth to the nearby refineries.

Terry and Nitro head up the hill to see what kind of information they can pick up on the CB scanner, TK wheeling closely behind.

Sure enough, it’s a tanker fire and the emergency band is already alive as rescue boats are hurriedly dispatched. By the time Celeste arrives at the truck, the Coast Guard is already announcing that they have found the crew in lifeboats and are picking them up – but one man is still unaccounted for. Helicopters are on the way to aid them in their search for the missing man, but it will take them at least another thirty minutes to arrive at the scene, which is a long time in a situation like this. With flames swirling and spreading about the deck of the tanker every second counts.

Team in Action

Terry turns to say something to Nitro, but he isn’t there--he’s already in the back of the trailer putting a fresh separator disc in RocketBike and getting it ready to fly. As usual, Terry and Nitro are on the same wave length.

“With RocketBike’s new slow flight capabilities, I should be able to fly over the area slow enough to help them with their search,” says Terry as he puts on his silver flight suit and helmet.

RocketBike is quickly ready to go and the four of them touch hands in a quick affirmation of team unity. Terry gets on the bike as Nitro hits the elevator switch to lift Terry and RocketBike to the roof. Below, TK turns on the computer so they can receive data from the bike and communicate with Terry. Celeste puts on a set of headphones hooked to the CB scanner so she can monitor search reports from the Coast Guard.

The elevator reaches roof level. As Terry prepares to launch, he looks to the west, where a good portion of the sky is now bright orange from the fire. “Won’t be hard to find,” he thinks as Nitro’s voice fills his headphones with a steady stream of launch information.

Blast Off

TK gives the countdown and at zero, Terry hits the green button. “Man, “ he thinks, “these launches are unreal. They almost make me forget about riding SuperBike.”

By the time Terry gets over the rush of the launch and gets his bearings, he’s out over the water and nearly halfway to the burning tanker. He looks down as he passes over a Coast Guard cutter. “Hope they’re too busy searching to notice me,” he thinks. “We want to keep this flying bike thing kinda under wraps for now.”

He’s in luck. Everyone on the cutter is staring out at the searchlight spots on the water, hoping to spot the missing crewman. Nobody looks up and notices the strange vehicle rapidly passing overhead. “This flying at night is alright,” thinks Terry.

It’s almost a full moon so the visibility is good, and he’s now close enough to the fire that it’s orange glow light the water and tanker deck.

Sea of Fire

The fire has spread out around the ship as its spilling fuel ignites. Flames stream skyward from the surface of the waves, fanning across the water in gusts of dark and oily smoke. Terry takes it in from the air as he approaches. It’s worse than it appears from the shore and he radios a status report to the team.

“Looks pretty hopeless if that guy ended up in the water. Everything’s on fire down there.” Terry completes his transmission as he leans into a banking turn over the huge vessel. Mid-turn, he notices something very interesting.

Although there is fire all around it on the water, and even though one end of it is totally engulfed in flames, there seems to be an area right down in the middle of the giant ship, perhaps some sort of raised deck, where there is no absolutely no fire at all. Making a tight turn, he comes in lower, feeling the heat as he looks down into the flames.

Help

Then he spots something else. Something that looks like a man, it is! He’s about half way down the raised platform. And as Terry passes over him, he can see that the man appears to be on his knees. “Maybe he’s praying,” thinks Terry. “And I don’t blame him. This situation doesn’t look too good.”

“Man -- I hate fire!” he says to himself as he pulls up steeply over the flames, which are pouring from the ship’s bridge windows.

These supertankers are longer than three football fields, and the middle platform surrounded by fire looks like a nice, long and well-lit runway. Terry comes around fast and heads straight for it.

Goin’ In

“Got no choice, it’s his only chance,” Terry radios to Nitro as he crosses over the bow of the monster ship. In a single rapid descent he clears the searing heat of the fire and sets down lightly on the front end of the platform, rapidly propelled towards the man, who has not yet looked up. “Hope he sees me before I hit him” Terry thinks.

As if on cue, the man suddenly raises his head and stares directly at Terry. Terry is close enough to see the expression on his face, and it’s a very strange one indeed. The man is beyond terrified: his features display a strange, desperate calm, the look of someone who has accepted his fate.

As Terry rolls to a stop beside him, the man reaches out and touches him. He’s obviously given

up hope, and his hand probes the silver of Terry's suit as if to comprehend it's meaning -- as if to determine whether Terry is real or a figment of his desperate imagination. Terry nods, and as the reality of his rescue registers, the man is suddenly, instantly babbling in a language that Terry can't understand at all.

Putting his feet to the deck, Terry can feel the heat of the fire through the bottoms of his boots. "This is going to be like a giant frying pan, real soon," he thinks. "Best get a move on."

Patting the seat behind him and shouting at the man to get on quick, Terry redistributes his weight over the frame of the bike and prepares for their getaway. Terry hopes that the man will figure out what he's trying to say, won't freeze with panic, but before he has a chance to give it a second thought, the man is already on the seat behind him. Even if he doesn't exactly understand Terry's words, he obviously understands the meaning of "hurry" - not to mention "fire" and "hold on tight." He doesn't waste a second grabbing on so tight that he practically squeezes the breath out of Terry.

We're Out of Here!

Terry hits the ignition button and they begin to accelerate towards the back end of the tanker and its bridge tower, which is now a wall of fire. They lift off and Terry puts RocketBike into a steep climb, banking to the left as the flames lick at their feet.

Through all of this, Terry's passenger is repeating the same words over and over. Terry, who can't understand a word he is saying thinks that maybe this guy has never flown before. He radios Nitro that he's going to set it down on the beach, putting it into a slow turn as they approach the shore. By the time he closes the gap, Nitro and Celeste are already at the waterline with flashlights to mark off a good level landing spot.

Safe and Sound

RocketBike sets down smoothly on the hard sand and rolls to a stop as Nitro and Celeste come running. When Terry's passenger sees Celeste, he finally says a word that Terry can understand: "Angel." Overwhelmed, he falls to his knees, putting his hands on the sand.

"I think you better get this guy to a hospital," Terry says to Nitro. "He seems real...confused."

Nitro whisks the crewman off to the hospital in the pick-up. The entire way he continues to babble away. Nitro can't even tell what country he's from -- leave alone make heads or tails out of what he's saying. Although he probably shouldn't, he occasionally nods in agreement to put the man at ease.

At the hospital, there's a lot of questions. Nitro just tells them that the guy was "found down on the beach." Of course, he doesn't tell them how it is that he got there. There isn't anybody at the hospital who can understand what the guy is saying either. "Hmmm," Nitro thinks, "we just might get away with this. We should be on our way to Florida by the time anybody can figure out what he's talking about."

As he heads toward the double doors of the Emergency Room, his thoughts continue. "It would be most preferable if people didn't know that RocketBike can fly yet. There are still a few bugs to work out before we want to go public with it. Also, people knowing that the bike can fly might bring up questions about the H²O-S system--something we don't want to have others aware of, particularly the people from Atlas."

Gettin' Away Clean

Early the next morning, before the Coast Guard or press can come around asking questions about how the guy from the tanker ended up on the beach. The Bikesters truck and trailer is loaded and pulling out the driveway for Florida.

On the Road Again

The trip is a fairly fast one. They drive almost straight through, with Nitro and Celeste switching off driving, and only a couple of three or four hour stopovers. TK is using the travel time to put the final touches on the paper to be presented to the Engineering Society. On the way back from Florida, they will be stopping in Chicago, where the Engineers are having their annual meeting. TK will be presenting his paper there, and it has to be just right.

TK is also analyzing data from the last RocketBike test. After getting an earful from Terry, and running the first set of numbers, it's quite obvious that they have to find a more efficient method of stopping the bike when it lands on the trailer.

TK has some ideas, which he will discuss with Jim and Ben when they all meet up in Florida. He's been running them by Nitro and Celeste, but they all agree: this one is going to take some major engineering talent.

Chapter 11

Table of Contents