THE BURNING TIME

TIMELINE 10/27/62
BOOK FIVE



JAMES PHILIP

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The Burning Time

TIMELINE 10/27/62 – BOOK FIVE

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The Burning Time

[Book 5 of Timeline 10/27/62]

Chapter 1

Monday 10th February 1964
Otopeni Air Force Base, People's Republic of Romania

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had joined the Communist Party of Romania in 1930. At that time, he had been an electrician on the railways with no inkling where that fateful decision would carry him in the following decades. He had made his mark in the Party during the Grivita Strike at the workshops of the *Căile Ferate Române* – The Romanian Railways - in February 1933; after the Army ended the Grivita strike by killing seven of his fellow strikers he had become the leader of the influential 'prison faction' of the Party, was elected to its Central Committee in 1936 and had begun his inevitable rise to power. Under the regime of Ion Antonescu – a man no better than a Nazi lickspittle – he had spent most of the Second World War in detention at Târgu Jiu in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, escaping shortly before the Soviet 'liberators' arrived. However, although he had been General Secretary of the Party since 1944, in the beginning he had moved slowly, patiently to consolidate his power base, only purging his main opponents in the early 1950s.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had understood that while Stalin lived his personal fate, and that of his country depended on towing the 'Moscow line'; accordingly, he had forced King Michael of Romania to abdicate, literally at the barrel of a gun. Likewise, he had pursued unrelentingly repressive policies against his opponents, including counter-signing orders sending fellow Romanians to work, and invariably, die in the slave labour battalions building the Danube-Black Sea Canal. Iosif Vissarionovich's favour had been everything in those desperate post-war years and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the leader of the one former East European Soviet satellite which had – by some inexplicable oversight on the part of the Americans and the British – remained virtually unscathed by the Cuban Missiles War, was nothing if not a stony cold pragmatist.

There was a single black telephone on the table before him. It was connected directly to the Command Post – manned by hand-picked heavily

armed Securitate shock troopers - at the entrance to the bunker complex.

"Comrades," he began in coarse, unadorned Russian. His protégé and deputy, Nicolae Ceausescu – who sat behind him now taking notes – had convinced him that in the new 'World Order' it was imperative that their former masters continued to believe that their one-time clients still accepted their right to rule; at least for a few more minutes. The air of the deep concrete bunker buried just inside the fortified perimeter of Otopeni Air Force Base was thick with vile Russian and Turkish cigarette and pipe smoke. The walls were clammy because this 'nuclear refuge' had only been half-completed in late October 1962 and nobody had got around to installing integrated electrical services or a fully functioning, filtered air-conditioning system in the complex. There had been other more pressing priorities in the last fifteen months. "Comrades," Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the balding sixty-two-year-old Dictator of Romania repeated, clearing his throat with a bronchial cough, "I formally welcome you to my country. As always, your presence is both an honour and a comfort to all Romanians."

The dull, expressionless eyes of the other men around the table viewed him coldly; but Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej did not take this lack of response personally or read anything untoward into it. The long, poisonous shadow of Iosif Vissarionovich still lay across all their pasts like a curse. In Stalin's time showing one's true emotions was a death sentence and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had understood this as well as any man. He had been one of the old monster's most adept disciples; in fact, he had been so committed to the old ways that the reforms of the Khrushchev years had, at first, been deeply unsettling.

It was a great comfort when Nikita Sergeyevich had crushed the Hungarian uprising with a truly Stalinist iron fist and thus reassured, Gheorghiu-Dej had stamped down harder than ever on his own counter-revolutionary troublemakers and dissidents, turning a deaf ear to the pusillanimous mutterings of the West about 'so-called' human rights and civil liberties in *his* country. *His* Securitate – *the General Directorate for the Security of the People* – was free to go about its business untrammelled. If firm government required the widespread use of intimidation, torture and imprisonment without trial, so be it for that was a price worth paying. Notwithstanding, in the years before the October War, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's government had pursued a tentative trade, diplomatic and political

rapprochement with the West, slowly moving towards becoming a semi-detached member of the Warsaw Pact. The Romanian economy had grown, the Securitate had restricted its activities to within the borders of the nation, and Romania's relations with the World's richest and most powerful democracies had threatened to one day become the envy of many other impoverished Eastern Bloc countries. Inevitably, in Moscow, Krushchev's people had begun to view the Romanian leader as a weak link, a possible Trojan horse within the body of the Marxist-Leninist polity. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had always known that there were limits to his freedom of manoeuvre and been very careful never to push his Muscovite overseers too far.

Old habits die hard.

He coughed.

"I surrender the floor to the esteemed members of the *Troika*."

The bunker was crowded; as many as twenty men standing or sitting, mostly around the walls, or just behind their principals. The majority of the men in the bunker were aides, bodyguards – each member of the *Troika* had at least two seconds, big men with badly fitting suits bulging where pistols or other murderous implements were deliberately poorly concealed – and there were half-a-dozen of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's own people, ministers or representatives of the key departments of state. The 'conference' was a security nightmare, a rush job organised in a panic and no matter how calm the atmosphere, nobody in the bunker pretended that this was anything other than the darkest hour faced by the dysfunctional ad hoc alliance which had coalesced out of the ashes of the recent war.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was genuinely curious to discover which member of the *Troika* would speak first and if the man who spoke first, actually spoke for the *Troika* as a whole. Up until now the Soviet response to the devastation of the October War had been on one level, utterly stoic and on another, *insane*. The Dictator of Romania had 'called' this conference to curb the *insanity*, without for a moment really believing that anybody was in a position to do anything about the *chaos* that was, sooner rather than later, going to consume them all. He had not expected the *Troika* to respond to his entreaties but, incredibly, here the three great men were, fulminating inscrutably behind clouds of evil tobacco smoke, less than forty-eight hours after he had 'summoned them'.

He had these men in his power at last; he had honestly believed revenge would taste sweeter. Now all he tasted was bile.

Nothing happened in the smoky silence for perhaps thirty seconds.

A horrible stillness settled, stirred only by men breathing the foul air. Most of those present had bad chests, maladies associated with the bitter winter, and from living their lives in damp, claustrophobic, ill-lit subterranean rat holes like this bunker beneath an airfield less than twenty kilometres from the centre of Bucharest.

“There are too many people in this room,” Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov said, his voice deafening in the quietness.

“Far too fucking many,” agreed the gnarled older man in the uniform of a Red Army tank commander with the street-fighter’s face who sat on the left-hand side of the third member of the Troika. There was gravel and a breathless huskiness born of a life smoking bad tobacco in that growling, bear like utterance.

The man sitting between the urbane, reptile-eyed Andropov and the grizzled, oddly cherubic brutal-featured soldier sighed and leaned forward a fraction in his seat.

“My comrades are right,” Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin said mildly. He looked Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in the eye with a sudden directness. “Your people do not need to be here.”

The dictator of Romania shrugged. He glanced over his shoulder at his most trusted lieutenant.

“Nicolae,” he reminded the room at large, “is the man whose work has made possible the restoration of a functioning command economy in the undamaged areas of *our* former *Empire*, and the restoration of communications with the surviving closed cities in the East. He needs to remain.”

Sixty-four-year-old Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, Marshal of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics guffawed like an asthmatic Walrus with a two-day old hangover.

“Sakharov ought to stay, too.”

Those who knew who Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb was, and recognised him in the crowd glanced in the direction of the tall, aesthetic, rather diffident man lurking in the shadows. The nuclear scientist did not care for the sudden scrutiny and shrank as far

back out of the loom of the lights as he could before he felt the moist concrete at his shoulder.

“We need at least one person in the room,” Chuikov, the most decorated Soviet soldier of his generation went on, his face cracking into what might have been a broad grin or a mask of contempt, “who knows what he’s talking about.”

“Everybody else should go,” Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin suggested and the man to his right, Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov brusquely nodded his concurrence.

Instantly, the bunker began to clear.

Feet scraped and shuffled, nobody spoke.

Presently, the heavy blast doors clanged shut.

“Well, Gheorghe,” Kosygin asked sombrely, viewing the Romanian dictator with unafraid, curious eyes. He was a man who had lived in fear for his life when Stalin had ordered him to spy on and undermine the most senior members of the Party in the years after the Great Patriotic War. “We’re here. What do you plan to do next?”

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was genuinely put aback.

“What do I plan to do?” He retorted, his nostrils flaring with offence. After the events of the last few days he did not deserve to be mocked by men for whom he had risked everything since the war.

The Russians frowned, each in their own uniquely distinct fashion. Chuikov’s whole face moved around his narrowed eyes, Andropov raised an eyebrow; Sakharov could not mask his confusion, while Alexei Kosygin watched the Dictator of Romania with cool, oddly respectful reserve.

“When I saw the reception committee on the runway I expected to be arrested, Comrade,” he admitted flatly.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej relaxed, allowed himself a glance at the phone on the table directly in front of his chair.

If he had ever been tempted to throw in his lot with the West it would have been on the day after the war. Now it was too late; and in retrospect it would have been too late by noon on the day after the war. Dozens of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact aircraft had landed on Romanian airfields, countless survivors from shattered Russian divisions had flooded across his borders, and then there had been the first civilian refugees, a bedraggled trickle, and shortly afterwards an irresistible flood that never seemed to end. Cruisers,

destroyers and submarines of the Black Sea Fleet had anchored at Constanta. Within weeks the remnants of the Soviet High Command had made contact from their hideaways beyond the Urals. By then the bastards had already *inflicted* the bane of *Krasnaya Zarya* – Red Dawn - upon him and in the weeks and months that followed he had watched in horror as the monster devoured his country. If he had known then what he knew now he would have ordered the Securitate and the Army to liquidate *Krasnaya Zarya*, drown it in its own blood before it was too late but everything had been a mess. Belorussia, the Ukraine, the Baltic States, Poland, East Germany, most of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Crimea and countless places north and east of the sea of rubble that had previously been Moscow were just, well, gone.

Nobody had comprehended in those first days after the war that the USSR was so vast, and its peoples so dispersed that here and there whole cities and large sections of the empire's military and industrial infrastructure had survived untouched, intact.

In the dark days that followed as the Americans had brazenly attempted to justify their aggression his heart had hardened and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had discovered, to his own astonishment, an inner moral streak he had done his best to discard back in the bad old days of Stalin. One simply did not abandon one's friends. Whatever their faults the Soviets had liberated his country from the Nazi yoke and given it back a limited independence of a sort that it had never previously had in all its history. Besides, how long would his own people tolerate the Party if he severed his links to the recent Marxist-Leninist past? And in that event how long would he and his regime last? The idea of a rushed show trial and its inevitable denouement; with he, his family and his closest associates lined up against a wall for the convenience of a hurriedly assembled firing squad, had little appeal to him. So, on that day after the war and in the days and weeks that followed, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had offered the hand of friendship and succour to the arrogant, imbecilic, neo-Tsarist retards who had – without consulting him – ignored his advice, his *diplomatic* pleading, and now started a second, and even more unnecessary, war with the British and for all he knew, the Americans.

"You expected to be arrested?" Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej asked, nonplussed.

Had there been a security leak?

It was all he could do not to turn to look at his deputy.

“Yes,” Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov said irritably. “If I was in your place that is what I would do, Comrade.”

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej knew the time for talking was over, that he needed to act. Now! And yet he hesitated. Was there another way? He had expected the *Troika* to obfuscate, to seek to placate him, to want to assure him that what had happened was some kind of aberration. Instead, the three men were looking at him as if he was something they had just scraped off the soles of their shoes.

“What purpose would that serve?” He asked, stalling for time.

If the Russians knew what awaited them, then his carefully laid plans to buy off the British and the Americans with the heads of the men who had allowed their *Krasnaya Zarya* surrogates to launch an unprovoked nuclear strike seventy-two hours ago, had already failed.

Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov chuckled so lowly and deeply that it seemed unreasonable that the walls did not vibrate in sympathy.

The Dictator of Romania looked at him with widening eyes.

Now he understood.

Decency, honour, patriotism were things that he had honestly believed belonged to another era, another century. He had not suspected his erstwhile allies – let alone these three men – capable of such things. Perhaps, he had been wrong?

What else have I been wrong about?

“Even,” he said eventually, suspecting that all was lost, “if I presented your heads on a silver platter to that witch Thatcher and that playboy Kennedy do you really think it would make any difference?”

Again, he looked to the telephone.

Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin shrugged as he considered the proposition. He genuinely did not know if their heads would – as a sacrificial offering - be sufficient prevent a new and final, utterly devastating rain of thermonuclear fire from burning down the rest of Mother Russia.

“I don’t know,” he confessed.

Chapter 2

Monday 10th February 1964
Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility, Philadelphia

The Marine Corps band played ‘Hail to the Chief’ as the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America clambered stiffly out of the armoured limousine onto the chilly Philadelphia quayside. John Fitzgerald Kennedy took a moment to get his bearings. While he was doing this, he waved to the jostling crowd of photographers and journalists crushed three or four deep to his left. He waved and he smiled that god-given, marvellously insouciant confident smile that had, against all the odds, allowed him to reconnect again with the American people in the frantic weeks since the Battle of Washington. Then he turned to face the reception party – several of his most trusted military commanders and a small clutch of loyal, or as LBJ called them, ‘tame’ Senators and Congressmen – awaiting him beneath the towering superstructure of the nearest of the two sleeping leviathans.

The idea of holding the ‘council of war’ onboard one of the two Second World War battlewagons mothballed at the Philadelphia Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility, had originated from the office of the new Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David Lamar McDonald. Like many of the ‘suggestions’ that emanated from the new CNO’s office, this one was a real humdinger.

Jack Kennedy straightened, waved again and flashed a new smile at the exploding camera flashes, allowing his Vice-President time to emerge from the other side of the Presidential car and stride up to his shoulder before he stepped closer to the baying Press pack. People used to tell him that having LBJ around only ‘made sense’ because the Texan ‘made him look good’; the naturally handsome younger man with the charismatic touch and the beguiling voice, with the older, rock-solid figure covering his back. The President’s younger brother, Bobby – who had detested and mistrusted Lyndon Baines Johnson until the unifying events of recent weeks had finally sorted the men from the boys in the Administration – had been openly talking about dropping LBJ from the Presidential ticket before the Battle of

Washington.

Bobby was the angrier, more impulsive of the two Kennedy brothers.

Sometimes, Jack Kennedy asked himself if Bobby's righteous idealism and his willingness to pick fights that he knew in his heart he could not win, would have survived a period of active military serve. He had loved his own time in the Navy – not the pain of his injuries, obviously, just everything else about those days in 1943 and 1944 in the Pacific – but the experience had tempered him in ways he doubted his brother, seven years his junior, comprehended.

LBJ touched the President's shoulder; the old stager was a consummate political professional. For the younger man to be able to strut his stuff with his customary panache he needed to know exactly where his Vice-President was without having to constantly turn and check. Unknowingly, the two men – separated by only eight-and-a-half years in age but before the Battle of Washington by seemingly unbridgeable differences in temperament, political outlook and upbringing – had become, overnight, the nation's darlings, America's favourite double act. The country's changing mood even threatened to permeate the Byzantine internecine machinations of the House of Representatives, recently transferred to Philadelphia from battle-scarred Washington DC. Jack Kennedy had called the House of Representatives' bluff and every day new 'loyalists' returned to the fold, seeking terms, hoping to limit and mitigate the 'collateral damage' that their previous 'honest misjudgements' had done to their future political careers. There was a long way to go before Congress was going to be 'onside' but in the last few days the spectre of a renewed nuclear war in Europe had concentrated the minds of the waverers *marvellously*.

In the Presidential limousine Jack Kennedy had quipped to his Vice-President that 'maybe we don't get to be impeached this year'. As recently as December, the prospect of impeachment and the opportunity to lay down his burdens had seemed like a blessing in disguise. However, on this coldly crisp grey Philadelphia morning the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America was daring to believe that he did not just have a fair wind in his sails, but a raging gale. He had not felt this exhilarated since he could not remember when; maybe back in the Pacific at the wheel of his beloved PT107 with the throttles wide open? Or perhaps, on Inauguration Day in back in 1961? Mornings like this were what he had expected the Presidency

to be like *every* morning.

The barrage of shouted questions bounced off the smiling, debonair man whom Middle America and the poor and the dispossessed alike so desperately wanted to take anew to their hearts.

He raised his arms to quieten the deafening babble.

"While I am your President," he declared, knowing he did not have to raise his voice because he was standing on the pre-prepared mark within feet of the two big, high gain microphones the Navy had set up for this very moment. "This great country will never again drop its military guard. The first responsibility of *your* President is to protect the American people. That was why on the night of the Cuban Missiles War I refused to leave my post, above ground, in the Oval Office of the White House. The American people had no real opportunity to find shelter that night; I as *your* President decided that I would rather die like a man than cower in a bunker." He paused, but not long enough for the murmur of voices to become a crescendo. "My friends, we have lived through dark times and face new enemies. Our British friends and allies – our British friends and allies who have fought shoulder to shoulder with America in three World Wars, Korea and now in the Mediterranean – in the last half-century, have fought the good fight against a new and terrible enemy and suffered grievously in defence of freedom and democracy. American ships have been attacked, and hundreds of American seamen have been killed and maimed – never forget that many, many more would have died but for the heroic actions of the escorting Royal Navy vessels – and for better or worse we are now in the fight. In war nothing is certain. Nothing. But that is no reason for shirking our manifest destiny in this new post-October War epoch. While I am *your* President no sinew will be spared in the defence of America, or of our allies or in the fight to preserve all that is good and decent in the World." He quirked a smile. "God bless America!"

The President turned and walked purposefully towards the long gangway inclining upwards at a shallow angle to the amidships main deck of the USS Wisconsin, where a large welcoming party was awaiting his arrival with patient expectation.

At the head of the gangway Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara was flanked by the tall blond fifty-seven-year-old Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David McDonald.

McDonald was one of those senior military officers who had a knack of instilling confidence in his political masters without ever being overt about it. The man breathed competence and authority. He had graduated from the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1928 and served on the battleships Mississippi and the Colorado before training as a naval aviator in the early 1930s. Afterwards his career had progressed with smooth inevitability. Before the Second World War he had been a flight instructor at Pensacola, commanded the US Navy's Operational Training Command, during the war he had served as the Executive Officer of the carrier Essex in the Pacific, and been appointed Assistant Chief of Staff of Operations for the US Pacific Fleet. After the war he had commanded the USS Coral Sea, then one of America's three largest fleet carriers. Before the Cuban Missiles War, he had been Commander-in-Chief of the Sixth Fleet based in Naples. He was also the youngest four-star admiral in the Navy.

Jack Kennedy preceded his Vice-President up the gangway and shook Robert McNamara's hand warmly. Most days he still felt a little guilty leaving the former President of the Ford Motor Company to clean up the mess in Washington, while he and most of the other member of the Administration occupied themselves touring the country or had decamped to Philadelphia. McNamara had not uttered a single word of complaint; he had just got on with the job of starting to plan the reconstruction of the capital and the reorganisation of America's fractured military-industrial complex focussing specifically and urgently on its grievously damaged command and control system.

"It is good to see you again face to face, Bob," Jack Kennedy grimaced. "Did I hear it right that LeMay is snowed in at Seattle?"

If Robert McNamara was the magician overseeing the rebuilding of the departmental structures destroyed in the Battle of Washington and repairing the technical underpinning of the nation's defences; General Curtis LeMay, the rambunctious Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was the man who had saved the day at the height of the vicious fighting for control of the capital in December.

In retrospect it was now incontrovertible that it had it not been for Curtis LeMay's unshakable loyalty to his flag, his country, the Administration and personally – to a man he had no reason to either like or respect – to the person of the President of the United States of America, that had turned the

tide and doomed the rebellion to failure. LeMay had been working around the clock ever since to ensure that *he* and his fellow Chiefs of Staff had *command* of *all* of the United States Military's assets. Spurred on by the dreadful revelation that it had been four of *his* B-52s which had killed all those people on Malta back at the beginning of December – not to mention eradicating in the process practically every modern electronic communications system on the Maltese Archipelago and killing most of the irreplaceable British and Commonwealth specialists vital to the effective command and deployment of ships, aircraft and men in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations – LeMay was ruthlessly purging all 'untrustworthy' elements from the US Air Force, Navy and Army. Having raged through the senior staffs like a super-charged witch finder general, removing dozens of senior field officers whose complacency and negligence had contributed to the 'Malta Atrocity', and the 'sneak attack on those Brit destroyers off Cape Finisterre', he had set about tackling the 'fucking idiots' who had authorised 'the attack on the Royal Navy nuclear submarine HMS Dreadnought in *fucking international waters*', and turned his guns on the numerous State National Guard units who had stood down – instead of rallying to the flag - during the Battle for Washington and subsequently attempted to obstruct *his* efforts to restore the rule of law within the military.

"The *Big Cigar* won't be happy to miss this pow-wow!" The Secretary of Defence observed with impish aridity. The Battle for Washington had sparked a steely resolve in the bespectacled, mild-mannered man who had been a statistician dogging Curtis LeMay's steps throughout the latter stages of the 1945 war, and post-World War II one of the 'whiz kids' who had turned around the ailing fortunes of the Ford Motor Company in the 1950s. He had come to Washington in 1961 as the Administration's efficiency guru charged with reorganising the sprawling military empire created by the Second World War. That empire had spread its tentacles like pernicious hogweed into every corner of the US economy. By the time of the October War he had barely scratched the surface of the beast, and after it he had reluctantly acquiesced with the massive 'peace dividend' cuts which had, in a matter of months, hobbled and hamstrung the nation's World-wide military 'reach'. The bloody insurrection – an attempted Red Dawn sponsored coup d'état was a better description – in December mounted by a terrifying coalition of America's lunatic right-wing fringe, the disposed, disaffected and

despairing had come perilously close to wiping out the Administration and its ability to govern. Cometh the moment, cometh the man. This was Bob McNamara's 'moment'. In the last two months he had been like a man reborn.

Again, his President patted his Secretary of Defence's arm.

"*Old Iron Pants* knows what we're going to be talking about and that we're not about to take any big decisions without him."

"I'm sure General McConnell will fight the Air Force's corner if it comes to it, sir." Admiral David Lamar McDonald added as the President moved down the line to shake the Chief of Naval Operation's hand.

"I'm sure he will," Jack Kennedy agreed but his thoughts were still with Curtis LeMay and their long conversation last night over a scrambled link while he had been flying back to Philadelphia on Special Air Mission 26000, the radically modified Type VC-137 Boeing 707 that was the flagship of the growing fleet of Presidential jetliners. Curtis LeMay had not minced his words; he rarely did. He had the Air Force back in his pocket and he was relatively sanguine about the problems with the National Guard. These latter 'problems' were 'containable' by indefinitely standing down and disarming all the suspect units, sacking commanders who refused to obey lawful commands, and in a small number of cases, arresting and detaining those whose disloyalty went beyond a simple refusal to carry out orders, on grounds of 'sedition and conduct prejudicial to good military discipline'.

No, the real problem was the Navy. The Navy had probably provoked the October War and last December the Navy – leastways, elements within the Atlantic Fleet - had done their worst to start another war. LeMay was worried that foot-dragging by the Navy Department in its relocated Philadelphia headquarters was creating a new ticking time bomb. The events leading up to the loss of the USS Scorpion were still officially unresolved, the subject of an as yet unconvened Board of Enquiry. Notwithstanding the appointment of a new C-in-C Atlantic Fleet – CINCLANT – the Administration's enemies in the House of Representatives were still playing politics over the bodies of the Scorpion's dead. LeMay had complained, with impressive and sustained vitriol, about 'people in the Navy continuing to brief the House that the Scorpion was the victim of a sneak attack by HMS Dreadnought'. The substance of the lie was that the Administration was *covering up* the truth to 'suck up to the Brits'. Basically, the Navy needed to

get its act together!

The trouble was that the new Chief of Naval Operations, who was unquestionably able and loyal, was a mere mortal and he did not have a magic wand he could wave to make the 'Scorpion Disaster' go away. Moreover, he had other, bigger fires to fight.

Fifty-sex year old General John Paul McConnell, Curtis LeMay's successor as Chief of Staff or the United States Air Force was almost completely unlike his larger than life predecessor in practically every way that a rational man might imagine He was LeMay's *acting* successor because once again the Honourable Members of the House of Representatives had not got their act together to hold, or to schedule confirmation hearings because they were presently too busy squabbling among themselves, fretting about their dignity and privileges, and diligently looking for new and innovative ways to frustrate the effective government of the country. Quiet, steadfast competence had characterised the career of the Arkansan born McConnell; unlike LeMay he had made few enemies and did not as a rule inadvertently close channels of communication to anybody who might one day become his enemy. He was a 'political' officer in the sense that he respected where the ultimate authority lay but he was no place man, and quite capable of saying 'no' to anybody. When he was promoted to full general and appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the United States European Command in 1962, he had slipped under the radar to leapfrog ahead of several more glamorous, but perhaps, less *solid* candidates. In the aftermath of the Battle of Washington, McConnell had been Curtis LeMay's sole recommendation to replace him on his own elevation to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Previously, whoever was appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had remained the Chief of Staff of his own service; but Jack Kennedy did not want a 'chairman', he wanted a fully fledged 'supreme commander' capable of, and authorised to, issue *orders* to the other chiefs of staff and had promulgated an Executive Order to this effect several weeks ago. Congress would do its best to shoot this arrangement down in flames but for the moment, the President was confident he had re-established a military chain of command that actually worked. Today was John McConnell's first full day in his new post as the professional head of the US Air Force.

Jack Kennedy shook the airman's hand.

"Welcome to the majors, General McConnell."

John McConnell’s high brow furrowed for an instant.
“I serve at my President’s pleasure, sir.”

Chapter 3

Monday 10th February 1964
French Creek, Grand Harbour, Malta

If Marija Elizabeth Calleja had still to make up her mind whether being the prospective daughter-in-law of the most powerful man in the Mediterranean was an entirely good thing; she was entirely confident that her blurted acceptance – five days ago - of the great man's son's proposal of marriage was a very, very good thing. The fact that by all accounts Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher, the handsome twenty-seven year old son of Admiral Sir Julian Wemyss Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations – those that had survived the travails of the last few weeks, anyway – had done his level best to get himself killed in the handful of days since she had finally met him, face to face, for the first and only time in their fourteen year courtship, had not diminished her conviction that Peter was the best thing that had ever happened to her by one single iota. In retrospect the strangest thing was that she had not actually realised, or admitted, that she was head over heels in love with him until the night of the October War.

Earlier that morning she and Surgeon Commander Margo Seiffert, United States Navy Reserve (Retired) had stood anonymously in the crowd in the Upper Baraka Gardens overlooking the old saluting battery as the USS Enterprise had nosed slowly into the Grand Harbour. Margo had squeezed Marija's hand and tried to suppress a gasp of horror as the huge ship passed beneath their elevated vantage point. The drifting smoke of the saluting guns could not hide the giant aircraft carrier's wounds; everything aft of her modernistic box like bridge superstructure was scorched and warped by the massive fires and explosions which had consumed the thirty aircraft and helicopters which had been parked on her deck at the moment the giant searing thermonuclear airburst had reached out to flail at the great ship.

The two women had leaned close one to the other.

Later they had watched as the first of scores of terribly injured men were loaded into lighters for the journey across the Grand Harbour to the hurriedly

readied burns wards at the Royal Naval Hospital at Bighi. Several hundred badly burned wounded were expected, survivors from both the USS Long Beach and the USS Enterprise. In the three days since the strike the big carrier's forward hangar deck had been transformed into a huge hospital but still, they said, several men died every hour from their nightmarish injuries. Margo Seiffert had volunteered the services of her nursing auxiliaries to the Medical Director of RNH Bighi but had been politely rebuffed. Specialist doctors and nurses trained in the treatment and care of burns victims had begun to fly into RAF Luqa yesterday morning; no cost was being spared by the US Navy to ensure that its men got the best possible specialist treatment. Margo would have pressed the issue but none of her 'auxiliaries' were trained to nurse men with fifty percent or worse burns. The small boats continued to carry the desperately wounded and the dying across to Bighi all that morning and into the afternoon.

Everybody was saying that if HMS Scorpion and HMS Talavera had not immediately come to the leviathan's assistance to train their fire hoses directly into the infernos raging in the USS Enterprise's stern, that the carrier would have had to have been abandoned, doubling or tripling the loss of life. The Scorpion and the Talavera, later assisted by HMS Broadsword had steamed so close under the overhanging flight deck that they had collided, time and again with the red-hot steel flanks of the massive ship while, above them fully armed and fuelled jet interceptors and helicopters burned, exploded and showered the destroyers' relatively fragile superstructures and hulls with a rain of flaming debris. The four surviving ships of the 7th Destroyer Squadron had been unable to do anything for the Enterprise's consort, the nuclear-power anti-aircraft cruiser the USS Long Beach, other than to take off as many of her survivors as possible before the wintery chop of the iron grey Mediterranean seas had consumed her shattered, fire-ravaged hulk.

The Long Beach and the missing HMS Aisne had been almost directly beneath the airburst; the yield of which Admiral Christopher's experts now speculated must have been in the one to two megaton range. The Aisne was gone, lost without a trace with her two hundred and seven-man crew. Between them HMS Broadsword, and Talavera's sister ship, HMS Oudenarde had lifted nearly three hundred survivors off the Long Beach and out of the sea before she sank.

Tragically, although over eight hundred men had perished on the American guided missile cruiser and nobody yet knew how many hundreds more on the Enterprise, today was a day of celebration. The salvo of nuclear weapons thrown at the Maltese Archipelago had detonated – or in the case of the ICBM which had plunged into the three mile channel between the main island and the islet of Filfla off the south coast, fortuitously *not* detonated at all - so far from the islands that not a single person had so much as been scratched on land; and somehow, against all the odds, the battered ships of the 7th Destroyer Squadron had helped to put out the Enterprise's fires and successfully escorted the mighty ship into the safety of the Grand Harbour.

All things considered Marija had decided to forgive Peter Christopher his recklessness.

This time, anyway!

The Commander-in-Chief – her courageous fiancé's father - had briefly separated himself from his entourage of bodyguards and staff officers to seek out the two women.

'I must detour to the new Communications Centre to take an urgent call from England,' he had apologised. The Signals Corps had taken over an annexe to a bomb damaged former Grand Master's Palace in the heart of Valletta and set up a small, state of the art, secure telecommunications facility with equipment flown out from England in the last forty-eight hours. Until yesterday all 'secure' traffic had had to pass through the antiquated emergency command centre in the Citadel at Mdina. 'I have arranged for transport and the necessary clearances to enable you both to have a ringside seat in French Creek. HMS Scorpion and HMS Talavera will tie up alongside Parlatorio Wharf. Broadsword and Oudenarde don't seem to be so badly knocked about so they will anchor in Sliema Creek pending engineering reports on their condition. I hope to rejoin you by the time Scorpion and Talavera are tying up alongside.'

Neither of the women had expected to be chauffeured, much in the custom of visiting movie stars or VIPs, directly onto the quayside just in time to watch the smoke billowing again from the saluting battery below the Upper Baraka Gardens – now on the opposite side of the Grand Harbour - as the first of the two fire blackened destroyers nosed under the ramparts of Valletta and swung their sharp prows into the broad entrance to French Creek. Both ships looked a little strange quite apart from their discoloured,

grubby appearance. Both were listing; Scorpion to starboard by perhaps two or three degrees, Talavera to port by about the same angle. But it was more than that; their lattice foremasts were *bent* out of true and Talavera's four-ton double bedstead Type 965 aerials were drunkenly leaning aft. Both ships were pumping frothing white water over their fo'c'sles from multiple hoses. Marija also noted that both ships were making more smoke than was customary; this latter spoke either to sloppy engine room drills or more likely, major structural damage not visible to the naked eye. However, while all these things caught Marija's practiced eye – she was after all a daughter of the Naval Dockyards, had grown up in a family that talked of nothing but the Royal Navy and its ships at meal times, and had watched a thousand grey warships come and go from the anchorages of the Maltese Archipelago in her young life – nothing took her breath away so much as the big, embroidered battle flags streaming from each destroyer's main mast halyards. Her father was fond of reminding anybody with ears and the inclination and patience to listen that 'when push comes to shove the Royal Navy doesn't care about ships, all it cares about is its traditions'. Until she had laid eyes on those magnificent battle flags she had never really understood what he was talking about. Now, in a flash of revelation, she *understood*. And in that moment, she understood also why she would never, ever ask the man she loved to 'be careful'.

In the last three months over half the Mediterranean Fleet had been sunk or put out of action; in the bigger picture it meant nothing. More ships would be sent to Malta, the war would go on. Nobody seeing *those* flags streaming proudly in the gusting wind from the main masts of the two badly damaged British destroyers could doubt it.

Marija shivered involuntarily and mistaking this for trepidation Margo Seiffert put her arm around her younger friend's shoulders. The older woman was a little surprised when she found herself studying the broadening smile on her protégé's face.

"What?" She asked before she could stop herself. Margo had been married once but never wanted children at the time. Fate had decreed that she had eventually met the love of her life many years too late for all of that child-bearing nonsense and looking back she would have changed nothing. In her sixty-third year she was a hyper-active small, wiry woman with piercing dull blue eyes and short straw grey hair whose look could sometimes

be amply sufficient to turn a strong man's knees to jelly. She had always enjoyed a very special relationship with Marija. Marija had been her child patient, later she had mentored and overseen her blossoming into the woman she was now. Marija had become her best friend on Earth; the nearest thing to the daughter she had never had. "I know that look!"

"Peter does not believe in God," Marija said, smiling seraphically before sobering a little. She went on: "But that doesn't matter. I have enough faith for both of us."

Margo Seiffert pursed her lips, held her peace.

Peter Christopher could have been killed half-a-dozen times in the last three months. Over fifty percent of the men who had sailed with HMS Talavera from Portsmouth in November were dead, missing or in hospital. Less than a fortnight ago his captain had had a foot blown off by a solid shot fired by an *anti-tan*k gun off Lampedusa; Peter had assumed command and conned the unarmoured destroyer even *closer* inshore to assist HMS Puma – hit in the engine room and drifting onto the rocks – and since then he had once again fearlessly steered his command into harm's way to save the most powerful warship in the World, and in so doing probably re-cemented the 'special relationship' between his country and the USA. The boy was a positive *combat magnet*!

The women watched the two destroyers limp deep into the Grand Harbour, slowing to a halt while big Admiralty tugs churned into position to nudge and prod the battered warships into French Creek. Normally, any self-respecting destroyer captain would steam confidently towards the quayside; wait until the last possible moment when a disastrous collision with the dock seemed inevitable before reversing his screws so as to glide to an imperceptible, kissing contact with the landward fenders. However, anybody with eyes in their heads could see that neither captain believed his ship was capable of such smart manoeuvring in their presently somewhat down at heel state.

The crowd parted nearby and the Commander-in-Chief strode onto the scene. It was not lost on Marija that her prospective father-in-law was wearing the sort of smile that, at this minute, implied he felt himself perfectly capable of walking on water.

"The Malta Defence Force is to be constituted as a permanent unit of the Commonwealth garrison of the Maltese Archipelago," he announced to the

two women in a voice designed not to carry beyond their hearing.

Previously, the MDF had been a hotchpotch of local volunteers, organised along the lines of the British Home Guard in the 1945 war. It had been something of a standing joke and regarded by regular British forces with affectionate contempt.

"The reconstituted MDF will have a Maltese commanding officer with the rank of major-general, its own land, sea and air branches, and," Julian Christopher grinned, "its own Medical Directorate which, as with the other arms of the new service will have to be built from the ground up. The post of Senior Medical Officer will be graded at Commander-level initially." He looked meaningfully at Margo.

"I'm not even Maltese," she objected, flushing with unfamiliar embarrassment.

"Actually, you are," retorted the tall, handsome man resplendent in his freshly pressed uniform and transparent good humour. "You have lived continuously in these islands for over ten years. Coincidentally, that's the official definition of who is, and who is not, a citizen of the archipelago for the purposes of membership of the MDF."

"Since when, Julian?"

"About thirty minutes ago."

Margo Seiffert frowned.

"I'll think about it."

Julian Christopher shook his head and chuckled beneath his breath. Marija could have sworn he winked conspiratorially in her direction but on reflection, she might have imagined it. The Commander-in-Chief, the two women, and the hundreds of people who had gathered on or around Parlatorio Wharf, on the quayside and atop the ramparts of Senglea on the other side of French Creek waited patiently, expectantly as the two destroyers held station while the tugs manoeuvred.

In the background the USS Enterprise had temporarily moored opposite the neck of the French Creek beneath the Floriana bastions, with a fleet of small boats latched onto her like limpets. Helicopters from RAF Hal Far and Luqa had begun to shuttle to and from her relatively undamaged forward flight deck offloading the unburned wounded and delivering supplies. That evening the carrier would be warped and nudged inshore to the old steamship anchorage currently occupied by the twenty-two thousand-ton Cunard liner

the RMS Sylvania. Beyond the Enterprise, already moored beyond the old passenger quay, the P and O liner Canberra, drab in her grey and khaki camouflage had docked overnight. The Sylvania had been in transit to Malta from Gibraltar at the time of the nuclear strikes and the C-in-C had thought long and hard before ordering her into the Grand Harbour to unload her desperately needed cargo of over two hundred skilled dockyard workers, defence industry communications specialists, radar men and electricians, their families and the four companies of fully equipped infantrymen of the Warwickshire Regiment that the liner had brought out from Southampton. The Canberra had been destined to join the Victorious Battle Group acting as a hospital ship and troopship for the evacuated garrison of Cyprus. When the Victorious had been crippled by a nuclear strike on one of her escorts and forced to withdraw to Alexandria for emergency repairs, the mission to Cyprus had been abandoned and the Canberra diverted back to Malta.

"I think Peter would have had the easier time of it," Marija observed, interrupting the great man's chain of thought.

"Oh, how so?"

"Well, I know that removing the steam feed to the lower half of the reversing turbines of the Weapon class ships solved the problem of major machine room breakdowns," Marija explained, her face a picture of concentration as she watched HMS Scorpion drifting towards contact with the quayside fenders, "but having to manoeuvre so close to such a big ship, almost in the USS Enterprise's prop wash, HMS Scorpion must have been very nearly uncontrollable with only half her designed reversing power?"

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher's mouth momentarily hung open in astonishment. He looked at the slip of a girl his son was determined to marry and gulped once, twice like a fish out of water before he collected his wits.

"HMS Talavera is a slightly bigger ship without partially disabled reversing turbines," Marija continued, squinting at HMS Scorpion's dented and slightly askew bow, missing starboard anchor, and her torn up fo'c'sle rails. In comparison the Talavera's damage – ignoring the unsightly charred gouge all down her starboard bridge plating to the level of the main deck through which keen observers could see the destroyer's helmsman at the wheel - seemed relatively superficial. "Peter would have had a much easier time of it. Don't you think, Admiral?"

Julian Christopher found himself exchanging looks with Margo Seiffert

who was struggling, and failing, to conceal her huge amusement at his discomfort.

It was a funny old World.

An hour ago, he had been in discussion with the Prime Minister intent on clarifying the circumstances under which he was authorised to task Arc Light nuclear strike missions by the five V-Bombers based at RAF Luqa. Margaret Thatcher had sounded unusually worried and *very* tired at the other end of the secure voice link to her new office in Oxford, the location of the soon to be reconvened Houses of Parliament.

Back in England the Cabinet Office was in the process of moving to premises at King's College, while Christ Church would accommodate the House of Commons. It seemed extraordinary to him, as a military man, that Margaret Thatcher remained so implacably, unreasonably committed to the restoration of 'politics as normal' in the old country just three days after Red Dawn had launched what amounted to a thermonuclear first strike – involving the use of as many as a dozen warheads, including several city-killing yield weapons - across *his* theatre of operations, and specifically, against *his* forces in the Mediterranean. He had had to remind himself that practically everything about Margaret Hilda Thatcher, the thirty-eight-year-old blond bombshell, Boadicea-like leader who had emerged seemingly from nowhere to galvanise a broken and dispirited people, was utterly *extraordinary*.

If he lived long enough he planned to marry *that* woman.

Margaret Thatcher's friends and detractors alike called her the Angry Widow. This she knew and made no apologies for the veracity of the handle. She was 'bloody angry' about what had happened at the end of October 1962 and had never made any secret of the fact.

An hour ago, she had reiterated that British commanders in the field had 'no authority whatsoever to independently deploy Arc Light'. Nonetheless, he had requested exactly that authority. The Angry Widow had not hesitated to slap him down. For all that they might be affianced – unofficially, secretly – and the unavoidable *complications* of their mutually shared and welcomed feelings one for the other, Margaret Thatcher had no intention of relinquishing her absolute control over Britain's nuclear arsenal.

It was the one thing she would not trust in his hands.

'The trigger remains locked in my handbag, Julian,' she had declared and

he had known that there was no profit in arguing the matter further. The Angry Widow had spoken and that was that!

Marija was smiling at him as if she was reading his mind.

The oddest thing was that there was something about the slight, angelic presence of Marija Elizabeth Calleja that somewhat intimidated the fighting admiral in ways that Margaret Hilda Thatcher never had, nor ever would.

Julian Christopher glanced to Margo Seiffert, with whom he had not quite contrived to have an affair many, many years ago and always rather regretted it. Margo was the third of the three uniquely *extraordinary* women he had encountered – in Margo's case re-encountered after a gap of over a decade – since he had brought the bulk of the British Pacific Fleet back to home waters escorting the Operation Manna convoys. Those convoys had staved off famine and chronic fuel shortages in England; earned him his nation's approbation and thanks and placed him firmly within the concentric orbits of Margaret Thatcher, Margo Seiffert and now, Marija Calleja. Honestly and truly he did not know which of the three women; the feisty former US Navy Surgeon-Commander, the charismatic political saviour of his nation, or the seraphically composed Maltese girl who had triumphed over awful childhood injuries to unknowingly become a symbol of her island's quest for freedom, confused and fascinated him the most.

Like Marija, Margo Seiffert had obviously read a little of his discomfiture in his eyes. However, for the moment Marija had eyes only for the battered, blackened silhouette of the Battle class destroyer HMS Talavera as she bumped and ground gently against the liberally strewn tyres and fenders at the seaward end of Parlatorio Wharf.

Chapter 4

Monday 10th February 1964
Otopeni Air Force Base, People's Republic of Romania

The only thing that worried Nicolae Ceausescu was that his mentor and friend – insofar as in the high command of the People's Republic of Romania any man could afford *friends* - Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej would fail to seize the day. The Dictator of Romania had the surviving figureheads of the old Soviet Empire in the palm of his hand, at his mercy. Ceausescu was sweating; his pen was slippery in his fingers. He could hardly keep still. The moment was so full of previously undreamt-of possibilities. Nicolae Ceausescu could almost feel the power sparking from the extremities of his body. His excitement was an arousal of the most visceral kind. The moment was intensely *erotic*...

All that needed to be done was to snatch up the telephone on the table and softly say a single word and it would begin.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was distracted by exactly the same thought as he concentrated his attention on Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin, the man who seemed to be first among equals in the Soviet *Troika* which had responded to his 'summons' following *Krasnaya Zarya's* unplanned, uncoordinated, and moronically executed nuclear strikes on the Greek, Italian, Yugoslavian, unaccountably on Egyptian targets, and insanely, upon the British forces in the Eastern Mediterranean and at Malta. Marshal of the Soviet Union, Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov sat to Kosygin's left, and the brooding, reptile-eyed Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov at his right. Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, the only other man in the bunker sat behind Chuikov, his face hidden in the shadows.

Nicolae Ceausescu tried to catch his fellow supernumerary's eye and failed. It irked him that while he had thick Securitate-prepared files on the three members of the *Troika,* he knew next to nothing about Sakharov other than that he was some kind of 'bomb' scientist loosely attached to Kosygin's personal staff.

"So, what is it to be?" Vasily Chuikov asked gruffly, his patience exhausted: "If you want me to drink Vodka until I piss my pants and for me

to dance on the table say so now!"

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej half-smiled but it was a death mask kind of smile.

"Stalin is dead, Comrade Marshal," he retorted lowly.

The old soldier guffawed and lit a foul-smelling cigarette. He had seen the tanks and armoured half-tracked troop carriers on the airfield perimeter road; noted the hard-bitten look of the over-large 'honour guard' that had greeted the *Troika* on the tarmac. He had noted also the way the main runway had been blocked by more vehicles immediately the *Troika's* aircraft had landed.

"So is Marshal Krylov," Chuikov grunted dispassionately.

"Krylov?" The Dictator of Romania asked flatly.

"Nikolai Ivanovich failed in his duty to safeguard the capital of the Motherland in the Cuban Missiles War," Yuri Andropov interjected testily. "There was little he could have done to have stopped the Yankee rockets and bombs but as Commander of the Moscow Military Districts he could and should have ensured that the appropriate civil defence protocols were in effect before the attack."

Nicolae Ceausescu flinched. He was not a man given to sentimentality, or for giving another man the benefit of the doubt, but there was something relentless and merciless in Andropov which gave him a very bad feeling about what would happen if Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was so unwise as to allow these *people* to walk out of this bunker alive.

The Dictator of Romania did not respond.

The silence dragged for several seconds.

"And then," Andropov continued, his voice dead pan and matter of fact, "Krylov allowed his people to try to get us all killed."

"*His* people?" Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej replied coldly. "You mean he allowed the *Soviet* personnel responsible for the care, maintenance and field deployment of a significant proportion of the viable surviving nuclear strike capability of *our* alliance to be seized and activated by the *Krasnaya Zarya* faction within *your* ranks?"

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had ignored Andropov and Chuikov to concentrate his spitting ire on the impassive face of Andrei Kosygin, who said nothing, knowing that his Romanian counterpart had not finished talking.

“That would be the same *Red Dawn* faction that *we* demanded that *you* confronted and expunged from *my* territory.” Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was breathing hard, loudly asthmatic, veins pulsed at his temples. His fists were clenched on the table before him. “When the British and the Americans calculate the trajectories of the missiles *your* people fired at them they will discover that as many as half of them were launched from Romanian sovereign territory. The sacred soil of *my* land!”

Alexei Kosygin nodded. “My sources inform me that you have already taken action against the *terrorists* responsible?”

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had ordered his troops to seize all Soviet nuclear weapons, technicians and support troops in Romania, to blockade all Soviet military formations in their bases and camps, to deny Romanian air space to Soviet aircraft and had mined the approaches to Constanta and other Romanian ports and harbours to stop Soviet vessels departing or entering *his* waters. In the unlikely event that the British and the Americans wanted to talk first and obliterate his country later; he had done everything he could think of to disassociate himself from the madness of the *Krasnaya Zarya* fanatics foisted upon him by the *Troika*.

Nicolae Ceausescu sighed, unsuccessfully veiling his irritation.

At one level Ceausescu perfectly understood his mentor’s strategy but still, he entertained nagging doubts as to the efficacy of his tactics. He had known Gheorghe was unwell for some months. His cough had become more hacking, his complexion greyer and his once limitless energy, sadly diminished. At first, he had wondered if it was simply the intolerable pressure of ensuring that Romania, a relatively untouched island of the old World surrounded by a sea of chaos and destruction, remained inviolate. But that was not it. Gheorghe and he were veterans of the old regime’s prisons and internment camps. They had survived those days hardened to withstand the harshest of trials. No, his old friend was very ill, probably ailing. In these post-apocalypse times disease quickly took a man, infection was remorseless, unforgiving and the stocks of modern drugs and medical equipment Party members had been able to get access to before the war were exhausted, lost, worn out. Once a man’s health began to decline it was only a matter of time. Now at the very moment Gheorghe needed to be at his strongest Ceausescu was afraid he would falter. And then what would happen?

That at least, was one question he knew the answer to; when Gheorghe was gone he would have to pick up the pieces.

The Dictator of Romania gathered his breath before he wheezed a sour-faced retort in Andrei Kosygin's face.

"The Armed Forces of the People's Republic and *my* Securitate have rounded up the leaders of the conspiracy. My instructions were to liquidate anybody who resisted arrest. Several of the ringleaders have been brought here to Otopeni. Mopping up operations against Soviet units sympathetic to *Red Dawn* continue. *My* forces have suffered heavy casualties in the last thirty-six hours and an attempt on *my* life was made as I travelled to this place. All logistical and technical operations in support of *your* forces on land, sea and in the air in the former territory of Bulgaria, and ongoing offensive actions in Yugoslavia and Greece have ceased. Until such time as the internal security situation has stabilized, *your* forces on those *fronts* will have to fend for themselves..."

At this point the Dictator of Romania began to cough. The others waited as the spasms wracked his stocky body. Eventually, Ceausescu put a hand on his friend's shoulder and handed him a fresh handkerchief. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was spitting blood.

"Gheorghe," his long time protégé and since the Cuban Missiles War his ever-present right-hand man asked gently, "perhaps, if I might..."

The older man gasped for air, nodded.

Nicolae Ceausescu was already on his feet.

"I confess that I have little or no interest in the great game you gentlemen think that you are still playing, Comrades," he confessed, "or in what role you believe that the *Krasnaya Zarya* hordes play in your twisted imaginary geopolitical chess game."

He stepped into the pool of light above the table.

The Russians recognised the feral, calculating mind behind the cold eyes and understood instantly that the man with whom they had to deal was not a sick, angry old-school Marxist-Leninist but an utterly ruthless creature of the modern World. If they had had any doubts before now they were abruptly dispelled; the well of pity in Ceausescu's icy eyes was dry.

Nicolae Ceausescu and pity were strangers.

Born the third child of an impoverished drunken, wife-beating despotic father in Scornicesti in the south of the country in 1918, he had run away

from home at the age of eleven to live with his elder sister Niculina in Bucharest. Apprenticed to a shoemaker called Alexandru Săndulescu, an activist of the banned Communist Party, he had become a party member before his fifteenth birthday. His first arrest had been in 1933; in 1936 he was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison. Thereafter, he had spent most of his late teens and twenties in one or other prison or internment camp.

Fatefully, in 1943 at Târgu Jiu in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains he had shared a cell with Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej; to whom he had quickly made himself indispensible. When the Red Army liberated Romania, he had been appointed Secretary of the Union of Communist Youth. With his connections to Gheorghe and his impeccable *prison faction* antecedents he had risen rapidly in the Party after the 1945 war, swiftly becoming a major-general in the reformed Romanian Army; and Gheorghe's deputy Minister of Defence and most reliable ally on the Central Committee of the Party. By 1954 he was a full member of the Romanian Politburo and by the time of the October War the man most likely to succeed Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. However, nothing in politics was straightforward or in any way as easy as it subsequently seemed to outside observers. In the People's Republic of Romania, no man could advance far, let alone scale the rarefied heights to the apex of power without assiduously cultivating his own standing in the Party, and most important, assuring himself of the backing of the Securitate. No man who worried about where the bodies were buried was ever going to rise to lead his people. Nor in Nicolae Ceausescu's opinion did any man who entertained such qualms have any right to so do.

He patted his old friend on the shoulder.

"Yes, do it," the ailing Dictator of Romania murmured.

Nicolae Ceausescu picked up the handset: "Krasnaya Zarya!"

He replaced black Bakelite receiver and stood back.

And waited...

The members of the *Troika* exchanged quizzically comedic glances; and then as the first burst of automatic fire reverberated dully around the upper levels of the bunker complex, and bullets ricocheted off the two-inch thick armoured blast doors to the room in which they sat, their frowns turned to scowls.

The shooting went on for several minutes, its intensity soon diminishing until there were gaps of several seconds between eruptions of small arms

fire. Within less than fifteen minutes only the occasional single shot was heard, distantly, muffled. During all this time the two factions in the bunker stared at each other; as if they were patiently waiting to discover whose champions had won the day even though there was never any doubt on that score.

The *Troika* had brought a twenty-man protection squad, some of the junior members of the hastily assembled delegation carried hand guns, otherwise the Russians were lambs to the slaughter; overwhelmingly outnumbered and out-gunned by the Romanian wolves descending upon the fold.

Presently, the telephone rang.

Nicolae Ceausescu picked it up: “This is the Deputy First Secretary Speaking. What is your report?”

The voice at the other end of the line returned: “Phase One is complete, Comrade First Deputy Secretary.”

“Good. Proceed to Phase Two.”

Nicolae Ceausescu smiled tight-lipped.

“Certain *preparations* need to be completed before any of us can leave this room,” he explained. He might have been discussing a football match or the fluctuating production figures at the Timisoara Collective Tractor Factory.

He drew up a chair beside Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej.

“What has just happened?” Andrei Sakharov asked, unable to stop himself jumping to his feet. He approached the table, rested his hands on it and leaned towards the two Romanians.

Nicolae Ceausescu gave him a coolly dismissive look.

Vasily Chuikov lit another cigarette, growling like a bear.

“The bastards just liquidated all the people who came west with us from Chelyabinsk and probably,” he raised a curious eyebrow in Ceausescu’s general direction, seeking confirmation, “every Russian they could round up in Bucharest and the surrounding countryside.”

Nicolae Ceausescu shrugged.

“But that’s monstrous!” Protested Sakharov.

Yuri Andropov stirred. He had seemed lost in thought while the shooting was going on. He guffawed unkindly.

“Coming from you, Academician Sakharov, the brain behind the *Third*

Idea," he observed sarcastically, "that is a bit rich, don't you think?"

Andrei Sakharov recoiled, stepped back from the table as if a Cobra had unfurled its hood in front of him.

Nicolae Ceausescu was piqued because he felt he ought to know what Andropov was talking about. He had heard the phrase the 'Third Idea' before but could not tie it down and it quickly threatened to become a distraction.

"The Third Idea?" He demanded.

"It is the name the people in Moscow gave the project to build the hydrogen bomb," Sakharov told him. "This is madness." He waved his arms like erratic disjointed windmill sails. He glared around the poorly lit bunker in which so much condensation had formed on the walls and ceiling that water drops were periodically exploding on the table and the shoulders of the six men. "Don't you understand anything?"

"What is there to understand, Comrade Sakharov?" The question came quietly from the lips of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who was gradually recovering from his earlier coughing fit.

"This is insane! What do you think you are doing?"

This brought forth no response.

The physicist went on.

"We are too weak to fight among ourselves. The only hope for us is if we husband all our collective resources." He shook his head in despair. "Don't you understand? If the British and the Americans were going to launch a retaliatory strike surely they would have done it by now!"

Chapter 5

Monday 10th February 1964
USS Iowa, Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility, Philadelphia

The USS Iowa was moored outboard of her sister ship the USS Wisconsin. To reach the admiral's day cabin on the Iowa it was, thus, necessary to traverse the superstructure and the one hundred and eight feet girth of the inboard leviathan. In the process any man who still doubted the untapped, sleeping military might of the United States of America would have had to have been blind, stupid, in denial or all three of the above to cling onto the tiniest seed of his former doubts.

It mattered not that the Iowa and the Wisconsin were mothballed, largely unmodified World War II vintage battlewagons with ten to twenty-year-old optics, radars and electronic suites, or that they were horribly labour-intensive beasts to steam and maintain, or that without constant air cover and a dozen surface and undersea escorts to ward off air and submarine attack they were giant sitting ducks. None of that mattered because anybody taking the most casual of casual looks at the great, long, lean battleships with their upper works bristling with old-fashioned but very, very visible firepower and their nine massive sixteen-inch calibre naval rifles mounted in three suitably enormous turrets – two forward of the bridge, the third aft of the superstructure – intuitively *knew* with utter, unshakable certainty that *nothing* could withstand these ships if they were so foolish as to come within range of their guns. Such was the fallacy of the battleship myth; even twenty years after it had been blown asunder at places as far apart as Taranto in the Mediterranean, Pearl Harbour in the Hawaiian Islands, in the South China Sea, in the Sibuyan Gulf and the Pacific south of Kyushu, nobody was emotionally immune to the cast iron solidity and the unambiguously awesome power of a battleship.

Iowa and Wisconsin were among the last battlewagons built for the US Navy, coming into service in 1944; by then the age of the battleship was over and in the last year of the Pacific War they were relegated to the role of fast escorts for the American carrier task groups ranging across the vast eastern

oceans, or employed as mobile artillery platforms capable of pouring screaming death and destruction upon enemy shores over twenty miles distant. In the months after the Iowas joined the Pacific Fleet the only bigger battleships ever built, the Japanese Yamato and Musashi, both twenty thousand tons heavier never came within range of their great sixteen-inch naval rifles; instead they were bombed and torpedoed into deep watery graves in attacks by hundreds of American carrier-borne aircraft.

Before he disappeared out of sight into the towering castles of steel moored in the muddy waters of the Delaware River, Jack Kennedy turned and waved for the cameras. He was in no particular hurry and invited his Vice-President to join him. The aura of their surroundings lent what they were trying to achieve credence out of all proportion to the highly questionable military utility of either the Wisconsin or the Iowa. The thirty-fifth President of the United States of America had tried to reason with his detractors, desperately attempted to woo at least some of his political enemies back onto the centre ground; and he had failed dismally, as eloquently witnessed by the fact that his Administration was at war with a sizable majority of the occupants of the House of Representatives. So be it; now he was appealing directly to the court of public opinion and he did not need to consult a public relations genius to know, that when the American people saw pictures of their President on the deck of an American battleship, they were going to feel a lot better about both him and themselves, and in all likelihood sleep a little more soundly in their beds.

Leastways, until the next disaster came along...

The Navy had spruced up the quayside flank and superstructure of the USS Wisconsin with a hurried coat of grey paint. The air stank of the freshly applied paint and Jack Kennedy breathed more easily as he followed Admiral David Lamar McDonald, the Chief of Naval Operations through the steel jungle to the gangway which linked the two battleships out of sight of the press corps. There were already men working on the decks of the USS Iowa, stringing cables high in her conning tower, anti-aircraft gun mounts were being dismantled, and two diesel generators thrummed in the lee of her forward main battery turrets. Unlike her sister ship, the Iowa was alive and in the coming days an army of workers would swarm over her like ants striving to turn the symbolic gestures of a few minutes ago into a reality that the whole World would recognise as an unmistakable signal of American

resolve. When the Iowa steamed out into the North Atlantic again Jack Kennedy wanted the World to know that he was putting down a personal marker.

He had not actually believed his new Chief of Naval Operations when David McDonald had told him that given Presidential priority and 'a fair wind', the old battlewagon could be taken out of mothballs and sent back to sea within eight weeks and be in the Mediterranean in twelve, without - and this was the crucial caveat – delaying the emergency reactivation of other more modern ships.

McDonald was, as Lyndon Johnson said, 'a regular guy', albeit 'for an Admiral'. There was probably no higher praise in the Vice-President's lexicon than an acknowledgement that a senior military man was 'a regular guy'. At this very moment the US Navy's Personnel Division was trawling Navy records for men who had served on the four mothballed Iowa class ships – the other two sisters, the USS New Jersey and the USS Missouri were laid up at the Bremerton Naval Inactive Ship Maintenance Facility in Washington State – because the master plan was to, quite literally, crew the World War II battlewagon with 'old hands'. Of the four ships the Iowa was in the best condition, and fortuitously, on the doorstep of the new headquarters of the national press and media corps. Although the Wisconsin had been the last of the class taken out of active service she had been extensively damaged by a big electrical fire after her mothballing and had never been repaired. Moreover, neither the New Jersey nor the Missouri had been modernized since the Korean War. Given the basic soundness of the Iowa's fabric and machinery, David McDonald had not seriously considered reactivating any of the other three ships of her class. Besides, while there were a lot of old battleship men on the Naval Reserve List it was highly unlikely that there would be enough, fit, willing and able 'older hands' with the necessary range of technical qualifications to enable him to magic out of thin air more than a single crew for one of the old ships.

Admiral McDonald waited until his guests had settled in the admiral's day cabin in the comfortable chairs arranged around the big table he had had brought in from City Hall, then he moved to the briefing board at the forward end of the compartment.

"In the event of an alarm sounding," earlier that morning the Alert Status of the US military had been downgraded from DEFCON TWO to DEFCON

THREE but that was more because of the inherent dangers of indefinitely maintaining the higher level of readiness, than any lessoning of the perceived international tensions or the actual risk of attack, “the Secret Service will lead all persons in this compartment below to a secure area within the most heavily armoured part of the ship. The area I have identified for this purpose is shielded by six inches of cemented steel deck armour and up to sixteen inches of side armour. In the event the ship is holed and sinks to the bottom of the Delaware River,” he added, affecting a fleeting smile, “rest assured that the ship will settle on the bottom and the designated ‘safe area’ will remain several feet above water.”

Jack Kennedy chuckled.

“That’s very reassuring, Admiral.”

“We are currently at a reduced state of alert; DEFCON THREE,” McDonald went on. Cabinet members and senior military officers knew this but not all of their aides and assistants. “This is a lower state of alert than that immediately subsequent to the initial nuclear strikes in the Mediterranean. However, B-52s are airborne at this time and they are still flying to their fail-safe points; and three of our Polaris missile boats commanded by officers for whose loyalty I can personally vouch, have put to sea in the last forty-eight hours.”

The President waited for the low whisper of voices to subside, looking around the compartment with a sober eye. Two key men were absent; The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Curtis LeMay, and murdered Dean Rusk’s successor at the State Department, the immensely able and sagacious fifty-eight-year-old Missourian James William ‘Bill’ Fulbright, who was currently engaged on a madcap round of shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East. Bill Fulbright – who was still technically the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and was likely to remain so for the foreseeable future if the House’s foot-dragging and obfuscation continued – viewed Red Dawn’s stunningly badly executed nuclear strikes of three days ago as a ‘once in a generation opportunity to knock heads together in the region’. Jack Kennedy had given him a free hand to ‘do whatever has to be done’ to exploit the situation. The way things were going they were unlikely to get too many lucky breaks like the ones Cairo and Malta had had last Friday.

God had all that happened only three days ago!

Jack Kennedy looked to his Chief of Naval Operations. David McDonald had offered him his resignation forty-eight hours ago.

'I knew we were sending the Enterprise and the Long Beach into harm's way, sir. The reality is that there will be people in Congress demanding somebody's head on a platter.'

'You were obeying my direct orders, Admiral,' his Commander-in-Chief had reminded him, ending further discussion. 'A lot of people who ought to know better haven't got used to the idea that we are at war. In war bad things happen. When they do we mourn the dead and we move on.'

Now on a grey morning closeted in the steel cocoon of a dinosaur from another, simpler age, the President of the United States of America paused a moment to make eye contacts around the table.

Lyndon Baines Johnson sat sombrely at his right hand, his Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara at his left. Bob McNamara had brought along his 'point man' with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, forty-nine-year-old three-star army General William Childs Westmoreland. Westmoreland's was a name already being bandied around as a future candidate as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, 'Westy' as he was known to insiders in the Army and the Defence Department, had a reputation as a 'corporate executive in uniform', making him exactly the sort of man that the former President of the Ford Motor Company, Bob McNamara, needed at his side in his fiendishly complex ongoing mission to unpick the chaos left by the Battle of Washington, and to reorganise and to place on a sound long-term footing the presently much diminished military might of the nation. The other members of the 'conference group' had come aboard the USS Iowa without fanfare, ferried across the Delaware in Navy launches from the New Jersey side of the river well out of sight of the media pack corralled on the Pennsylvania shore.

Robert Francis 'Bobby' Kennedy, the President's younger brother who held the post of Attorney General in the Administration had shed several years off his careworn good looks in recent weeks. He had suffered a minor gunshot wound in the tragic assassination of British Prime Minister Edward Heath in the Oval Office at the end of the Battle of Washington; recovered fast and been, with his elder brother, the barnstorming, proselytizing, unapologetic face and voice of the Administration in the weeks since. While the President had wowed the crowds – essentially, he had been on the campaign trail – Bobby had mixed 'campaigning' with reconnecting with

Middle America and the downtrodden, dispossessed whom both brothers now regarded as *the* key elements of *their* natural constituency. Until the last couple of months Bobby and Lyndon Johnson had been at odds, mistrusting and misunderstanding each other at every turn. Latterly, Bobby had realised that beneath the tall Texan's frowning disdain for 'gesture politics' and his career reputation for 'playing hardball, fixing and dealing in DC', that LBJ and he shared a broadly similar vision of a better, fairer, more equitable and fundamentally *juster* society. However, before they created that better new World they both recognised that they had to preserve the one they were living in first.

Some of the faces around the table were hardly known to the President. Not so that of fifty-three-year-old Virginian, Henry Hammill Fowler, since the assassination of his predecessor, C. Douglas Dillon on the first day of the Battle of Washington, promoted from Under Secretary for the Treasury to oversee the financial reconstruction that Jack Kennedy now realised he ought to have authorised immediately after the October War.

Fowler was another man ideally qualified to discharge his new responsibilities. A lawyer by training, in the 1945 war he had been counsel to the Office of Production Management and to the War Production Board, during the Korean War he had returned to government with the National Production Authority, serving initially as Director of the Office of Defence Mobilization and later been drafted onto the National Security Council. A lifelong Democrat he had left government during the Eisenhower years but not retired from public service; serving on the Commission on Money and Credit between 1958 and 1961, working for the Democratic Advisory Council, and sitting on the Brookings Institute's National Committee on Government Finance before joining the Administration in 1962. Henry Fowler was closer to LBJ than either of the Kennedy brothers, gifted with a distinctly *southern* charm and politically, conservative without ever having fully embraced the traditional segregationist 'Southern Democratic' agenda.

Beyond the ruddy-faced Treasury Secretary sat the Secretaries of the Navy, the Air Force and the Army, several loyal senior Democrats, the Secretary of Labour, the Surgeon General, and two representatives of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom; the British Ambassador, Lord Franks, elegantly attired in civilian garb, and beside him Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's personal 'Military Legate to the President', the former

Chief of the British Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Charles Elworthy. Margaret Thatcher had made it clear to Jack Kennedy that these two men, in her absence, 'spoke for the United Kingdom' and when the Angry Widow said a thing like that a man was a fool not to take it to heart. Senior staffers circled around their principals. This 'packing' of the conference presented an intrinsic security issue but not one that was outweighed by the crying need for *everybody* to be on the same page, and to be wholly conversant with the same message.

The President of the United States of America cleared his throat.

"Admiral McDonald has prepared a *for our ears only situation briefing*," he prefaced, deadly serious. "This conference was called at this time and place for four reasons. One, the setting," he quirked an unfunny half-smile, "because appearances do matter, my friends, and I make no apology for using these magnificent old ships as publicity props. Any assurance we can give our fellow Americans in these troubled times is to be welcomed."

There were murmurs of agreement around the table.

"Two, despite recent events in the Mediterranean, and the news we are receiving all the time – some good, some bad, some very bad – nothing that has happened in the last few days has altered the declared policy of *my* Administration. The United States of America *will* re-mobilize to fight a *one continent* war by the earliest date. Thereafter, we *will* restore and if necessary, build up, our forces to be capable of simultaneously fighting a *two-continent* war against any likely foe. For the present we will offer and provide, without reserve, on a 'war grant' basis," he threw a glance at his new Secretary to the US Treasury, "similar to the Second World War lend lease arrangements' *all* assistance that it is within out power to give to the United Kingdom. Several ships carrying war supplies and other essential goods are already at sea en route to the United Kingdom and to the Mediterranean. Presently, this lifeline is a trickle; heads will roll if that lifeline does not quickly turn into a mighty river of foodstuffs, industrial and technical materials, fuels and every imaginable sinew of war."

Jack Kennedy exchanged looks with his younger brother, whose understated nod confirmed he was hitting the right buttons. Thus fortified, he continued.

"Three, while re-affirming that it is still this Administration's position that an attack on the soil of an Ally as defined by the Articles of the North

Atlantic Treaty Organisation, shall be automatically be regarded as a direct attack on the United States of America; I have been persuaded by Premier Thatcher that despite the clear intention of aggressors based on Romanian sovereign territory, and the soil of one, perhaps two of the republics of the former Soviet Union, to target British territories and warships in the Mediterranean with nuclear weapons," he paused, made eye contacts around the table, "a decision to launch a retaliatory nuclear strike has been deferred indefinitely at this time pending future developments. Those responsible for the recent nuclear *and* conventional war crimes and atrocities committed in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Regions are hereby under notice from the civilized World that their crimes will never be forgotten, and that one day they will face the justice they so richly deserve."

The sound of hammering and machinery filtered into the compartment from far, far away as if to remind all those present that this ship, and the country at large was stirring from its post-cataclysm stupor.

"Four," Jack Kennedy said, his tone brightening and yet filling with iron resolve. "Tomorrow evening in a speech to the Faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology I will announce my decision to run for a second term as *your* President."

Chapter 6

Monday 10th February 1964
Parlatorio Wharf, Grand Harbour, Malta

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, could not but be aware of the peculiarly *festive* atmosphere around him on the dockside as the gangway was heaved into place and secured to the gouged, dented, fire-blackened main deck of the battered Weapon class destroyer HMS Scorpion. He had given 'the ladies' – Marija Calleja and her chaperone, Margo Seiffert – leave to detach themselves from the official welcoming party. For himself, no matter how much he wanted to shake his son's hand again, protocol demanded that he welcome Captain 'D' of the 7th Destroyer Flotilla ashore first.

Striding magisterially up the gangway he caught a glimpse of Marija and Margo smoothing down their skirts while they awaited the securing of HMS Talavera's gangway. He chuckled to himself and shook his head before forcing himself to focus on the matter in hand.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain!"

Captain Nicholas Davey, the crown of his head swathed in thick crepe bandages and his left arm in a sling did his best to straighten his generously proportioned, somewhat bruised frame, into a semblance of naval good order. He threw a parody of a salute; it was the best he could manage while somehow contriving to keep a relatively straight face as his old friend stood at the top of the gangway like an aging Greek god in his immaculate uniform.

"Granted, sir!"

Julian Christopher looked about him at the wreckage and the twisted metal, the wooden deck planking scorched by fire. The ship stank of aviation fuel, a lot of it only half-burnt.

He sniffed, maintained the severe severity of high command for a little longer.

"Quiet a mess," he observed tartly.

The side party waited with baited breath.

Suddenly the Commander-in-Chief's handsome tanned face broke into a smile and his eyes glistened with mischief and relief.

"While I was listening to the Enterprise's radio traffic during the worst of the fire there were a couple of times," he declared loudly, "that I thought you and the boy were gonners, Nick!"

Captain Nicholas Davey had raced big – ocean-going America's cup contenders - and countless smaller yachts with Julian Christopher before the 1945 war; they had raced hard and partied harder, and later they had served together many times in these very waters. The last time they had been together in Malta he had been his old friend's second-in-command.

"Yes, well," the portly commanding officer of HMS Scorpion bemoaned, his face flushing with good humour, "needs must, sir."

"What you did was heroic, Nick," Julian Christopher said much more loudly than he needed. "Bloody heroic!" He swung around and let his eye fall randomly on the men around him. "Bloody heroic, I say! There aren't enough bloody medals in the World for you and your men!" The ship was half-wrecked and it was astonishing that there had been no deaths on either HMS Scorpion or on HMS Talavera during the Hellish hours they had fought to pump water into the USS Enterprise's fire-ravaged stern. Both destroyers had had several men badly injured and a score or so less seriously; but nobody was on the critical list which was proof positive that miracles happen sometimes. "Finest traditions of the Service! The finest bloody traditions!"

The Commander-in-Chief was about to call for three cheers when he, the Captain of HMS Scorpion, and everybody else on the deck of the destroyer, and on the dockside and on the high ground flanking both sides of French Creek were distracted by a commotion on the quay alongside HMS Talavera.

"Ah," Captain Nicholas Davey sighed, "that will be *that* boy of yours making a damn fool of himself, no doubt." The words were said with a mellow, brotherly indulgence that belied their apparent harshness. Without a word both men stepped to the head of the gangway to get a better view.

"Hip! Hip! HURRAH!"

"Hip! Hip! HURRAH!"

"Hip! Hip! HURRAH!"

It seemed as if every member of HMS Talavera's crew – decked out in unreasonably good order considering the parlous state of the ship around them – was lining her starboard rail. Not that much of her starboard rail

survived; many men were leaning precariously into space to get an unobstructed view of the scene on the quay. A hundred caps were raised in the air in unison; on shore there was more cheering and then, wild clapping.

At the foot of HMS Talavera's gangway Marija Calleja was in her beau's arms, clinging onto his neck, her feet dangling clear of the concrete dock while the couple slowly turned circles.

Julian Christopher saw that his son's cap had fallen to the ground.

The young couple were briefly so caught up in the moment that they completely forgot about the hundreds of watching eyes; but because they were both sensible, organised, rather conventional young people, as soon as they realised that they were making a spectacle of themselves they felt a little foolish and made a half-hearted attempted to retrieve the situation.

Peter Christopher carefully returned his fiancée's feet to terra firma.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away," he muttered, blushing deeply. "I didn't hurt you, lifting you off your feet that way?"

"No," Marija giggled, loving the closeness of him, wanting him to pick her up again and yet knowing that would probably have to wait for another time, another place; another place much more private that this one. "I am not a wallflower. I will not break," she said awkwardly. And hissed: "Everybody is looking, Peter!"

The man grinned, holding the woman a little apart from himself.

Decorum! Stop mauling the poor girl in front of all these people, man!

Oh, no, my father will be watching this...

The last time, the first and only time, he had seen the woman he loved – the woman he had loved since he was a spotty adolescent, half a lifetime ago – she had been in a hospital bed with a fat lip, two black eyes, and with a freshly stitched wound in her left eyebrow. The swelling had gone down. Make up, he assumed, had covered up the darkness around her eyes *which was all the more reason not to maul her*! Not right now.

"You look much recovered?" He stammered.

"Margo spent forever making me *presentable* this morning," the love of Peter Christopher's life confessed. "But I am okay. Really I am."

"Just don't try to run again until you are fully healed up," Peter quipped, wondering as he said it if it was the wrong thing to say. Less than a week ago Marija had fallen – literally on her face - because she was trying to attract his attention, call to him, catch up with him as he strode down the narrow

cobbled streets of the Mdina Citadel in conversation with Lieutenant Alan Hannay. She had been so agitated that she had *tried to run* after him. Which was fine except for the fact the last time she had run anywhere was in 1942 when she was five-and-a-half years old. In between then and now she had spent her childhood and teenage years in hospitals slowly, painfully being put together after being crushed in the rubble of a collapsed bomb shelter in Birgu. Last week she had briefly forgotten she *couldn't* run. Or rather, after she had run five or six steps she had remembered she *couldn't* run, and straight away fallen flat on her face. "Sorry, silly thing to say..."

Marija raised her right hand and touched his lips with her finger tips.

Such a sweet man!

Suddenly, they both forgot all about the watching eyes.

Peter bent his head to hers, she clasped her hands behind his neck, melded into his arms and again, her feet left the ground. This time they kissed. A first, exploratory kiss before they stopped caring about where they were, who was looking, or even who they were until after an eternity, they had no option but to come up for air.

"Well," Margo Seiffert declared a little later as she approached Julian Christopher and the heavily bandaged inordinately cheerful, somewhat portly man standing on the dock beside HMS Scorpion's blackened bridge, "I thought that went better than expected!"

"Yes," the proud father murmured ruefully. "I think we can say that the young lovers were, er, glad to see each other again." The Commander-in-Chief grimaced and introduced the Captain 'D' of the 7th Destroyer Squadron. "Margo, his is Nick Davey, Peter's squadron commander," he guffawed, "Nick, this is Surgeon Commander Margo Seiffert, formerly of the United States Navy but soon to be Medical Director of the Malta Defence Force."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Captain Davey." Hands were shaken. Margo cast a peeved look at Julian Christopher. "As to the MDF thing, you know full well that I haven't decided yet!"

Now that the crowds had cleared the air was filled with the sound of the regular gushing, spewing rhythm of the pumps that were keeping the two damaged destroyers afloat while preparations were finalised to transfer them into dry docks on the other side of French Creek overnight.

A slim young lieutenant approached the group, came to attention, saluted

the C-in-C and waited respectfully to be asked what he wanted.

"I hear you acquitted yourself with distinction, Hannay?" The great man smiled, returning his former flag lieutenant's salute. "Welcome to the real Navy."

A little over a week ago Alan Hannay had had what most of his peers regarded as the cushiest job in the whole Mediterranean Theatre of Operations. He had been Julian Christopher's bagman, the guardian of his diary, the man who organised his life, basically. Nobody got in to speak with the C-in-C without getting past him, and whatever he asked for he got. For the last two months he had spoken with the C-in-C's voice, and he could easily have lived the rest of his career safely on the staff, far away from the shooting. Julian Christopher had known this but he had done nothing to stop Alan Hannay sailing towards the sound of gunfire.

"Ah," the young officer's Squadron Commander recollected, "you must be 'that blasted young rogue Hannay' that the Captain of the Resurgent wanted me to place in irons the morning we sailed out of Sliema Creek?"

Alan Hannay looked sheepish.

"Talavera was rather short of a longish list of essential supplies, sir."

Nicholas Davey was laughing softly under his breath.

HMS Talavera's Supply Officer did not immediately realise as much.

"I probably bent a few Regs, sir. Sorry, I..."

Both his Commander-in-Chief and Captain 'D' exploded with laughter.

"Ah, I see," Alan Hannay mouthed, feeling even more idiotic than before.

Captain Nicholas Davey waved at the two battered destroyers moored alongside Parlatorio Wharf.

"I suspect that your particular *acquisitive* skills will come in very handy over the next few weeks, Lieutenant Hannay. But be a good chap; try not to be so bloody obvious in your circumvention of *the Regs* in future."

Alan Hannay finally caught the mood of the small gathering.

"Right ho, sir. We wouldn't want any word of any irregularities coming to the ears of the Commander-in-Chief?"

Julian Christopher, the Captain of HMS Scorpion and the newly designated Medical Director of the nascent Malta Defence Force watched the younger man hurry back to his ship.

"I still don't understand why you let that boy go?" Margo queried in the

descending quietness of the late afternoon. “He might only have been your Flag Lieutenant for a couple of months but he was already a legend?”

The three of them had focussed on the great, brooding hulk of the USS Enterprise being made secure ahead of the Cunard liner RMS Sylvannia at what had been formerly been the old passenger terminal on the Floriana - Valletta side of the Grand Harbour.

“If I hadn’t let him go he had only have stowed away on Talavera,” Julian Christopher chortled.

“I hear things will speed up a gear or two in the dockyards now the first batch of chaps from the old country has arrived?” Nick Davey asked idly.

“Assuming the locals can be persuaded not to down tools tomorrow morning!”

“Is that likely, Julian?”

Margo Seiffert was struck by the easy informality of the two men when they were out of earshot of strangers, interlopers. Two old friends reunited in a good war, just like old times.

“We shall see, Nick. We shall see.”

Margo decided it was time to take a professional interest in Captain ‘D’.

“How soon do you plan to have your injuries properly assessed, Captain Davey?”

“I’m fine. The old collar bone is a bit creaky on the left wing. Oh, and I got a tad scorched when a lump of helicopter dropped onto the side of the bridge. Think I might have knocked my ribs in all the commotion. But I’m fine, dear lady. I’ve had much worse knocks playing rugger for the Navy...”

“Dear lady?”

“Forgive me, a lapse of the tongue. Forgive any discourtesy, none was intended...”

Margo gave him a hard, unblinking look.

“Er,” Nick Davey sighed, knowing when he had met his match. “Perhaps, the knock on the head was harder than it seemed at the time.” He forced a grimace. “I shall get myself a jolly good looking over in the morning. Just as soon as the old girl,” he flicked a look over his shoulder at his ship, “is safely tied up in dry dock.”

Realising this was the best offer she was going to get Margo relented, made her excuses and departed.

“My, what an extraordinary woman!” Nick Davey whistled.

“Yes, indeed,” his old friend concurred.

The two men were silent awhile.

“Will you come on board for a snifter, Julian?”

“Another time, perhaps, Nick.”

There was a pause, a silence that threatened to linger.

“I thought it was all up for us last week,” the shorter, plumper man admitted. “Taking Scorpion and Talavera under the Enterprise’s stern was the only thing I could think of to take everybody’s minds off what was probably coming next. Goodness knows what it must have been like being here watching the mushroom clouds in the distance. Do we have any idea why there wasn’t a second strike?”

“None at all.”

“And we’re,” Captain ‘D’ of the 7th Destroyer Squadron suspected he was overstepping the bounds of his old, and hugely valued friendship with his Commander-in-Chief. He went on, trying not to push the boundaries of long acquaintance beyond breaking point. “And we’re, keeping our powder dry on the Arc Light front for the time being?”

“Yes,” Julian Christopher retorted flatly. “Bone dry, old man.”

Chapter 7

Tuesday 11th February 1964
Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, and Defender of the Faith rose to her feet when her guests were ushered into the East Library. There were the normal understated bows and then everybody sat down in the Queen Ann chairs arranged around the low gilded table placed slightly off centre towards the rear of the room where, if she cared so to do, the Queen could easily gaze out across the drab, wintery landscaped Oxfordshire countryside.

Margaret Thatcher recollected how nervously awed she had been the first time she had made her monarch's acquaintance. That had been the strangest day of her life, the day she discovered her true infatuation with Julian Christopher, the day of the murderous bombing attack on Balmoral Castle and its surreal aftermath in which she, her friend from that day onwards, Pat – now Lady Patricia – Harding-Grayson, the wife of the Foreign Secretary, and the Queen had organised an emergency field casualty clearing station while the late, genuinely lamented in her heart, Edward Heath had taken personal command of the surviving members of Her Majesty's bodyguard...

"I shall be mother today," the Queen announced.

"How is Prince Philip, Ma'am?"

His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, had very nearly lost his legs in the attack on Balmoral. His recovery from his injuries was slow and fraught with complications.

"Some days better than others; they now say it will be at least another month before we can risk flying him south. The children are still in Scotland, of course, and they visit him most days. It will be marvellous when we are all together again here at Blenheim Palace."

The thing that struck a person the first time one met Queen Elizabeth II was not how small she was; but that after that first face to face encounter one

never again really noticed her lack of stature. Perhaps, it was because she was innately regal, something in her bloodline? Margaret Thatcher did not think it was that simple. The better she got to know her sovereign the more she recognised the iron resolution of the woman and understood that duty and service ran through her veins like seams of gold through ancient bedrock.

Cups and saucers were passed to William Whitelaw, the Defence Secretary, and James Callaghan, the Deputy Prime Minister. In a situation in which the exigencies of government were inevitably compromised by questions raised about the legitimacy of those holding the reins of power, it had been the Queen's suggestion that until there was a return to 'politics as normal' that *both* the major parties ruling in coalition as the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom should be represented at audiences with her Prime Minister. The protocol recommended itself on two grounds to Queen Elizabeth II. It was a public nicety designed to silence possible accusations of Royal 'partiality' towards one or other of the parties; and it provided her with a wider cross-section of opinion in a crisis. Since there was a crisis most weeks this was doubly important.

"I gather that the situation in the Mediterranean is *quiet*?" The Queen asked, hoping above hope that her question would turn out to be entirely rhetorical.

"Yes, Ma'am," her Prime Minister confirmed. "Thank goodness!"

"Hear! Hear!" William Whitelaw concurred.

James Callaghan, the big lugubrious man who had somehow contrived to hold the core of the Labour and Co-operative Party together for the last year while being a consistent voice of sanity and moderation in government, pursed his lips and pondered whether to speak.

"What are your thoughts on this subject, Mr Callaghan?" The Queen inquired pleasantly.

The man hesitated.

"Willie," he prefaced – everybody in the Cabinet called William Whitelaw, the hangdog-faced forty-five year old Member of Parliament for Penrith and Border 'Willie' because that was what he preferred, and he was the sort of genuinely personable colleague one really did not like to offend – before continuing, "knows more about this than me but we're beginning to get fragmentary of information from the few foreign legations still operating in and around the Black Sea area, and via our listening posts..."

“Yes,” the Defence Secretary agreed affably, his brow furrowed with concentration. “Honestly and truly we really don’t know what to make of it, Ma’am,” he explained apologetically.

Margaret Thatcher was in a quandary.

She hated passing on what was at the moment mainly gossip, idle speculation and suppositions of the most unreliable kind to her monarch. She preferred to convey *facts*, information which she or one of her senior military or political advisors vouched to be *true*, or if not true, then of a ‘probable’ rather than a ‘possible’ character.

In response to the nuclear attack on Malta she had ordered a national ‘air raid drill’. The United Kingdom was divided into eleven regions, each with a military governor and its own civil defence infrastructure, and she had wanted the comfort of knowing that the if the worst happened again that *her* people would at least know what to do, and where to go in the event of an attack. Participation in the exercise had not been mandatory but anybody obstructing or publicly attempting to dissuade fellow citizens to take part was technically guilty of a breach of the peace under the War Emergency Regulations. The drill had taken place yesterday between seven and eleven o’clock in the evening and there had been only a few reports of civil disobedience. Regional Governors had been advised not to press charges against people whose conduct inhibited the air raid drill exercise, other than in the most egregious circumstances; for example, in those rare cases where violence had been used or threatened against fellow citizens, the police or members of the armed forces.

The ‘National Air Raid Drill’ had been mounted to follow up her address to the nation on Saturday evening. In that speech she had assured *everybody* that the *apparent* targets of the nuclear strikes had been well over a thousand miles away from the United Kingdom and that there was no indication whatsoever that subsequent attacks, either in the Mediterranean or elsewhere were to be expected, or for that matter, remotely likely. She hoped she would not be proved a liar by events but if preventing panic in the streets was the price she had to pay for compromising her scruples, then so be it.

“There are several possibilities, Ma’am,” she decided. Since the October War the Queen’s role as a constitutional head of state had ceased to be purely ceremonial. Yes, she remained the nation’s figurehead but since the outrage at Balmoral she had become much more than that. The monarchy had

become the one institution – perhaps, the *only* one – around which all the major political and military factions within the splintered polity of the United Kingdom could unite. London, the centuries old hub around which the country and the Empire had coalesced, grown and flourished had been laid waste overnight on that last Sunday in October 1962, and with its loss some greater or lesser piece of the heart of every one of them had been ripped out and consumed by the fires of the cataclysm. But the monarchy, incarnated in the unflappable, pragmatic and fearless person of Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her Other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, and Defender of the Faith, had survived as the one, immutable talisman of a terribly wounded country. The pre-war days when the monarch was *just* a ceremonial figurehead were gone. In practical terms this meant that it was understood by *all* the parties that in the event of a major falling out within the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom, the Queen would have, in effect, a final and binding casting vote. "However, I must warn you that these are *possibilities*, not established scenarios, Ma'am."

"I fully understand, Prime Minister." The Queen sipped her tea, placed her cup and saucer in her lap, smiled serenely and waited for Margaret Thatcher to continue.

"The *best-case scenario* is that the enemy – whomsoever he may be – has emptied his locker. *Red Dawn* may have shot its bolt, as it were."

"That sounds rather too much like wishful thinking to me," the Queen pronounced. She might have been reading her Prime Minister's mind.

"That is my view, also, Ma'am. Given that neither our own intelligence services nor the Central Intelligence Agency had any inkling that *Red Dawn* possessed viable..."

"Viable?"

Willie Whitelaw cleared his throat to intervene.

"Forgive the jargon, Ma'am. *Viable* in the sense that a nuclear weapon is, in the lingo of these things, *fully generated* and capable of deployment in the field. There is a huge difference between the possession of warheads and actually being able to shoot or drop the filthy things on anybody."

"Thank you, Mr Whitelaw." The Queen looked back to Margaret Thatcher. She understood why so many people called her the 'Angry Widow'; and she thought it was dreadfully unfair. Of course, that was not to

say that her Prime Minister had not proven herself unexpectedly adroit at turning all the nonsense about emulating a latter-day Boadicea and the exploitation of her natural feminine good looks to the maximum effect. There was ice in the Queen's soul every time she thought about what would have happened if that madman in Cheltenham had succeeded in assassinating Margaret Thatcher a few weeks ago. What would have become of them all? The woman was a force of nature, a phenomenon even if she did not yet know it herself.

A grateful nation had given John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough Blenheim Palace for winning the War of the Spanish Succession. The great and enduring mansion designed by John Vanbrugh and built in the relatively rare English Baroque style between 1705 and 1722 had been gifted to the scion of the Churchill family for having saved the bacon of the ruling dynasty in what was probably the first 'World War' of the modern era. What, the Queen asked herself, would the Angry Widow's grateful people grant her if against all the odds, she successfully led them through their present travails to the Promised Land beyond?

The Queen silently chastised herself for letting her thoughts drift.

"Quite," Margaret Thatcher sighed, re-gathering her thoughts. "Given that we had no idea *Red Dawn* had access to viable nuclear weapons in the first place we can hardly make a realistic calculation as to how many more they might have up their sleeve. Logically, the fact that they had *some* weapons probably means that they may have others."

"The real imponderable, Ma'am," William Whitelaw offered, explaining their mutual frustration and the underlying root, frankly, of *all* their fears arising out of the turn of events in the Mediterranean in the last fortnight, "is that we have no meaningful *feel* for what we are actually up against in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Balkans. *Krasnaya Zarya* as a stay behind terroristic entity made a kind of twisted sense but what we have actually been fighting in the Eastern Med is a twentieth century – albeit an early to middle twentieth century – military machine capable of moving significant assets from place to place without us being any the wiser. In retrospect, the *enemy's* apparent clandestine seizure of the island of Crete some months ago now seems to have been a pre-cursor operation aimed at isolating Cyprus. On the ground the first wave of *Red Dawn*, or whatever it is," the Defence Secretary threw up his hands in mild exasperation, "comes upon its enemies

like something reminiscent of the Soviet Union's defence of Moscow in 1941, or the Battle of Stalingrad. Hordes of mostly unarmed or poorly armed attackers rush defences with the living picking up the weapons dropped by the dead. We have reports of assault forces driving women, children and old men before them. But, and this is the thing I believe we need to concentrate upon, in several cases the initial 'shock tactic' assault has been followed up by what appeared to be highly disciplined, organised, regular forces. Likewise, while the ships we have encountered in the Eastern Med are flying great big blood red flags, they appear to be exercising and operating in generally good order in a fashion that would be familiar to any man who served in the Royal Navy in Hitler's war. Add to this the reports that our aircraft have encountered enemy jet interceptors – albeit only one or two so far - over the Aegean, the Sea of Crete and approaching Cyprus apparently operating under the aegis of an integrated air defence system of some kind; and what we are up against ceases to look like a mere terroristic entity, but begins to assume the appearance and more than a little of the substance of a partially reconstituted elements of the old Soviet military machine."

"Oh," the Queen observed, not really caring to contemplate the range of geopolitical *complications* which would arise if this was true.

Margaret Thatcher spelled out the most intractable of those *complications*.

"If this is the case then it seems obvious to me that significant parts of the former Soviet Union may not have been as badly damaged as we previously believed."

"What you are saying is that we might be facing is a wounded Soviet monster determined to wreak revenge on us all?" The monarch prompted.

"Yes," the other woman confirmed. "We have asked our American allies if additional reconnaissance *assets* are available to properly assess the situation in the areas of the former Soviet Union that we know to have been less heavily attacked during the October War. Unfortunately, it seems that the CIA's pre-war spy satellite program was one of the victims of the Kennedy Administration's 'peace dividend' cutbacks last year. This means that apart from our own Canberra photo-reconnaissance aircraft and a pair of U-2s, all of which had ceased operating over Soviet territory after the *Gary Powers' Incident* in 1960 because of their proven vulnerability to ground launched missile attack, we have no real way of establishing the 'facts on the

ground' in the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Black Sea Area or, frankly, anywhere in central or eastern Russia."

"Oh, dear," the Queen frowned. "Presumably, we have information garnered from intercepted communications and foreign legations in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans? Although, I don't suppose there can be many of those left, surely?"

"The Norwegians and the Swedes attempted to maintain a token presence in Bucharest and Belgrade, Ma'am."

"Yes, of course."

"Currently, there are reports of heavy fighting north of Bucharest and of an unprecedented clamp down in the city by the Romanian Secret Police and Army. There also appears to be widespread fighting in the western provinces of the country."

William Whitelaw added: "the Romanian Black Sea port of Constanta is either closed or blockaded. We don't know which. The people at Cheltenham are speculating that if the warships we've observed operating in the Aegean and elsewhere had been docked at Constanta, or perhaps, Varna in Bulgaria, our intelligence coverage of these areas has been so 'spotty' that they could actually have been there all this time without us being any the wiser."

"What do the Americans make of all of this?" The Queen asked, putting her darkest forebodings to the back of her mind.

"I think it would be safe to say that they are still *assimilating developments,* Ma'am," Margaret Thatcher replied, a little tongue-in-cheek.

Chapter 8

Tuesday 11th February 1964
Securitate Headquarters, Bucharest

Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin had not so much lost track of time as not bothered to try to keep track of it in the first place. The Securitate bruisers who had roughed them up at Otopeni Air Base before bundling them into the back of the truck for the ride back to the city had confiscated their watches, trouser belts, ties and shoes, and emptied their pockets. The Securitates had not blindfolded or hooded them because they obviously did not care if their prisoners saw or understood where they were being taken; he had not yet made up his mind if this was a good or a bad sign. The four of them; Kosygin, his fellow Politburo comrade Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov and his country's post-Cuban Missiles War premier surviving atomic physicist, Academician Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov had been thrown – 'thrown' as if they were four sacks of coal - onto the bare, filthy unforgiving tiles of the floor of the three by two metre cell buried somewhere below the streets of the capital. A single glaring electric bulb swung from a short cable just inside the rusty, impregnable iron door; the only cell *furniture* was a rusty metal bucket. The bucket was the Securitates' solitary concession to the elevated status of their 'guests'; it seemed likely that the normal toileting option it offered the occupants of this cell was a small circular drain covered by a mould encrusted grill situated approximately in the centre of the dungeon.

The stench of faeces and urine had overwhelmed that of vomit some hours before a squad of Securitates had entered the cell and dragged Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov away. If Andropov had not already pissed his pants he would have then. It was odd that it was always the same men who so loudly advocated 'the way of discipline' and the most immediate and brutal suppression of 'ideological deviance', who were invariably the first to piss their pants when they were actually on the receiving end of the 'iron fist measures' they championed.

Kosygin had never trusted Andropov; the man had lost his nerve

watching the mob stringing up Hungarian secret policemen outside the Soviet Embassy in Budapest in 1956. Andropov had been the one who had persuaded Nikita Sergeyevich to crush the uprising. Khrushchev had not wanted to do it because it smacked of a return to the ways of the Stalin era, then only three years in the past. Andropov – as Soviet Ambassador in Budapest and therefore the man on the spot – had forced his hand. With the benefit of hindsight Kosygin believed that the Cuban Missiles War would never have happened but for the Hungarian disaster. Afterwards, the West had recoiled at the brutality of the supposedly reformist, altered post-Stalin Soviet bear.

Andropov had not wanted to make *that* Krasnaya Zarya speech because he knew that it was the sort of thing that could so easily come back to haunt him. KGB apparatchiks like Yuri Vladimirovich always preferred to keep their hands as clean as possible.

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev had insisted: 'Fuck it! You have to take responsibility for something sooner or later if you're going to *any* fucking use around here, Yuri Vladimirovich!' Andropov had twisted and turned like an eel, insisting that a Red Army man should be identified as the head of *Krasnaya Zarya*.

Vasily Chuikov, the Soviet Union's most decorated living soldier had laughed contemptuously.

'I told you this thing would get out of control!' He had thundered. The other members of the Politburo had thought he was reaching for a gun as he stood up, his chair crashing to the floor behind him as he had leaned menacingly towards Andropov, the Politburo member responsible for co-ordinating counter-intelligence and espionage activities against the West. 'You must have had your finger up your arse these last few weeks and your head buried in a pile of dog shit to have let things get to this stage!'

Alexei Kosygin's partner in the post-war collective leadership of the rump Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev had looked to him and when he had nodded his assent, he had condemned Andropov.

'You will do this thing, Comrade,' he had growled. 'Or you will personally account to the Politburo for the unauthorised use of nuclear weapons in the West.'

Now Kosygin, Sakharov and the old soldier sat on the cold floor with

their backs against the wall. Other than the faint radiated warmth of the single overhead lamp the cell was frigidly clammy although their breath did not mist as it would have in the basement of the Lyubianka in Stalin and Beria's days.

"I am confused," Andrei Sakharov confessed.

"Are you confused about anything in particular, Comrade Academician?" Kosygin asked, welcoming the opportunity to break the circle of his increasingly gloomy thoughts.

"It was my understanding that our mission to Bucharest was to assist Comrade Gheorghiu-Dej and the Romanian Politburo to purge *Krasnaya Zarya* elements in the region, and to clarify existing military and technical mutual support arrangements?"

Kosygin tried not to laugh too loudly as Sakharov frowned in that innocently professorial way of his. The man might be a genius but he understood nothing about realpolitik.

"We came here to intimidate the fucking Romanians!" Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Chuikov grunted irritably. "Fucking Romanians! My boys fought the bastards in the Ukraine in the Great Patriotic War! Fucking Nazi lap dogs! We always knew they'd betray us in the end!"

"Not however," Alexei Kosygin observed dryly, "quite so comprehensively, Vasily."

The old warrior responded by guffawing like a rutting musk oxen.

The scientist remained baffled.

"Comrade Andropov has been taken away and we have been left to rot in this stinking hole in the ground," he said, stating the patently obvious, a thing he rarely did and despised coming from the lips of others. "How can you both be so calm?"

Kosygin looked at the scientist thoughtfully, envying his naivety.

The last year had prematurely aged the fifty-nine-year-old. Unlike his co-leader, Leonid Brezhnev he did not care to dye his hair unnaturally black or to pretend to a youthful vigour he no longer felt. He was a lean, hard man whose keen intellect was his defining strength and he readily acknowledged the irony of his current situation. He and Leonid Ilyich, it seemed, had done far too good a job masking the residual military and industrial strength of the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from their only remaining ally in Eastern Europe.

They had kept their secrets too well!

If Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and that little shit Nicolae Ceausescu had known what they were dealing with the Securitates would not – right now at this very moment - be kicking Andropov around an interrogation cell, and Kosygin and his fellow prisoners would not be killing time in a fetid basement in Bucharest. The situation would have been amusing if it had happened to somebody else.

The Romanians and their *Krasnaya Zarya* parasitic guests who had used Bucharest as their quasi-capital since the October War, had honestly believed they were dealing with a *Troika* – some kind of Party-KGB-Army junta – ruling the devastated, enfeebled ruins of the old USSR from somewhere behind the Ural Mountains. The Romanians had been willing accomplices – now it seemed they had convinced themselves they were the new overlords – grudgingly providing the under strength 57th and 58th Shock Brigades of the so-called *Ukrainian People's Front* bases and jumping off points for the incursions through Bulgaria and Transylvania into Greece and the Balkans. Presumably, the Romanians had imagined *Krasnaya Zarya* would win them relatively intact and undamaged footholds, the bridgeheads of some new latter day Roman Imperium. They had honestly believed that they could control *Krasnaya Zarya*! When they discovered their mistake, they had panicked. They had not counted on *Krasnaya Zarya* poisoning the well both west and south of the Black Sea. The 61st and 63rd Shock Brigades of the *Trans-Caucasus People's Front* were, like the Romanian-based 57th and 58th, uncontrollable, undisciplined polyglot rabbles made up of refugees from all over the former Eastern Bloc, commanded by berserkers who had turned on their Soviet Military advisors – and controllers – as Phase One of Operation Nakazyvat, *Operation Chastise* - had been on the cusp of achieving all its objectives. When the maniacs belatedly discovered that they had never been the masters of their own destiny they had reacted by attempting to start a second global nuclear war.

The fundamental lesson of the great Patriotic War against the Nazis had been that most things go wrong most of the time. Practically everything had gone wrong in the execution of Phase One of *Operation Nakazyvat*; and yet, if one discounted the disaster of the bungled nuclear first strike against the British in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean, it was hard to imagine how things could have possibly worked out better. It was a mystery why the

British had not retaliated after the bombing of Limassol, or after their aircraft carrier, the Victorious, was attacked with a nuclear-tipped torpedo.

How could the British not retaliate after the attack on Malta?

The World had gone mad!

How was anybody supposed to conduct serious strategic planning in a World in which one's enemy had the power to annihilate one in the blink of the eye and yet, did nothing?

Of course, ending up in a Securitate cell in Bucharest had not been in the plan either...

Most things go wrong most of the time...

Nobody in the bunker complex outside Chelyabinsk, the current headquarters of the Provisional Government had imagined – not even in their worst nightmares – that *Krasnaya Zarya* fanatics would gain control of the 21st Mobile Strategic Missile Brigade emplaced around Ploesti, or worse, of the 6th Strategic Missile Brigade deployed across the barren steppes east and south of the bomb-ruined city of Kuybyshev.

The nine operational R-16 inter-continental ballistic missiles of the 6th Strategic Missile Brigade had represented the Provisional Government in Chelyabinsk's last bargaining card if and when, Kosygin and Leonid Brezhnev ever came to sit around a peace table with the Western mass murderers. Each of those thirty-metre-tall one hundred and forty-ton rockets had been capable of destroying a city eleven thousand kilometres away. If the Americans or the British attacked again those eleven missiles would have made little difference; but if China encroached upon the eastern frontiers of the Soviet Union – as sooner or later Mao Tse-tung was bound to do – or developed its own nuclear bomb what then would become of the Mother Country? To discover that *Krasnaya* Zarya had subverted the *last* remaining strategic thermonuclear strike capability of the USSR – spies in the United States confirmed that none of the Red Air Force's bombers had got through to their North American targets on the night of the Cuban Missiles War and were therefore, *useless* in their primary strategic strike role - so far from its bases of operation in Romania and the Trans-Caucasus, had come as a hammer blow to the Politburo. After that, this fool's errand to Bucharest had almost seemed, if not a good idea then logically the last throw of the dice.

In retrospect it had been a catastrophic blunder to encourage the Romanians to believe that they were calling the shots; a blunder even though

it had facilitated the lengthy build up to and the launching of Phase One of *Operation Nakazyvat*. The Politburo had accepted that sooner or later Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and that little shit Nicolae Ceausescu would need to be put in their place. What *nobody* in Chelyabinsk had factored into the equation was that Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's and Nicolae Ceausescu's visions of grandeur verged on the megalomaniac and the psychotic.

Alexei Kosygin grunted a chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Andrei Sakharov demanded.

"We came here to stiffen the backbone of the Romanians and it turned out that they had too much steel in their spines already." He smiled again. "I bet the bastards don't even know about the *Tbilisi Company*," he added sardonically, glancing to Vasily Chuikov as he used the secret name of the 6th Strategic Missile Brigade.

The old soldier grinned, sharing the in joke.

Kosygin renewed eye contact with Andrei Sakharov.

"You asked me why we are so calm, Comrade Academician?" He reminded the physicist.

Sakharov responded with a jerky nod.

"We are Russians of the old school," Kosygin explain, "the Comrade Marshal and I, you perhaps, are of the new order of things." As he said it he did not think the physicist would understand a word he said. The man had lived a charmed, privileged life in the USSR as one of its most pampered, favourite sons. How could he possibly understand?

Kosygin, who had been born in St Petersburg thirteen years before the Revolution, had diligently worked his way up through the local Party hierarchy over the years; surviving successive purges and denunciations. During the Great Patriotic War against the Fascists he had been appointed Deputy Chairman of the Council of Evacuation, responsible for the removal of factories and vital war assets ahead of the rampant German armies. Later he had been the man who broke the Nazi blockade of the city of his birth – by then renamed Leningrad – by running truck convoys across frozen Lake Ladoga in winter and in 1943, laying a pipeline under its waters. However, fame and recognition were a dangerous thing in the Soviet Union of Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. The closer one moved to the 'Man of Steel' the more impermanent a man's life became and after the end of the Great Patriotic War, Iosif Vissarionovich had drawn him into his inner circle from which

there was no escape. Stalin saw enemies everywhere and in everything; and in the late 1940s Kosygin, Nikolai Voznesensky, the Chairman of the State Planning Committee and a First Deputy Prime Minister, and Alexei Kuznetzov, whom many saw as a possible successor to the 'Man of Steel', had risen together through the higher echelons of the Soviet Government by sheer dint of their administrative competence and natural leadership skills. For Voznesensky and Kuznetzov, and for many others, this prominence was to prove fatal, leading to show trials and summary executions for treason. Kosygin had survived, been drawn ever deeper into the dark lair of the monster until eventually; he had become a key instrument in the investigation and destruction of the careers and lives of numerous other members of the Moscow elite. Terrifyingly – it still gave him the shakes when he thought about it – the old monster had actually taken him into his confidence by the end.

Kosygin had been ordered to spy on his senior comrades, men like Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, leading Politburo figures like Anastas Mikoyan and Lazar Kaganovich. Inevitably, he had become mistrusted and detested by other members of the hierarchy, despised as a pawn in Iosif Vissarionovich cruelly ruthless hands. He had lived in constant fear of his life, never leaving his home without briefing his wife exactly what to do, how to behave, and what to say, if he did not return.

Alexei Kosygin briefly contemplated explaining this to Sakharov; decided it would be a waste of time.

However, Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov was in a more expansive mood.

"You don't know shit, Sakharov!" He declared with an oddly cheerful grimace. This said the veteran of the Russian Civil War and the victor of Stalingrad who had been Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Army at the time of the Cuban Missiles War folded his arms and lapsed into a wheezing, pugnacious silence.

Chapter 9

Wednesday 12th February 1964
Admiralty Dockyard, French Creek, Malta

On the stroke of noon every civilian worker onboard HMS Talavera downed tools – literally, by very loudly dropping whatever they had in their hands on the deck – and walked off the ship.

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher, who had been working in his day cabin catching up with the morass of paperwork – ahead of transferring Talavera's 'office' ashore later that afternoon – that he had neglected during the last week registered the cacophony of thuds and clanging on the deck above his head and elsewhere in the ship but thought little of it, the ship was in dockyard hands, after all, until there was a knock at his open door.

He looked up.

Lieutenant Miles Weiss, his Executive officer was wearing a boyishly troubled face.

"The locals have gone on strike, sir!"

Peter put down his pen.

"What are the 'locals' doing now, Miles?"

"Er, milling around on the dock."

HMS Talavera's commanding officer decided to take a look for himself. Jamming on his cap he headed for the door. As he made his way to the gangway he noted - with irritation - and stepped over the discarded tools and equipment on the deck.

"Detail somebody to collect all this rubbish and unblock the passageways please," he instructed conversationally. "Have all this stuff locked away. It wouldn't do to have any of it go missing."

Captain 'D' had mentioned, albeit in passing before he allowed himself to be transported to the Royal Naval Hospital at Bighi to have his injuries properly x-rayed and assessed, to Peter that: 'either the blighters will walk off the job and disappear for days on end, in which case they'll decamp with all their possessions and anything else that's not tied down; or, they'll down tools, jump up and down on the dock and breeze back onboard shortly

thereafter so they don't lose more than an hour or two's pay."

HMS Talavera's Captain and Executive Officer almost collided with Spider McCann, the destroyer's Master at Arms at the foot of the ladder to the main deck. The ship's senior non-commissioned officer was fit to blow a blood vessel.

Peter's first words mollified him somewhat.

"I don't want any civilians on my ship again until they've made up their minds whose side they are on, Mr McCann. Pull up the stern gangway and place guards at the shipboard end of the amidships gangway, if you please."

The diminutive, scarred, steely little man who had once been the Mediterranean Fleet's bantamweight boxing champion tried hard not to smirk; he understood exactly what was going through his young Captain's mind.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The placards read: *MALTESE JOBS FOR THE MALTESE, DOWN WITH SCAB LABOR*, this last word Peter guessed was a spelling mistake, and *NO SURRENDER WCADM.*

He could not make out what the workers, perhaps as many as fifty, were chanting. They were yelling in Maltese.

Um, mental note to myself to stick my nose into a Maltese-to-English phrase book or to ask Marija to brief me on the more common Maltese sayings...

"What's WCADM stand for, sir?" Miles Weiss asked.

"Workers' Committee of, or for, I don't know which off the top of my head, the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta."

"Oh, of course. My word, odd how a little brush with industrial strife puts one in mind of what it was like back home in the good old days before the war? I suppose in those days we'd have called this a 'wild cat strike', what?"

Peter Christopher was not really listening.

He was looking at the vaguely familiar face of the stocky, smiling man with the tousled black hair who was orchestrating the chanting and seemed to be the leader of the striking workers. The chanting slackened in intensity as some of the men on the dock caught sight of the tall figure of Talavera's youthful commanding officer.

Then others were pointing.

The chanting collapsed; only one or two voices desperately attempted to stir up the last dregs of flagging enthusiasm. The cheerleader turned and was a little surprised to find the destroyer's captain striding down the gangway towards him.

"I was wondering when I'd bump into the famous Joseph Calleja?" The Englishman chuckled wryly as he stuck out his right hand in greeting to his prospective brother-in-law.

Joe Calleja was caught unawares and meekly extended his own hand to meet that of the taller man's.

"I, er..."

"This is a thing, isn't it?" Peter declared, taking off his cap and running his fingers through his thick fair hair. "I've met you father, of course, and I was rather hoping to be introduced to you at yesterday's ceremonials?"

The shorter man glanced at his feet.

"I was banned from Parlatorio Wharf. Most of the other members of the Workers' Committee, too..."

"Oh, that's a bad show." Peter Christopher sighed. Miles Weiss had joined him on the dock, no quite knowing what to make of things. His commanding officer made the necessary introductions. "Oh, this is Joe, Marija's brother, Number One."

"How do you do?" HMS Talavera's Executive Officer inquired pleasantly, civilly offering his hand in the same way Peter had moments earlier.

Again, to his discomfort Joe Calleja found himself taking his enemy's hand in unlikely friendship.

"Goodness," Peter groaned, "this is dashed awkward. In any other circumstances I'd have had you manhandled to the Wardroom to down a few stiff ones to, er, celebrate our first acquaintance, Joe. But..."

"I thought you'd have already gone ashore," Joe Calleja confessed sheepishly.

"No, unfortunately I've got reams of paperwork to do first. We've been a bit short-handed since that business off Lampedusa. Poor old Miles," he grinned at his Executive Officer, "and I are doing two or three men's jobs at present. Still, that's the Navy; one does what one must do and all that. And now you and your chaps have put another spoke in the wheel. I promised Marija I'd try to get over to Mdina this afternoon. Obviously, that isn't going

to happen now."

Joe Calleja shifted unhappily on his feet.

"Oh, no," he muttered, looking past the two British officers.

Peter Christopher followed his look.

A dozen booted and baton-wielding Dockyard Policemen were marching purposefully towards No 2 Dry Dock.

"Those fellows look as if they mean business. What's the form here?" He asked his soon to be brother-in-law.

"I don't know. *Admiral* Christopher brought in a new Dockyard Superintendent yesterday."

"Number One," Peter suggested casually. "Would you be so good as to find out what those fellows are up to please?"

Miles Weiss hurried to intercept the newcomers.

Peter Christopher, knowing that he was standing within earshot of several of the striking workers leaned towards Joe Calleja.

"As I say, this is dashed awkward. Meeting this way," he almost whispered. "Nevertheless, it is as well that we understand each other from the off, what?"

The two men were edging away from the crowd.

Joe Calleja's eyes were a little suspicious for a moment.

"I'm a fairly uncomplicated sort of chap," Peter went on. "Life is complicated enough without making things any more complicated, that's my motto. That said right now, as we stand here passing the time of day, there are three things which I need to tell you. I apologise in advance if any of those three things put your nose out of joint but well, life is like that sometimes and personally, I try not to hold grudges. But that's just me, Joe."

"Three things?" Marija's younger brother murmured, bemused.

"Firstly, you and your chaps have just downed tools repairing the latest battle damage to my ship in a time of war. That is irresponsible and frankly, not clever..."

"What about the jobs of my members?"

"I'm happy to argue about that at another time. Today I am Her Majesty's Ship Talavera's Captain and frankly, I don't care. You chaps are either on our side or you're not. That's another thing that we don't need to argue about because you either are or you are not. On my side, that is. The proof, as it were, is in the pudding!"

Peter glanced down the dockside to where Miles Weiss had halted the advance of the police detachment but was now engaged in an animated discussion with the suited foreman who seemed to be in charge of the men in uniform.

“Secondly, the equipment your chaps abandoned blocking *my* passageways and generally making *my* ship look untidy is presently being collected and securely stowed away by the Master at Arms. As per War Emergency Admiralty Dockyard Regulations any tools, equipment or materials left unattended or unsecured on one of Her Majesty’s Ships in a theatre of war, as defined by the said act, is forfeit and shall henceforth be treated as *prize*. That is, it may be sold to the highest bidder with the funds thus garnered being paid back into the coffers of HM Treasury.”

“Nobody’s ever interpreted the law that way before...”

“Yes,” Peter agreed affably. “Well, obviously, we’ll have to leave the niceties to the lawyers. I’m just a humble sea dog, Queen’s Regulations are what they are and I am bound to follow them. Sorry, I can be very stubborn sometimes.”

Joe Calleja tried and failed to scowl.

“So, can Marija!” He warned, doggedly.

“Which brings me to my third point; instead of tidying away my desk ahead of shipping Talavera’s files ashore this afternoon, I find my plans for the rest of the day up in the air and at some stage later today Marija is going to start worrying about why her fiancé has failed to make an appearance.”

Miles Weiss returned.

He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder.

“Those fellows want to lock Mr Calleja’s ‘troublemakers’ out of the yards, sir.”

Joe Calleja visibly bristled at the new threat.

Peter cleared his throat.

“Bloody Hell!” He complained his exasperation barely contained. “I’m never going to get ashore at this rate!”

This was Miles Weiss’s cue to hurl a darkly accusative look at Joe Calleja.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” Marija’s brother protested.

HMS Talavera’s Executive Officer briefly lost his temper: “Get back to bloody work, you idiot!”

Peter Christopher was afraid the other two men would come to blows.

He put a hand on Joe Calleja's shoulder.

"May I have a chat with your *workers* please, Joe?"

The smaller man felt as if he ought to object; in the end he mutely acquiesced.

"Look, chaps," Peter began. "I'm a new boy when it comes to what goes on here. I don't know anything about your grievances, or how much substance there is in your fears for your jobs when it comes to the newcomers who are being shipped out here from the United Kingdom. There is probably a time and place to talk about these things but this isn't it. I am the Captain of a damaged ship and I need you to repair her so that I can take her to sea again in defence of these beautiful islands. I need you to do that *now* please." He waved at the policemen poised to eject the strikers from the dockyard. "Stop messing around and go back to work *now* and I will deal with those fellows." He sniffed the cool spring air. "Thank you for listening."

He turned on his heel and marched back up the gangway.

"Inform Mr McCann that if the dockyard people are back in board within fifteen minutes they may have their tools and equipment returned to them," he said to Peter Weiss. "Oh, and indicate to Mr McCann in the strongest possible terms that I don't want any of the dockyard police on *my* ship."

Returning to his day cabin he was relieved to hear booted feet clunking on the deck over his head and in the adjoining compartments as Joe Calleja's chastened comrades trudged back onto HMS Talavera.

Now that the ship was out of the water every inch of her fabric needed to be checked and surveyed and a comprehensive repair, refit and maintenance program executed as quickly as possible.

However, most of all *he* needed to get ashore and to be with Marija.

Chapter 10

Wednesday 12th February 1964
HMS Dreadnought, 157 miles West of the Grand Harbour

Captain Simon Collingwood was almost as exhausted as his boat. HMS Dreadnought had been far too long at sea and her commanding officer had been pushing himself too hard for too long and he knew it. A minor but possibly significant factor which constantly exacerbated his weariness was the presence of so many supernumeraries – refugees rescued from a convoy under attack by a Red Dawn squadron off Cyprus – onboard the submarine. Dreadnought's was a horribly cramped, crowded, claustrophobic environment at the best of times. The addition of twenty-two additional souls, many of them young children in Dreadnought's close-packed little world could not but be a tremendous strain on both the boat's internal systems, and on her whole crew.

However, there were compensations.

"Your cocoa, Captain Collingwood," said the soft, lilting feminine voice. The words seemed to swirl about him in the darkness for a moment before his hair-trigger awakening response brought him crashing down to earth with a hard bump.

The commanding officer of the Royal Navy's most advanced and dangerous vessel – albeit a vessel whose capabilities were somewhat impaired at present – blinked into the face of a serenely lovely young woman and miraculously, for a little while, his weariness completely evaporated.

He tried to remember when he had last had a good night's sleep. Probably not since the boat had sailed from Gibraltar. He and his officers had surrendered their tiny cabins to the refugee women and children, resting when they could in the Wardroom, often under the table, or cat-napping in warm corners. He had got by taking ten, twenty or thirty-minute catnaps in his control room command chair.

"Thank you, Maya." The young woman, she was twenty-three he had discovered from the notes of her debriefing, was called Maya Hayek and she had come aboard with her younger sister, and two young children; a girl

called Yelda and a boy called Yannis, cousins whose parents were likely dead somewhere in Turkey. Yelda was the older child. In her own tongue the name meant ‘summer rose’; now she was orphaned and travelling on a submarine whose only reason for being was war.

The World had gone mad.

The Captain of the United Kingdom’s only nuclear-powered hunter killer submarine allowed himself to meet, momentarily, Maya Hayek’s limpid brown gaze, knowing that nothing again in his life would ever quieten his thoughts, nor fill him with such gentle strength as the calm in her eyes. Maya was dressed in an over-sized blue boiler suit, her long black hair modestly contained and mostly hidden by a scarf.

Reality suddenly impinged.

“SURFACE CONTACT!”

Simon Collingwood waited for the next report.

“Bearing three-two-zero! Single screw! Range ten plus miles!”

Commander Max Forton, Dreadnought’s Executive Officer had been napping in the sound room. He stepped into the control room rubbing his red-rimmed eyes.

“Let’s go and have a look at her,” Simon Collingwood decided.

His second-in-command leaned over the tactical plot.

“Amphion should be dead ahead of our contact, Skipper,” he observed, knowing his exhausted commanding officer would not cavil at being reminded. The two men liked and trusted each other; and such small things mattered when the going got tough and it became horribly easy to make disastrously bad decisions.

A picket line of conventional ‘A’ class – diesel-electric submarines like museum exhibits from a far distant past age in comparison to Dreadnought’s modernity even in her present somewhat tired incarnation – was strung north to south along longitude seventeen degrees East. It was the job of the ‘Amphions’ to intercept and challenge all ships attempting to pass to the west. The picket line had been established after Red Dawn had used a passenger ferry, crowded with refugees from Turkey to smuggle a tactical nuclear weapon into Limassol harbour to sink the cruiser HMS Blake, and to put the port out of action. This attack, coming shortly after the Blake had stowed the last of thirty-eight nuclear warheads previously stored at RAF Akrotiri in her magazines, and at the moment the evacuation of the garrison,

its dependents and friendly Cypriot citizens from the island was about to commence, had begun the bloody decline and near collapse of British arms in the Eastern Mediterranean. Fear that the fate of Limassol could be repeated at other ports, like for example, Malta's Grand Harbour, was constantly in the forefront of the mind of every senior officer in the theatre. Hence, the line of obsolete Amphions patrolling down longitude seventeen degrees East.

Simon Collingwood allowed himself a moment's reflection.

It was too easy to make a fast decision when one was tired; and as his executive officer had just diplomatically flagged up that he had just made a 'fast' decision that failed to take account of at least one very important tactical *fact*. Namely, *HMS Amphion.* HMS Amphion probably did not know Dreadnought was transiting her patrol box, and Collingwood had no intention of advertising his boat's presence to the 'A' class boat, or to anybody else for that matter.

"Belay that last order, Number One," he grimaced with momentary self-deprecation. "Thank you for reminding me Amphion is on station. We'll let Amphion do her job. Plot a course well south of the surface contact. We've had quite enough excitement on this cruise; perhaps we should let somebody else have a little fun?"

"That's confoundedly generous of you, Skipper!"

There was a mutter of amusement in the control room.

When Simon Collingwood looked around Maya had disappeared like a beautiful apparition he had glimpsed in a dream. He knew her disappearance would trouble him, lingering in the back of his head until he next saw her. It was getting very hard to remember that commanders of nuclear-powered hunter killer submarines could ill afford distractions.

He clenched his right fist, clunked it down on the arm rest of the command chair. If he got careless people would probably die; and that would never do. Not if they were *his* people.

"Take the boat down to two-seven-five feet if you please, Number One. We will maintain our present course and speed until we are well past the surface contact."

His orders were repeated around the control room.

"I suggest we come left onto two-six-zero degrees, sir!"

"Very good! Carry on!" Simon Collingwood stretched in the chair. The ache in his shoulders and behind his eyes was not going to go away any time

soon. He stood up. “You have the watch, Number One.”

“I have the watch, Skipper!”

“I’m going to wander around the boat for a few minutes.”

Although Max Forton looked a little ragged, he was still raring for action, yearning for the chase. After the last year no man in the Royal Navy was better fitted to occupy Simon Collingwood’s seat when inevitably, his time in command ended and for all he knew this was his last cruise.

Clutching his precious mug of cocoa HMS Dreadnought’s commanding officer headed aft, sticking his head into the nooks and crannies where his men lived and worked until he entered the machinery spaces where he had a brief chat with the Engineering Officer. He looked into the Wardroom where three women and four child refugees were chatting with a steward. Sighting the Captain, they silence fell. Maya was restraining Yelda, trying to stop her hiding under the table.

“Pretend I’m not here,” Simon Collingwood suggested uncomfortably. He placed his now empty mug on the Wardroom table.

The young woman’s brown eyes flashed demur amusement.

At exactly that moment HMS Dreadnought’s pressure hull trembled and filled with a sound like the muffled roar of a volcanic eruption.

And then the collision alarm sounded.

“GET ON THE DECK AND HOLD ON TO SOMETHING!” Simon Collingwood barked and without waiting to see if his order had been obeyed he stumbled towards the control room.

Max Forton’s voice broke hoarsely over the submarine-wide public-address system.

“THIS IS THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE! BRACE FOR COLLISION! BRACE FOR COLLISION!”

Dreadnought was heeling into a tight starboard turn and Simon Collingwood almost fell over the hatch combing as he entered the control room.

“Very, very large underwater explosion, Skipper!” Max Forton announced tersely.

The noise was muted as if a ten-mile-wide drum had been struck by mile-wide drumstick under water a great distance away. The delayed pressure wave smashed into HMS Dreadnought’s bow like a giant hammer; the whole boat seemed to stop dead in the water for a second before she lurched

forward, her bow rising.

"Level the boat!" Simon Collingwood demanded. "Number One," he added, beckoning Max Forton over to the command chair. They both knew they had been closer to a big nuclear depth charge than they ever wanted to be again. There was no profit belabouring the point. "I may be being a tad paranoid but I think somebody had just blown a big hole in the Amphions' picket line. As soon as the acoustic disturbance has dissipated we'll creep up to periscope depth and have a look around."

"We ought to get a signal off to Valletta, Skipper," Max Forton muttered confidentially.

"Yes. Trail the aerial and we'll get that sent soonest."

Some ninety minutes later HMS Dreadnought's attack periscope skimmed the surface of the almost smooth, very nearly perfectly dark azure Central Mediterranean. The surface contact they had discovered before the explosion was gone. A careful orbit of the horizon revealed nothing, an ocean devoid of shipping.

"Periscope down!" Simon Collingwood frowned in intense concentration. "Has Malta acknowledged our last transmission?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very good, take the boat down to two hundred feet if you please, Number One. Once we are at depth please plot a course to place us twenty miles magnetic west of Amphion's last known position. We will fill the gap in the picket line pending further communication with Fleet HQ in Malta."

It was reasonable to assume that the surface contact had waited until HMS Amphion had challenged her; shortly thereafter she had detonated a massive nuclear depth charge, probably within a few hundred feet of the 'A' class boat.

That was cold!

Dreadnought had a Mark XX homing torpedo and four heavy-weight old-fashioned Mark VIIIs loaded in her five working torpedo tubes. He had thought he was going to have to take them back to base; perhaps, God had had a change of mind.

He dictated another terse message to Fleet HQ.

Shortly after nightfall a flash transmission pad was pressed into his hands.

IMMEDIATE X CINCMED TO S101 X CONCUR WITH YOUR

ACTIONS X BE AWARE OF AIR AND SEA ASSETS APPROACHING YOUR PATROL LINE FROM EAST X HOLD THE LINE X DEPLOY 2SS AS YOU SEE FIT X MESSAGE ENDS

Simon Collingwood struggled to stifle a shivering yawn as he passed the pad to his Executive Officer. The younger man raised an eyebrow.

"Congratulations, Skipper. The C-in-C has just given you command of the 2nd Submarine Squadron!"

"Establish contact with whichever boats are still on station please."

There ought to be four, possibly as many as five Amphions twenty to thirty miles apart in the picket. One was sunk; if another had departed its station since Dreadnought had picked up the last general situation report nearly twenty-four hours ago there might be wide gaps in the theoretically impenetrable *line*. Only Dreadnought – assuming she did not have a major breakdown – was physically capable of covering any additional holes in Malta's eastern submarine defences although with only five torpedoes remaining from her initial war load of twenty-four, it was a moot question as to what she might actually achieve if confronted with multiple targets.

Simon Collingwood breathed a long and heartfelt sigh of relief when after a wait of over two hours the last of the remaining Amphions reported in.

The southern extremity of HMS Alliance's five-mile-wide patrol box was twenty-three miles north-east of Dreadnought's current position. HMS Artemis was nineteen miles to the south-east; HMS Alderney forty-two miles, the Ambush seventy-one miles, and HMS Astute one hundred and four miles to the south.

Other than ordering the Astute to withdraw twenty miles to the north-west to 'better cover the flank of our line' he left *his* captains to their own devices. On balance he suspected their irritation to be 'bullied' by the new boy in the class, would be greatly outweighed by how glad they were to have a nuclear-powered hunter killer boat to back them up if they ran into the sort of trouble which had proven fatal to the Amphion.

"Did you know anybody on the Amphion, sir?" Max Forton asked quietly as the two men studied the extended tactical plot.

"No, not really." That was a lie. A classmate of his at Dartmouth had been her captain; a decent, unimaginative, utterly solid man who had lost his wife and two young sons in the October War.

What was wrong with the World?

There was a polite cough behind the two men.

“They said there was ‘too much excitement going on’ before,” Maya Hayek apologised, holding out a mug of steaming cocoa. “I sorry I did not bring the Captain’s Kye before... Now...”

Chapter 11

Wednesday 12th February 1964
The Citadel, Mdina, Malta

The two staff cars transporting the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, and his Deputy on Malta arrived at the gates of the narrow bridge over the Citadel's thirty feet deep dry moat within moments of each other. The two cars crossed into the ancient fortress in convoy and parked in the courtyard of the derelict Connaught Hospital.

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher and Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French greeted each other with wry grins, casual salutes and brief handshakes. The two men had instantly hit it off when they first met in the aftermath of the devastating air raid on the Maltese Archipelago in early December last year. They did not invariably see eye to eye - one man was an admiral, and the other an airman so they were never going agree about everything – but their robustly friendly and wholly collegiate endeavours had served the men under their command well and thus far at least, greatly contributed to delaying the complete collapse of British power and influence in the Mediterranean.

Julian Christopher paused to look around the courtyard that his staff had requisitioned as a car park.

"Young Hannay was going to look into the history of this place," he remarked, waving up at the first and second floor balustraded balconies and the high arched neo-classical windows of the old abandoned hospital.

"I can help you there," Dan French guffawed. "Its location just inside the Citadel gates rather gives the game away."

"Oh," the men had urgent business but they were old hands who knew that it was best not to rush towards the sound of the guns without first catching one's breath. "How so?"

"The original building on this spot was a '*Universita*', or 'Government House'. It was ideally located to regulate traffic in and out of the main gate and presumably, if need be to tax whatever was coming in or going out of the Citadel. When the gate was rebuilt in the early eighteenth century the then

Grand Master, Manuel de Vilhena – a Portuguese gentleman, I believe – forked out from his own pocket to create the palace we see around us now. Until the mid-fifties we were using it as a hospital. The Connaught Hospital, so named because His Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught stumped up the readies to fund the conversion work. Before the October War there was talk of turning it into a museum of some kind."

Julian Christopher grinned broadly.

"My word," he sighed, "I never knew you were such a font of local knowledge, Dan!"

"Well, I'd hate to think I was working for a fellow who knew *all* my secrets!"

The two men laughed. Out of earshot of their subordinates they were comfortable in their unforced informality. They fell into step for the short walk across the Citadel to the Headquarters of Mediterranean Command beneath the western ramparts.

"This is a Hell of a thing," the airman, the younger man by well over a decade observed. The safe arrival of the USS Enterprise in the Grand Harbour, and that morning of several of her conventionally powered escorts - left behind fuelling and provisioning at Gibraltar while the two American 'nuclear' warships, the carrier and her escorting cruiser, the USS Long Beach forged on ahead – and the unanticipated stalling of *all* enemy offensive action in Cyprus and the Balkans following Friday's nuclear strikes, had given Mediterranean Command a short opportunity to draw breath. However, the attack on HMS Amphion and the temporary breaching of the 2nd Submarine Squadron's picket line chillingly echoed what had happened to HMS Blake in Limassol Harbour.

Neither man, nor any of their closest advisors knew what to make of the incident one hundred and fifty miles west of Malta. But for the fortuitous presence of HMS Dreadnought in the vicinity of the missing Amphion, the one Royal Naval vessel in the Mediterranean capable of guarding, almost single-handed, the eastern approaches to the Maltese Archipelago, both men would have been significantly less sanguine.

"It is a little bizarre," his C-in-C agreed. "Our best intelligence is that all Red Dawn major surface units have withdrawn into the Sea of Crete or are heading back to their bases in the northern Aegean. Why the blazes would the blighters blow a hole in the Amphions' picket when they've got nothing

within several hundred miles to put through it?"

"Do you think our friend Arkady Pavlovich will shed any light on it?"

Julian Christopher shrugged. Dan French was wise to mistrust Arkady Pavlovich Rykov, the mysterious, dangerous former KGB Colonel who had, supposedly, been working as a double agent for MI6 in the years before the October War. Rykov's story was that he had betrayed his country and his mentor, Nikita Khrushchev, after the brutal crushing of the Hungarian uprising of late 1956 when he was ordered to infiltrate the higher echelons of the *Krasnaya Zarya* movement. For the man who had once been Josef Stalin's translator at the Yalta Summit, and later groomed by Lavrentiy Beria, it had been, apparently, too much. Rykov had convinced the Secret Intelligence Service that he had discovered his conscience; and two months ago, no lesser luminary than the Head of MI6, his long-time controller, had brought him in from the cold. However, like any double agent he was a man best kept under the closest of close surveillance; the head of MI6 had been of a like mind and had voiced no objections when this stipulation had been presented to him when the idea of sending Rykov back to Malta was first mooted.

"I honestly don't know, Dan," the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean remarked, regretting that his friend was not on the Secret Intelligence Service's 'need to know' list when it came to the subject of the man who claimed to be Arkady Pavlovich Rykov.

Julian Christopher guessed the younger man suspected – rather than knew – that there was more to the 'Rykov situation' than he had been told; and appreciated his discretion in not pressing him further.

The two men were accustomed to operating in a twilight haze of uncertainty. There were too many conflicting snippets of inconclusive intelligence coming across their desks; and none of their senior analysts could agree on what was actually going on. In Cyprus the Red Dawn horde had melted away from the pre-prepared defensive lines of the massively outnumbered British garrison. With the cessation of Red Dawn aerial activity over the island RAF Akrotiri had been re-opened to desperately needed re-supply and evacuation flights, and several isolated enclaves in the Troidos Mountains had re-established corridors of communication with both Akrotiri and Limassol. Julian Christopher had hoped the arrival of the first US Navy nuclear submarine in the Eastern Mediterranean, the USS

Swordfish, would temporarily interdict Red Dawn's ability to reinforce its invasion *horde* on Cyprus; he had not expected Red Dawn's hitherto berserk, utterly insane onslaught to simply *cease* – hopefully because it had run out of steam - before the American SSN had fired a torpedo in anger.

The Red Tide *horde's* advance had halted *everywhere* and now there were fragmentary reports about outbreaks of heavy fighting in Romania and on the border between Turkish Asia Minor and the Trans-Caucasus.

None of this made any sense.

"HMS Dreadnought will secure the 2nd Submarine Squadron picket line pro tem," Julian Christopher went on. "She's badly in need of dockyard time but she's still in good enough order to be the surviving Amphions' gatekeeper and protector if the worst comes to the worst."

"Do you think there may be more enemy subs out there with nuclear-tipped torpedoes?"

"We shall see. Personally, I don't think a former Soviet conventional boat would have much chance of getting past the old Amphions, let alone Dreadnought. I've asked Rear-Admiral Detweiller to hold the USS Seawolf and the USS Skipjack respectively fifty miles west and south of Malta until the situation is a little clearer. He's not comfortable leaving the Swordfish 'out on a limb' at Cyprus but he agrees that securing our base of operations here is the key to the whole 'ball game'."

"Detweiller's a good egg, they say?"

Rear Admiral Laverne Lucas Detweiller, Commander of the partially decapitated Enterprise Task Force, was a third-generation American son of Saxon immigrants who had settled in Jones's County, Iowa in the 1880s, originally as small-time dirt farmers who now farmed tens of square miles of the rolling plains of the great American 'corn belt'. A towering, blond giant of a man with a handshake that would make a Grizzly bear wince - and subsequently count his clawed fingers - he made no bones about what he intended to do to the 'sneaky, cowardly bastards who murdered all those fine young men on the Long Beach, the Enterprise and your ships last Friday'. Rear-Admiral Detweiller had explained that his friends called him 'Lucas' or just plain 'Det'; he was an intrinsically gentle giant who had taken the attack on his flagship as a personal affront, and dealt with everybody he met, be they humble cooks in his flagship's galley, or the C-in-C of all British and Commonwealth Forces, with robust cheerful amiability. However, if he ever

got his hands on the man behind Friday's nuclear strike he meant to 'rip off his godammed fucking head!'

This, in the circumstances, was fair enough.

Arkady Pavlovich Rykov was waiting for Julian Christopher and Dan French when they arrived at Headquarters. The three men hurried upstairs to the C-in-C's room.

"The first use of nuclear weapons," the former KGB man said sombrely once the door to Julian Christopher's office had firmly clicked shut at his back, "would never have been sanctioned by the surviving Soviet High Command."

Julian Christopher's eyes narrowed a little; Dan French almost choked on his ire.

"What do you mean? The *surviving* Soviet High Command?"

The former KGB Colonel did not bat an eyelid. When he had been a young man he had once been so terrified in the presence of Iosif Vissarionovich that he had shit himself. In comparison to his one-time master there was very little either of the – admittedly very powerful – men in the cool, still, room beneath the bastion walls of the great Citadel of Mdina would do to frighten Arkady Rykov. A man who had survived nearly ten years in the inner circle of monsters like Stalin and Beria lost the capacity to be intimidated by any normal man.

The Russian had refused the offered chair.

He would have been a fool to tell his *handlers* and his new *clients* everything; and anyway, they would not have believed him until now so what would have been the point recklessly burning through his last credit note with the British all at once?

He clasped his hands behind his back.

He had no choice but to speak a little of the truth; if he did otherwise their distaste for him personally and for everything he represented professionally, would inevitably begin to erode his remaining credibility. Thereafter, his situation would become increasingly untenable and his mission would inevitably end in failure.

"You must understand that I have no specific intelligence in this matter. What I say now is speculation based on my knowledge of the plans that existed in the Soviet Union before the war. You must understand also that many different plans were developed because the Soviet High Command

knew that it could not win a war against the West."

Julian Christopher shrugged, held his peace.

The Russian picked his words with meticulous care.

"The USSR is a very large country with many, many secret places that neither you nor the Americans know about. Mother Russia is a very large country with very big bomb shelters buried very deeply in its *holy* soil. There was no general alert or alarm before *your* missiles and *your* bombs began to fall but do you truly believe that the members of the High Command were all standing on the balcony of the Kremlin waiting for the first ground burst in Red Square?"

Julian Christopher's gaze narrowed further.

Arkady Rykov was a lean, dapper man in his forties of no more than average height. He had let his hair grow in recent weeks to cover the livid scars on his skull. Beneath his tailored grey suit his torso was a mass of scar tissue; x-rays showed old and recent fractures of ribs, his left forearm, several cracked vertebrae, crushed fingers and a dozen tiny pieces of shrapnel deeply imbedded in his back. He was handsome in a swarthy way with dark eyes that could be anything to anybody, depending upon the circumstance.

"Many members of the High Command, the Politburo, or whatever you wish to call it, would *probably* have survived the war, Admiral Christopher," the Russian continued. "The Soviet Union in the west ceased to exist," he shrugged, "probably. But what of the rest of the Mother Country? Strategic Air Command and your V-Bomber Force suffered over fifty percent losses on the night of the war. You can have no idea how many of those lost aircraft were shot down *before* they reached their targets. Nor, I suspect, have *you* or the Americans had the stomach for systematically overflying *all* your war objectives, let alone the huge tracts of Mother Russian that you never even targeted in the first place. After the Great Patriotic War, the United States Air Force crawled through the ruins of all the cities and factories *you* had bombed in Germany and produced comprehensive reports of what they found. I am unaware of any similar post-war exercise having been conducted in the last year, Admiral."

Julian Christopher ignored the Russian's implicit insinuation the he really ought not to have to be telling his British masters any of this because they ought to have worked it out for themselves. He said nothing.

"History does not repeat itself," Arkady Rykov said flatly, "but it teaches

us hard lessons. When the Roman Empire in the West was over-run by barbarians; it moved to the East and survived for another thousand years."

"Very pithy," Dan French sniped.

"But undeniably apposite, Air Vice-Marshal."

Julian Christopher leaned back in his chair.

"So, what is *Krasnaya Zarya*, Colonel Rykov?"

The former KGB man looked at him with grudging respect.

"A wild beast that the High Command was too wise to attempt to cage, Admiral. A wild beast that it unleashed upon its enemies; a wild beast it was happy to see slavering at the throats of the monsters responsible for destroying the western half of their empire. I have no love for my former masters, you understand, but I can see no circumstances in which they would have knowingly allowed *Krasnaya Zarya* maniacs to seize control of any part of their surviving nuclear weapons stockpile."

Dan French jumped up from his chair and crossed his arms across his chest.

"You're telling us that last week's unprovoked thermonuclear first strike was some kind of miscalculation?"

"In the eyes of the High Command more of an unfortunate *accident*."

"What about the weapon that was used to destroy HMS Amphion?"

"Another accident."

"An *accident*?"

Arkady Rykov met the airman's angry glare levelly.

"I have no crystal ball, gentlemen. I am a spy and an assassin who has a somewhat more than passing acquaintance with many of the likely senior players in our drama. I claim to have insights into the way they think but I know very little of what must have actually happened in the remotest corners of the Mother Country since the war. I can guess, I can speculate, but I know nothing for a fact. You, on the other hand, are military men with long and varied experiences of war. Within hours of the first strike – which appears to have been launched by at best people who did not know what they were doing, or at worst, by imbeciles – the fighting virtually ceased in Yugoslavia, Greece and Cyprus and the Red Dawn naval units encountered in the Eastern Mediterranean withdrew to the north. Add this to a simultaneous immediate cessation of enemy air activity and what does this tell you?"

"That the recall order went out but not all Red Dawn units got the

message?" Julian Christopher offered. "That might be consistent with the reports of renewed fighting in Romania and Bulgaria, and in the Tran-Caucasus region."

Dan French exhaled a long breath.

"You're telling us that the Red Dawn zealots on the ship that HMS Amphion surfaced to challenge hadn't got the message?"

Arkady Rykov had already told his interlocutors that he did not have a crystal ball; it would have been rude and ill-advised to have reminded them of the fact.

Chapter 12

Wednesday 12th February 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher had been happy to offer Lieutenant Alan Hannay, HMS Talavera's Supply Officer, a ride to the Citadel. A week ago, Alan Hannay had still been his father's flag lieutenant and he had transferred to the destroyer in such a hurry that he had left all his personal kit in his old quarters at Mediterranean Fleet Headquarters. The younger man had also intimated he would like to pay his respects 'to Miss Calleja', if 'that's all right with you, sir', while he was in Mdina.

Since his Captain was a bag of nerves facing the prospect of finally meeting the love of his life – in something akin to privacy for the first time – he had been only too glad to bring Alan Hannay along for the ride.

"You must have met Marija dozens of times in the last couple of months," he remarked as the old Humber bumped and jolted, rolling like a bathtub on a Channel crossing.

"I was quite friendly with Jim Siddall," Alan Hannay explained.

"The poor chap who got blown up in Kalkara with Marija's sister-in-law?"

"Rosa. Yes, it was a very bad business; that and Marija's brother going missing. We were all very worried about her."

Both men ignored the flapping ears of their red-bearded driver.

Back in the days when thirty-year-old Petty Officer Jack Griffin had been a humble, repeatedly demoted electrical artificer in HMS Talavera's radar room he had appointed himself Peter Christopher's personal guardian angel.

The reasons for this were arcane and mostly incomprehensible to anybody ignorant of the two men's recent history. Peter had inherited Jack Griffin when he joined Talavera at Chatham; that was several months before a one megaton ground burst on the night of the October War transformed the historic base into a flooded crater, diverted the River Medway and killed everybody who had lived within three miles of ground zero. The two men had struck up an unlikely rapport from the outset and somewhere along the

line the perennial black sheep Jack Griffin had turned over a new leaf. He had stopped drinking – to excess, leastways – curbed his tripwire temper, decided for the first time in his life that he wanted to 'belong' to 'something, somewhere', and had become a respected key member of Peter Christopher's tight knit Radar and Electrical Warfare Division onboard the Talavera, then fitting out at Chatham ahead of her much-delayed operational trials. The two men were the last survivors of Talavera's radar room crew from the night of the October War. Most of the others had died in the Battle of Cape Finisterre, shredded when the Skyhawks strafed the crippled destroyer. Peter would probably have been dead too if Jack Griffin had not wrestled him out of high chair onto the debris-strewn deck that seconds later was awash with the blood of the dead and dying.

When HMS Talavera's previous Captain, David Penberthy, had sent Peter ashore at Oporto after the battle to recover from his minor injuries he had detailed Jack Griffin as his personal 'steward' and bodyguard. Subsequently, they had been posted together to the Operations Staff of HMS Hermes, thence back to Talavera at Gibraltar and since then shared the destroyer's latest adventures off Lampedusa and the day and night-long terrifying fire-fighting episode beneath the raging inferno on the USS Enterprise's flight deck.

All of which was known to Alan Hannay; which meant that he knew that in front of this particular Petty Officer, he could speak his mind without fear or favour, knowing that his words would go no further than the car.

"There were those awful rumours about Marija's brother Samuel being involved in some way with Red Dawn," Alan Hannay explained. "It is positively ludicrous, but there were actually people who accused him of personally sabotaging HMS Torquay!"

Peter Christopher had been very careful to steer Talavera well clear of the buoys marking the resting places of the two sections of the sunken frigate in the Grand Harbour. It was a pure fluke that the bow section had gone down in over seventy feet of water, settling on its starboard side; and that the stern had grounded just beneath the surface under the ruins of Fort St Angelo, again in such a position as to not present a serious hazard to navigation at the neck of Dockyard Creek.

"Your father quashed all that nonsense," Alan Hannay continued. "Fortunately, the security people rounded up the real culprits. Or rather

cornered the blighters and settled their hash once and for all!" There was undisguised heat and bitterness in Alan Hannay's words of a kind Peter Christopher had not thought his urbane, mild-mannered Supply Officer capable.

He glanced at the other man.

"I should imagine some of the chaps at HQ took the whole dreadful business to heart?"

"I should say so, sir!"

"I never realised how," Peter hesitated, "*special* Marija is to people on the island. Yesterday on the dockside it was as if everybody had come to see *her* not Scorpion or Talavera."

"The Labour Party and the Nationalists are both courting her for all they are worth," Alan Hannay said, not knowing if he ought to be telling his commanding officer this. Any of it. "On account of her becoming so famous leading the *Women of Malta* movement, I suppose, but I think it is more than that. It is the whole thing about how she recovered from the injuries she suffered during the siege in 1942, and how she trained as a nurse and midwife. I never met her before the bombing in December but after the work she did on the Sliema waterfront – she was a real angel of mercy - just after the attack, well, ever since that night she seems to have become even more of a symbol of..."

"A symbol of what, Alan?"

"I don't know really. Of *hope*, I suppose. The World has changed so much from before the war that none of the old ideas really hold water these days, don't you feel, sir?"

"Because the old ways died with the old World?"

"Something like that."

Petty Officer Jack Griffin sighed: "Miss Calleja is a perfect little Princess. That's what everybody says, sir."

At Headquarters Peter Christopher attempted to pay a courtesy call on his father but discovered that the great man was 'in conference'. Relieved, he walked the short distance to St Paul's Square and to the St Catherine's Hospital for Women. Before they had broken from their – in hindsight, embarrassingly spontaneous and intimate clinch on Parlatorio Wharf – Marija has whispered that she was 'on shift' at the hospital for the next four days and or nights, he could not remember which. Holding Marija in his arms had

been *distracting* in ways he had never experienced with any other woman, and when she kissed him his mind had gone completely blank...

"Commander Christopher!" An excited young woman with wide eyes and a mop of short, unruly brown hair attempting to escape from her pale blue starched nursing bonnet exclaimed excitedly before she disappeared back into the building.

Margo Seiffert was less excitable.

"Have you recovered from yesterday's homecoming, Peter?" She asked, smiling ruefully and shaking his proffered hand.

"No, not yet," he confessed. "I believe Lieutenant Hannay may have preceded me..."

The Director of St Catherine's Hospital for Women refreshed her smile and nodded.

"Just walk straight through to the courtyard at the back. Alan's in the garden with Marija and Rosa."

"Rosa?"

"Samuel Calleja's widow."

"Ah," the man murmured, "of course." He followed the direction indicated by the older woman's pointing arm and stumbled towards his fate. He heard women's voices and laughing before he emerged into the cool sheltered cloister hidden in the heart of the hospital.

He glanced up at the branches of the tree which grew in one corner of the courtyard, its upper boughs brushing against gables and gutters.

His eyes grew accustomed to the shadows.

Marija, bare headed dressed in her pale blue nursing smock was sitting at one end of a wooden bench next to a young woman in a wheel chair; and Alan Hannay was standing beside a woman whose profile was instantly familiar but not immediately recognisable to the newcomer.

"Peter!" Marija exclaimed, rising and moving to meet him as he emerged into the peaceful church-quiet yard. Her eyes twinkled with pleasure as she walked into his open arms as if she had been doing it all her life. He had hugged her close and planted kisses in her hair before he remembered the watching eyes. In a moment she took his hand and turned proudly to the others. The man was in a complete daze, hardly registering anything but the scent of Marija's hair.

"This is my sister Rosa," she said happily, introducing him to the young

woman with the cropped hair and sutured skull. The invalid's right eye was puffy and bloodshot, her lower right leg was encased in a clumsy plaster cast and she held her left hand resting immobile in her lap. She seemed unnaturally pale for a native-born Maltese but oddly, considering the circumstances which had brought her to Mdina, not remotely sorry for herself.

Peter Christopher bent low and shook Samuel Calleja's widow's small right hand.

"It is nice to meet you," he murmured awkwardly.

"My sister," Rosa Calleja replied, dredging an unlikely mischief from somewhere deep in her battered psyche, "never told me that you were as tall and handsome as your famous father, Commander Christopher?"

Marija sucked her teeth in mock despair.

The two women giggled like schoolgirls.

"Rosa is making an amazing recovery," Alan Hannay said, recognising his commanding officer was, for the moment, all at sea and a little out of his depth.

"I would have been lost without my sister," the woman in the wheelchair said, suddenly not so certain of herself and unconsciously reaching for Marija's hand. Instantly, her sister-in-law was by her side.

"These are strange times," Peter blurted, finally recollecting the one and only time he had met the third woman in the courtyard. "Isn't that so, Miss Pullman?"

Clara Pullman looked and felt older than she had the last time she had encountered the dashing young naval officer in a waterfront taverna overlooking the estuary of the River Tagus in Lisbon. She was dressed soberly in a calf-length fawn dress and an off-cream blouse beneath a dark jacket, and her hair was trimmed severely, at least two inches off her shoulders. She saw his suspicion and mistrust.

"Commander Christopher and I met in Portugal when HMS Hermes put into Lisbon for repairs after the, er, modern day Battle of Trafalgar," she explained to the others with irony playing in her dulcet tone. "I think he was a little down in the dumps at the time and I was able to cheer him up a little bit. I was working as an embassy *courier*, you see. Delivering messages, that sort of thing. It was very boring most of the time but occasionally, as in life, one meets *interesting* people."

Peter Christopher wondered what a spook like Clara Pullman was doing here in St Catherine's Hospital on the day he happened to pay a house call? It was not lost on him that the woman was already known to, and apparently, comfortable in the company of, and liked by the others. He said nothing, waited for her to explain what was going on.

Clara's smile confirmed that she was reading his thoughts.

"I don't work for British Intelligence any more, Commander," she said. "I only ever ran errands and, in these times, one has a duty to do what one can to help, to pull one's weight. I trained as a nurse many years ago. Just before you arrived I had an interview with Doctor Seiffert about the possibility of my employment either here, or in some other place or capacity with the medical wing of the Malta Defence Force."

"Clara will be joining us here in Mdina," Marija announced happily.

"From tomorrow morning, actually," the older woman added.

"I see..."

Alan Hannay, Clara Pullman and Rosa Calleja were aware that the Marija and her beau wanted – in fact badly needed and positively yearned – to be alone.

"If you would be willing to push my chair, Lieutenant Hannay," Rosa decided, "I could show you and Clara around the hospital."

"I'd be delighted," the young officer beamed. "Just point the way!"

Clara Pullman paused as Rosa's rather rickety wheelchair was gently coaxed across the cobbles and tiles to the door.

"Please believe me when I say I am honestly and truly not here to spy on anybody, Commander," she said simply. "I don't do that anymore."

Peter shrugged.

"Whatever you say, Miss Pullman."

The woman nodded and turned away.

"What was all that about, Peter?" Marija inquired, her brow furrowing in a way that he suspected was going to fascinate him for as long as they both lived. He grinned uncomfortably.

"I think that you and I have been persons of interest to people like Miss Pullman for longer than we know."

"You mean all that stupid censoring of our letters after the war?"

"Yes. Among other things." He looked to the empty bench and they sat down, not touching, each in their different ways suddenly shy to make the

first renewal of physical contact. "I met your little brother this afternoon," he confessed, feeling foolish and a little guilty.

His tone was the warning; and Marija decoded it instantly.

"Oh, no," she groaned, resignedly. "What has Joe done *now*?"

"I think he's got himself and some of his comrades on the Workers' Council into a deal of hot water. He led a wild-cat strike," he saw the term did not mean anything to Marija, hastily rephrased it, "he and his friends downed tools and walked off the Talavera without telling anybody first. The new Admiralty Dockyard Superintendent – a chap called Commodore Renfrew who arrived on the Sylvania - wanted to lock all the strikers out of the yard but I persuaded Joe to lead his comrades back to work and I refused to allow the dockyard police to board the ship to execute the new policy."

"Oh," Marija's frown deepened. "Will you be in trouble with this Commodore Renfrew for helping Joe?"

"Probably, but I'm a new boy in Malta. I can always claim that I was unaware of the new regulations and just wanted to get my ship's repairs started. Joe's shift was onboard to plug the biggest holes and make the old girl safe for the surveyors to crawl over her tomorrow morning."

"I am sorry. My brother is a good man, but," she sighed, "very stupid sometimes. He was badly treated by the British," she stopped herself, "sorry, by the *security people* after the October War. He was wrongfully imprisoned for nearly a year without trial. But you know that... Anyway, sometimes I think he is okay, but he doesn't laugh as much as he did before."

Peter nodded.

"You and your family have been through a lot," he sympathised. "What with Joe being locked away for no good reason and what happened to Samuel last month."

"I think it is worst for my Mama," Marija replied, forcing a brave smile. "Joe was always her favourite and she feels guilty now that Sam is gone..."

Peter reached for Marija and took her in his arms, onto his lap and cradled her as she began to weep the tears she had been afraid to cry until today. Presently, she quietened, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Chapter 13

Thursday 13th February 1964
Communist Party Headquarters, Bucharest, Romania

The Securitate had filmed the entire interrogation on incredibly scarce 8-millimetre Kodak colour film stock. They had filmed it all; right up to the end of the last session, by then their victim had been reduced to a pulped, unrecognisable mess chained to a steel chair in the 'interview room' sitting in the middle of an expanding puddle of his own blood, piss and shit. Nicolae Ceausescu had watched a few minutes of the footage and told the technicians to turn off the projector. Now the words in the file on his desk burned at him off the page.

Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov had wept, pleaded, screamed, squealed for his life and told his inquisitors *everything*. The beating, the torture had not stopped. Everybody lied to stop the pain; every word they uttered had to be verified by additional agonies. Spilling the beans did not help a man, or a woman, once the Securitate had one at their mercy.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had gone as white as a sheet and suffered a violent coughing fit when he started to read the key pages of interrogation transcript. Eventually, he had coughed so uncontrollably his cancerous lungs had burst and he had bled like a stuck pig, spitting gobs of blood and mucus in bubbling rivulets from the corners of his blue-tinged lips before collapsing into a coma. The strain of the last few days had been too much for him but Ceausescu had little sympathy for his old friend and mentor.

Gheorghe had preventing him communicating directly with the West after *Krasnaya Zarya* started randomly lobbing thermonuclear hand grenades, and in hindsight, Ceausescu realised he should have moved against Gheorghe then. In fact, he ought to have moved against him after the first tactical nuclear weapon went off in Limassol Harbour. Elena, his wife, had harried him angrily over his 'stupid sentimental attachment' to the Dictator; but there were some men whom not even Nicolae Ceausescu could betray at the drop of a hat. Nevertheless, he should have acted sooner because now it was almost certainly too late.

The phone on his top floor office desk rang shrilly.

He was relieved to hear the voice of the Soviet Ambassador on the other end of the line. At that moment he did not think he could cope with another vitriolic, spitfire harangue from his witch wife.

Volodymyr Vasylyovych Shcherbytsky, the man who had turned up in Bucharest last January claiming to represent the 'diplomatic and political interests' of the *Provisional Government of the USSR*, who more recently styled himself *Ambassador to the Romanians for and on behalf of the Troika* was a forty-five-year-old Ukrainian whose face wore a perpetual mask of mourning for the loss of his beloved Republic. Although he was an angry, disputative man he had cultivated tolerably civil relations with Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej; he and Ceausescu detested each other. Were it not for the fact that Shcherbytsky's *Embassy* – he had commandeered the old Soviet Embassy with a gang of refugee ex-Red Army men, of whom there had been several thousand in and around the capital by early last year – regularly greased the palms of senior Party members with gold and silver, and since the summer had secured the release of military supplies, both ancient and new from allegedly 'abandoned stockpiles' in the 'dead zones', Shcherbytsky would have been ignored, imprisoned or simply *disappeared* long ago. Shcherbytsky had consistently described what was left of his 'Mother Country' as a 'country in name only'. He had claimed the squabbling regions beyond the Ural Mountains and in Siberia were 'like the old wild west'. Shcherbytsky had unashamedly painted himself as a mobster cashing in on the chaos and publicly backed *Krasnaya Zarya* as the 'best defence against the West moving in and taking over'.

Nicolae Ceausescu wanted to put his head in his hands; he and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had been seduced by the possibility that fate had dealt their small, forgotten backwater of a nation a winning hand in the global geopolitical game. For a blink of an eye they had been the heirs to the Romans for whom their country was named; and truly dared to believe that it might conceivably be their destiny to carve out a new empire from the ruins of the surrounding lands. Moreover, offering support and bases of operation for the surviving units of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and *Krasnaya Zarya* had unexpectedly given them a stack of chips in the *great game*. Secure in the delusion that they had the power to turn off the oxygen of men and materiel to Red Dawn at a time of their own choosing; they had dreamed of gaining a

bridgehead in both the western and eastern camps. Only days ago, it had seemed as if their time had come. If they seized the moment and beheaded the *Troika*, what stood between them and immortality? Romania might yet be more than the aggressively neutral Switzerland of the Black Sea, it might be something great. Bucharest might become the capital of a new Roman Empire...

Except it had all now gone terribly wrong; *Krasnaya Zarya* had infiltrated and split the regime so badly that only the loyalty of the Securitate – bought at an extortionately high price largely with Shcherbytsky's money – had enabled Gheorghe and Ceausescu to cling onto power. And then the missiles had started to fly again...

"What the fuck is going on?"

Volodymyr Vasylyovych Shcherbytsky's savage interrogative hit Nicolae Ceausescu like a slap in the face.

Contrary to what the members of the *Troika* had been led to believe at Otopeni Air Base no action had been taken against their entourage other than the enforced confinement of its members to a dingy run-down hotel several blocks from where Ceausescu now sat. The shooting had been for dramatic effect. The Soviet 'delegation' had been rounded up and a couple of Securitates had shot up the corridors of the bunker to intimidate the *Troika*. Ceausescu's loyal troops and the Securitate had had enough to do hunting down and liquidating *Krasnaya Zarya* activists without getting into a major fire fight at Otopeni. Ceausescu and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had correctly anticipated that elements of the former Soviet forces that had sought sanctuary in Romania after the Cuban Missiles War would react badly to a clamp down on *Krasnaya Zarya*; neither of them had contemplated an all out civil war erupting in the southern and eastern regions, and around the strategically vital port city of Constanta on the east coast.

But then they had *not* known at the time that the 'former Soviet forces' in their country were just the advanced guard of the *whole fucking Red Army!*

Ceausescu was still struggling to come to terms with just how quickly everything had gone wrong. His ongoing bewilderment – and temptation to go into denial - was fogging his mind at exactly the moment he needed to be most alert.

Volodymyr Vasylyovych Shcherbytsky was shouting abuse at him.

"Operations against counter-revolutionary elements continue, Comrade

Ambassador," Ceausescu parroted lamely.

"You bastards wouldn't recognise a fucking counter-revolutionary," thundered the irate Ukrainian, "if he pissed in your face!"

Nicolae Ceausescu winced.

"Comrade Gheorghiu-Dej has not been well and mistakes have been made," he said hurriedly.

"What the fuck have you done with *my* people?"

Until a couple of hours ago the Soviet Embassy had been surrounded by a cordon of heavily armed Securitate troopers backed up with half-a-dozen tanks. All telephone lines had been cut and access into and out of the compound around the building blocked. It was symptomatic of the disintegration of the Party's control of the city that somebody had, somehow, contrived to restore the Embassy's communications with the outside World.

There was a loud banging on the door of Ceausescu's office. Before he could say a word, a harassed Securitate officer ran in and slapped a message sheet on his blotter.

Two Soviet cruisers were shelling Constanta...

Two Soviet cruisers and a battleship!

Volodymyr Vasylyovych Shcherbytsky cursed.

"Are you still there?"

"Yes, er, yes..." Nicolae Ceausescu muttered. "*Your* people have been in protective custody since their arrival in Romania due to the unrest in the country following the irresponsible actions of *your* clients in the *Krasnaya Zarya* movement, Comrade Ambassador."

That was it; the accusation he had never planned to voice; a taboo on a par with mentioning Stalin's Gulag.

"I want to speak to Kosygin."

"That's not possible at this time..."

"I want to speak to Alexei Nikolayevich before *my* Government decides to drop a fucking great big bomb on your rat-faced head!"

"What, I..." Like most powerful men accustomed to being surrounded by subordinates he could cow into humiliating submission with a casual raising of an eyebrow or the utterance of a single, inoffensive word, Nicolae Ceausescu, had no stomach for being on the receiving end of similar, or in this case, much worse medicine. He literally did not know how to deal with it. "How dare you threaten me..."

“Nobody’s threatening you!” Shcherbytsky raged. “The bombers are probably already in the air, you stupid little shit!”

“The bombers?” Ceausescu queried, icy fingers exploring his spine with very sharp finger nails. He had heard gunfire in the streets about an hour ago, now he heard it again, much closer. Small arms fire interrupted sporadically with what sounded like an anti-aircraft cannon blazing off short bursts. His advisors had discounted the reports of *Krasnaya Zarya* armoured columns heading for the capital from the east and south, it was too incredible...

The neatly typed Securitate transcripts of the interrogation of Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, the so-called Commissar of the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* – the KGB – of the Provisional Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics lay partially read on his desk.

He dropped the handset of the phone back onto its rests, cutting off Shcherbytsky’s ranting.

According to Andropov, Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin was co-leader of the Central Committee of the surviving Soviet Communist Party. He and his fellow comrade in the new ‘collective leadership’ – Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev - of the post-war Soviet empire ruled over a part devastated nation of perhaps as many as forty million people. From the Caucasus in the south to the Arctic in the north, and east of the Ural Mountains all the way to distant Manchuria whole cities and regions remained untouched, and in some remote areas there were probably still Soviet citizens who did not yet know that there had even been a war. European Russia was gone, a radioactive wasteland mostly. But in the East the Mother Country lived on, damaged but whole; and reconstruction had already begun. There was no *Troika*, and *Krasnaya Zarya* had always been the outlier, the pre-prepared shockwave cutting edge of the Soviet Union’s defences in the event of a catastrophe as annihilating as the Cuban Missiles War.

Kosygin had come to Bucharest to promise increased military and economic aide in the event the West did not retaliate with nuclear weapons. If the Americans or British retaliated the mission to Bucharest was academic because they would all be dead. If the West failed to retaliate – showing their moral weakness – the Provisional Government of the USSR had made an irrevocable decision to support the Party leadership in Bucharest and to grant Romania a seat on the newly re-constituted Politburo based in Chelyabinsk. Of course, this pre-supposed that those in the Romanian Communist Party

who had collaborated with the criminals responsible for launching the unauthorised first strike against the British and others in the Mediterranean would be *purged*.

Nicolae Ceausescu picked up his phone again.

His Securitate switchboard operator asked him which number he required.

He waited until he heard his wife's vexed voice.

"Shut up and listen, Elena," he barked. "Take the children to the *grey house*. We have to get out of the city."

"The *grey house*?" His wife checked. "Are things that bad?"

"Yes. I will come as soon as possible."

He hung up.

He hit the red button on the top of the handset.

"I need my personal security detail."

Another man would have attempted to rationalise how he had blundered into the worst mistake of his life. Not Nicolae Ceausescu. He had been beguiled by the *experts*, betrayed by his *friends*, sold down the river by that scumbag Shcherbytsky. *Krasnaya Zarya* traitors and counter-revolutionaries had subverted the legitimate Government of the People's Republic of Romania. He had been a good communist and an honest patriot; he was blameless for the unmitigated disaster that was about to befall his country; and one day he would have his revenge on the traitors who had sold out the Party.

It crossed his mind that perhaps he ought to order the elimination of the Soviet prisoners. He hated loose ends, hostages to fortune. No, somebody was bound to ask for written confirmation of an order like that, and that would mean there would have to be some kind of time consuming bureaucratic *process*. Andropov, Kosygin, Chuikov and the others were not anonymous nonentities. There would be questions and inevitably delays, and the one thing he was critically short of was time.

There were booted feet in the corridor.

Nicolae Ceausescu sighed and got to his feet.

Chapter 14

Thursday 13th February 1964
Tudor Hall, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

"Everybody is present and correct, Prime Minister," Sir Henry Tomlinson, the grey-haired éminence grise of the Home Civil Service, and the Secretary to the Cabinet of the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland as constituted by the provisions of the War Emergency Act.

Margaret Thatcher looked up from her desk in the small ante-room to the Tudor Hall of Corpus Christi College, the room assigned to host the first full Cabinet meeting of her Unity Administration in Oxford.

Sir Henry Tomlinson was pleased to see that a little of the lustre had returned to the Angry Widow's cheeks. Whether she was happy, exhausted or worried sick his Prime Minister was never less than immaculately, marvellously turned out, not one hair out of place, and to a casual observer she was always overflowing with keen intelligence, vivacious energy and enthusiasm. However, he knew her well enough – since her accession to the Premiership they had lived through harrowing and tempestuous times fraught with unimaginable dangers in which a week had seemed like months, and a month, years and aged accordingly – to know that sometimes even she was prone to the natural predations of human weariness and melancholy. However, this morning was not one of those times; primarily he suspected, because she had enjoyed and only recently concluded - 'enjoyed' was exactly the right descriptor - an uninterrupted twenty-five-minute conversation with the 'Fighting Admiral' upon whose capable shoulders so many of their hopes rested.

"How is Mr Powell today, Henry?"

"He seems in good form," the Cabinet Secretary reported. Unlike his Prime Minister he was not convinced that the practice of keeping one's friends close and one's enemies even closer was necessarily wise in all cases. The Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South West, Enoch John Powell, was completely unlike any of her other high-profile detractors – presently relatively few in number – because he was never going to forgive

her for being what she was; the charismatic leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party that he imagined *himself* to be. The man was a near genius polymath, a singular classical scholar, poet and an immensely gifted linguist in his own right, who had been a University Don at a ridiculously young age, whose ambition in his student days had been to be Viceroy of India; but it did not matter how much he talked about or claimed to be able to relate to or to connect with the man on the street, because he never would.

Margaret Thatcher did not have Powell's towering analytical intellect, or his magical public speaking aura but her outrage and her hopes were perfectly aligned with those of her millions of supporters in the country. When Margaret Thatcher spoke from the heart she was talking for *her* people, the British people, not for some clique of little Englanders who yearned for a return to Empire and the so-called 'good old days'.

Margaret Thatcher tidied her papers and reached for her handbag.

Today's handbag was an elegantly practical Navy-blue model bearing the internal label of a fashionable Knightsbridge ladies' couturier, a present from an admirer that had arrived with a covering letter from the husband of its former owner who had asserted: 'my late wife would have cheered every step you take...'

Before the war the Cabinet had comprised twenty-one ministers, a formula that Edward Heath had adopted in his United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration in the immediate aftermath of the October War. However, Margaret Thatcher had decided that a model based more closely on the latter day streamlined configuration of that Cabinet, was more appropriate to the immediate needs of the country and to promote good governance. *Her* Cabinet comprised twelve members, including the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, currently the First Sea Lord Admiral Sir David Luce. Of the eleven other members of her Cabinet, the Foreign Secretary was a political appointment with no Party affiliation – notwithstanding his avowedly centre-leftist inclinations - and of the remainder six were drawn from the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, and four from the Labour and Co-operative Party.

The Prime Minister headed the Conservatives who included in their number the Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Sir Basil Brooke – a nephew of Lord Alanbrooke, Churchill's Second World War Chief of the Imperial General Staff - who was attending full Cabinet for the first time

today having previously been reluctant to leave his headquarters at Stormont Castle due to the fluidity of ongoing events in Ulster. In this case 'fluidity' was a convenient euphemism for the near civil war that was tying down the equivalent of four brigades of infantry; and over twenty-three thousand trained and equipped men whose presence in the Mediterranean would have enabled the C-in-C in Malta to have mounted a successful defence of the island of Cyprus. Northern Ireland was a canker that was going to have to wait for another time; likewise, the disgraceful behaviour of the Government of the Irish Republic in Dublin in stoking sectarian tension in the north.

The other Conservative Party ministers around the oval table were: William Whitelaw, at Defence; Peter Thorneycroft, the member of Parliament for Monmouth and the most senior pre-war surviving Tory grandee from MacMillan's last administration reinstated as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a post he had held in the 1950s; Airey Neave at Supply, which now also oversaw Transportation; Iain Macleod, the Chairman of the Conservative and Unionist Party at the Ministry of Information; and holding down the Scottish Office, the one largely intact pre-war ministry, John Scott Maclay, the fifty-eight year old MP for Renfrewshire.

The 'opposition faction' was led by James Callaghan, the Leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party, who was formally acknowledged as Margaret Thatcher's deputy. There had been no mandatory order of succession in Edward Heath's Administration, but if anything untoward happened to her – for example, in the event she got shot by a madman at a public meeting which had very nearly happened at Cheltenham Town Hall not so long ago – Jim Callaghan would automatically become the next Prime Minister and would remain in post as long as he retained sufficient support in the country and Her Majesty's confidence. Jim Callaghan also held the portfolio of Secretary of State for Wales. To balance the 'unity' of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom, the posts of the Home, the Labour and the Health departments had been assigned to Labour Party nominees; respectively Roy Jenkins, Anthony Crosland and Christopher Mayhew.

Charles Anthony Raven Crosland, the forty-five-year-old MP for Grimsby, was one of the finest minds in British politics and sooner or later would have become a candidate for the leadership of his Party regardless of the intervention of the October War. His Labour Ministry portfolio included a brief to explore options for re-creating a functioning national education

system. At present the surviving Universities were being left to their own devices, other than where their funding was directly related to Government defence research, development or other priority projects; while the school system was currently administered by the eleven Emergency Regional Administrations. Margaret Thatcher had decreed that one day the old, fragmented system would be in unified. It was Anthony Crosland's job to identify practical options and to report back to Cabinet by the summer.

Christopher Paget Mayhew, the forty-eight-year-old MP for Woolwich East, the former seat of his old friend and mentor Ernest Bevin was a pro-Arabist with openly big 'L' liberal views that had sat uneasily in his own Party before the October War. Margaret Thatcher had hesitated before rubber-stamping his appointment to the Health Ministry but James Callaghan had offered no obvious or better qualified candidate, so she had accepted Mayhew.

This morning three Privy Counsellors had been invited to 'observe Cabinet'. This was not a gimmick but a genuine attempt to reflect the composition of the surviving electorate and a broader variety of views and opinions across the country. While the Cabinet operated at approximately half its pre-war size, this seemed to be a sensible compromise given that shortly it was planned to reconvene Parliament and once that happened, Margaret Thatcher had no intention of allowing *her* Cabinet to operate in a vacuum. To this end she had personally invited Enoch Powell, the most prominent Conservative MP not in government to attend this inaugural Cabinet in Oxford, and two high profile female Labour and Co-operative Party members.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the Prime Minister called as she swept into the oak panelled Tudor Hall of Corpus Christi College to an unmelodic accompaniment of scrapping chair legs, "and ladies," she remembered. She stopped to shake hands with Enoch Powell, who was at his most stiffly, severely punctilious, and then, somewhat mechanically, with the two women who had been invited to 'observe' proceedings alongside the MP for Wolverhampton South West.

The Honourable Member for Blackburn was the elder and the feistier of the two women 'observers'. Fifty-three-year-old Barbara Ann Castle had joined the Labour Party while still in her teens. She came from a family active in the Independent Labour Party in the 1930s; her father a tax inspector

by profession becoming at one point the editor of Bradford's socialist newspaper, the *Bradford Pioneer*, while her mother had run a soup kitchen for local miners. That had been in the era when the Labour Party was in schism - after Ramsey MacDonald had split the faithful by forming a National Government with the Tories and the Liberals - the hard school in which most successful British post Hitler's-war socialist politicians had cut their teeth. Barbara Castle's activism had bloomed first in nearby St Hugh's College, where she had earned a third-class degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. In London before the Second War she had sat on St Pancras Borough Council and written for *Tribune*, then as now a leading mouthpiece of the left in British politics whose editor, William Mellor - a married man some two decades her senior – she was said to have been having an affair with at the time of his death in 1942. When she married in 1944, she was the housing correspondent of the *Daily Mirror*, the populist broadsheet of moderate socialism. Margaret Thatcher's briefing was that Mrs Castle had been nothing if not true to her leftist principles down the years, ploughing a singular path for a woman in politics as an unapologetic socialist on the Bevanite wing of the post-war Labour Party, who had promoted the accelerated decolonization of the Empire and vociferously opposed the South African Apartheid regime. Before the October War the Prime Minister and her left-wing counterpart had had little time for each other and the feeling had been entirely mutual.

Barbara Castle's chaperone in this otherwise all male and largely hostile environment, was Eirene Lloyd White, the fifty-four-year-old Belfast-born Member of Parliament, since 1950 for East Flint. Educated at St Paul's Girls' School and Somerville College, like Barbara Castle she had won a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Later she had studied for a year in Heidelberg before crossing the Atlantic to work for the New York Public Library. During Hitler's War she had joined the civil service, and afterwards become the political correspondent of the Manchester Evening News and worked for the BBC. In 1948 she had married another House of Commons lobby correspondent, John Cameron White, who had not survived the October War. In her own way she was every inch the feminist that Barbara Castle was, but unlike Barbara Castle she was a political moderate in most things. A former chairman of the Fabian Society, as long ago as 1953 she had resigned from the National Executive Council of the Labour Party in

disgust because of the constant internecine warring between the left and right.

"Let me welcome our guests," Margaret Thatcher began. "Before we begin I would like to explain for the benefit of Mr Powell, and Mrs Castle and Mrs White, how we go about our business in Cabinet." She ignored Airey Neave's rolling eyes; knowing he would not dare to be such an incorrigible rogue if he was not that horribly rare thing, a living national treasure. Her forty-eight-year-old friend had escaped from Colditz, read the indictment of their heinous crimes to the major Nazi war criminals at the Nuremburg Tribunal, and had been her indispensible chief of staff in the months leading up to her unexpected assumption of the Premiership. Airey and Ian Macleod, the often angry, impatient, remarkable man who had held the Conservative Party together in the last year, were her staunchest confederates in the Party and in Cabinet, the men she trusted most in the World after a certain Fighting Admiral who, regrettably from a selfishly personal viewpoint, had unavoidably been detained on vital duty overseas virtually since the day they had met.

"I like to open Cabinet with a few thoughts of my own; particularly if there have been important developments overnight which aren't necessarily included for discussion as an agenda item. The first formal item on today's agenda is a briefing by the First Sea Lord on the war situation..."

"Excuse me, Prime Minister," Barbara Castle said with a wavering stridency.

"Yes, Mrs Castle?" Margaret Thatcher was not remotely incommoded by the interjection. In fact, she had hoped to engage each of the 'observers' at some stage that morning. There was no point attending a meeting unless one had something to contribute; and she badly wanted backbenchers to re-engage with her Government before Parliament reconvened in a little over a fortnight. "What is it?"

"I would like to ask a question."

The majority of the Angry Widow's ministers were grumbling under their breath.

"By all means, Mrs Castle."

Barbara Castle was a sparsely made, not over-large woman with auburn to ginger hair and a habit of leaning towards an opponent with her jaw jutting defiance. What she lacked in feral intelligence she made up for many times over in political nous, and cunning of a sort that had, and no doubt would in

the future, trip up a lot of people who ought to have known better than to underestimate her formidable powers. She and the other two 'observers' were seated along the wall close to the left-hand head of the Cabinet table. Now she rose to her feet.

"I would like to know what this country's policy is on the *first use* of nuclear weapons, Prime Minister?" This asked, Barbara Castle fixed Margaret Thatcher with an unforgiving, unrelenting glare.

"That is a very pertinent question, Mrs Castle," the younger woman replied. She did not bother to smile, her stare met steel with more steel, of the cold blue tempered variety. "It would be true to say that this country has *no* policy on the first use of nuclear weapons."

"That is a disgrace!"

"No, it is pragmatic, Mrs Castle. The United Kingdom does not have such a policy because if we had, then our enemies would know our minds. Our enemies would be able to make their plans based on that knowledge of our *policy*. Forgive me, I mean this in no way to be condescending or patronising, but I believe that what you are really asking me is whether I am currently contemplating a retaliatory strike in response to the attack on Malta last week?"

The older woman nodded jerkily, visibly feeling herself to have been on the wrong end of a very 'condescending' and 'patronising' put down.

"Now you are going to tell me that you can't answer my question because of 'security concerns' or some such clap-trap!"

"No," the Angry Widow said coolly. Strong men in the room blanched, fearfully, rather guiltily anticipating that something unpleasant was about to transpire. "However, I will tell you what I said to President Kennedy last Friday." She let this sink in a moment. "I advised him not to retaliate on our behalf, or because of the loss of so many brave Americans on the USS Enterprise and the USS Long Beach, for two reasons. Firstly, I was not convinced it was possible to target the wicked criminals who launched the attack without killing many thousands, perhaps, millions of innocent people. Secondly, I pointed out to him that in the event that we continue letting off nuclear weapons in the atmosphere sooner or later we will so poison the World that life itself will be rendered impractical. I further emphasised to President Kennedy that it was my personal view that I could see no circumstances in which, at this time, a retaliatory strike, even of a very

limited nature, was consistent with the pursuance of a sane approach to international affairs. For what it was worth I also informed him that although the Government of the United Kingdom has no formal ‘first use’ policy or doctrine, that there was no conceivable scenario – at this time - in which I personally would authorise the first use of British nuclear weapons.”

Silence.

The sound of pins dropping on a carpet ten miles away would have been deafening.

“I hope that answers your question, Mrs Castle?” The Angry Widow inquired flatly. The question was entirely rhetorical and with a brusque, unusually disconcerted shake of her head the older woman resumed her seat.

Chapter 15

Thursday 13th February 1964
Royal Naval Hospital, Bighi

Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher was a little shocked to discover that Captain David Penberthy – the man whom he still regarded as the Talavera's rightful, legitimate commanding officer - was a gaunt, prematurely aged version of his old self. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes almost hollow and he had about him the look of a cancer patient in terminal decline. Peter very nearly groaned aloud with relief when his former captain cracked a pleasantly surprised smile and struggled into a more upright position on the bed in the crowded sunny, south-facing ward. Around him were officers and men – the majority American survivors from the USS Long Beach and the USS Enterprise – for whom, like David Penberthy, the crisis had passed.

Peter tried very hard not to stare at the heavily bandaged stump where his former captain and mentor's left foot had been; until an anti-tank round fired by Red Dawn insurgents close inshore off the island of Lampedusa had removed it at the ankle and showered HMS Talavera's flying bridge with shrapnel. He had awakened in a cold sweat a couple of times since that night; the carnage and chaos on the destroyer's bridge, the flash and the shuddering crash of the broadsides of the other ships in the gun line, the thudding, crunching, screeching impacts of solid shot against the thin plates of Talavera's sides, and the blood glistening evilly in the light of the half-moon every few seconds when the main battery unleashed a new salvo. He had gone to the bridge rail, stepping over the bodies, discovered HMS Puma drifting out of the line, the water around her boiling and erupting with exploding cannon shells and near misses, helpless as the shore batteries concentrated their fire on her. He had shut out the cries of the dead and the maimed and without a moment's hesitation steered Talavera between her wounded consort and the withering fire...

"My goodness!" David Penberthy chuckled hoarsely. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Peter!"

The younger man shook his bony hand.

"You look..."

"Pretty bloody dreadful, I should imagine," the man in the bed grinned. "I'm on the mend." He guffawed feebly: "Although I rather doubt I shall be back at sea any time soon."

It was Peter's turn to smile.

"I suspect that whenever you are fit to resume sea duty, sir," he assured the man who had been like a father to him and the rest of Talavera's crew in the grim times after the October War, "there will be no shortage of employment for chaps like us."

After the war the ship had been moored like a floating prison hulk in Fareham Creek along with most of the Channel Fleet for endless months, inactive while the ships of his father's British Pacific Fleet shepherded the Operation Manna convoys half-way around the World to the old country. "I don't think the Fleet will be spending much time in port in the foreseeable future!"

There was a hard chair next to the bed and Peter Christopher pulled it up, settled.

"I rather doubt it," the older man agreed.

"I apologise for not coming to visit sooner, sir," the younger man offered, grimacing.

"I wouldn't have known you were here until a couple of days ago," he was comforted.

David Penberthy had lost so much blood that by the time Talavera's surgeon - before the war a third-year medical student who had been press-ganged into the Royal Navy under the provisions of the War Emergency Act - had staunched the bleeding, he had very nearly died on the destroyer's bridge that night while Peter had fought the ship standing and stepping over his prostrate, unconscious body. At Bighi he had fallen prey to fever and balanced precariously between life and death for over a week.

"I gather you saved the day at Lampedusa with the Nelson gambit?" The older man inquired wryly, the amusement that was flickering in his rheumy eyes hardly touching his drawn, ashen features.

"Er, I don't know about that, sir."

"Steaming inshore of the gun line? Drawing the enemy's fire while you got a hawser onboard the Puma? It sounds pretty bloody Nelsonian to me,

Peter?"

The younger man blushed with embarrassment.

"It was the *only* thing to do," he shrugged. "Puma was taking a beating and she was dead in the water." He shrugged again. "I only did what I thought you'd have done in the same circumstances, sir."

David Penberthy wasn't having any of that. He waved around the ward. Beds were crowded into practically every available space and uniformed visitors cluttered the aisles and clustered around the cots as voices babbled softly in the warm, sunlit hall.

"As if your exploits off Lampedusa weren't enough, from what my new friends from the lost colonies tell me, you and Nick Davey saved the Enterprise's bacon a week ago. Apparently, the chaps on the carrier couldn't believe their eyes when Scorpion and Talavera disappeared under the Enterprise's flight deck overhang and started pumping water into her stern. Is it true what they say about a Phantom falling across Talavera's bridge wing?"

"Er, that was nothing," Peter said evasively. "It was just the wing tip that clipped us. I think one of its external fuel tanks lit off about the time the fuselage went overboard so a few of the chaps got singed eyebrows. Everybody on deck was kitted out in anti-flash kit and fire-fighting suits, so not much harm was done. Scorpion got knocked about a lot worse than Talavera."

David Penberthy thought about this while he collected his strength.

"Whatever," he muttered weakly. "These fellows," another attempted sweep of the arm to take in their surroundings, "think you and Nick should get medals..."

Peter waited patiently for his friend to recover.

"How goes it with your young lady?" The older man asked eventually.

"We're engaged to be married, sir."

"Good..." Exhausted, Peter Christopher's former commanding officer sank back onto his pillows. "That's good..." He shut his eyes and slept.

Peter patted the back of the older man's hand, remaining in his chair. He had an appointment with the newly-appointed Superintendent of the Admiralty Naval Dockyard at his office in Senglea later that afternoon but he was in no hurry to leave. Once he left Bighi his day was going to be a succession of meetings and wearisome journeys between them. There would

be no opportunity to see Marija again for another day or two now.

Yesterday evening had been dreamlike; sitting with Marija in the cool inner courtyard of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women in the Citadel at Mdina, quietly, intimately alone with her for the first time. The first time he had ever been truly alone with her and he ached to be alone – just the two of them – with her again. They had said very little, held each other and when the time had come for him to go they had kissed, slowly, innocently.

On the coming Sunday evening he had been invited to the Calleja family home in Sliema where he would meet Marija's 'Mama', and – probably – any number of her aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces. 'Joe' she had promised, 'will be on his best behaviour'. They had smiled at each other at that point; he had bent his head, they had nuzzled foreheads...

That was yesterday and this was today.

He found Petty Officer Jack Griffin in the hospital canteen laughing and joking with a comely girl in the pale blue uniform of one of Margo Seiffert's 'nursing auxiliaries'. He had seen several women so dressed in his brief visit to Bighi. The red-bearded Petty Officer straightened and sobered the moment he saw Peter.

"This is Miss Anna Boffa, sir," he reported. "She trained in Mdina with Miss Calleja, sir."

Peter Christopher shook the young woman's hand and to his horror, she very nearly swooned with delight.

"It is good to see that you are making friends with the natives, Jack," he observed dryly as the two men marched out of the hospital towards their car.

"All you have to do is tell a girl that you're off the old Talavera, sir," the other man explained, cheerfully, "and suddenly it's like being a movie star. Right now, they'd make you King of Malta if you asked, sir!"

Peter did not care for that thought or have the least inclination to encourage the sort of transient hero-worship that Jack Griffin and presumably other of his men were likely to exploit to gratuitously take advantage of impressionable young women who really ought to know better.

"Grand Masters," he grunted. "They don't have Kings, they have Grand Masters of the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St John of Jerusalem," he equivocated, not confident he had remembered the name of the Order correctly, "I think."

Peter was surprised to be confronted by an old friend when he entered the

outer office of the new Superintendent of the Admiralty Naval Dockyards.

Forty-year-old Ralph Hobbs, the one-time former Second World War Lancaster wireless operator and Edinburgh-based Marconi radar man, had been on board HMS Talavera on the night of the October War ironing out the converted destroyer's new electronics suite. The older man rose to his feet and with and ever-broadening smile shook the tall young officer's hand.

Ralph Hobbs was half a head shorter than the acting Captain of HMS Talavera, his face pale from the cold of a northern winter and his angular frame unhindered by a single ounce of spare flesh. His hair was noticeably thinner than fifteen months ago when the two men had bidden each other farewell at Rosyth, where Talavera had docked five days after the war. At the time they had assumed they would never meet again.

"What on earth are you doing out here, Ralph?" Peter blurted.

"I came out on the Sylvania with most of my department from Scotland. My wife and both my girls came, too. Things have been a bit grim in Edinburgh the last year," he pursed his lips, the grey green in his eyes clouding, "out of the frying pan into the fire, as they say. Marconi was running down my research program and I reckoned Sarah and the girls deserved a little sunshine." He seemed to remember the real object of the original question. "I'm to be assigned as Under Manager of all Electrical Installation at the Admiralty Dockyards. I'm the new head radar man, essentially. A lot more good men will be coming out to the Mediterranean but I'm reliably informed that the C-in-C – you father – wants me to train up as many locals as possible to install, configure and maintain the latest state of the art kit." He hesitated. "I imagine there must be a lot of bad feeling about bringing so many people in from the old country?"

"A bit. I'm not convinced it has been handled very *diplomatically*..."

The door to the office of the Superintendent of the Admiralty Naval Dockyards opened suddenly.

"What's that? Not *diplomatically*?" Demanded the small, bustling figure who bowled into the reception room. Two uniformed typists leapt to their feet.

"Er, no criticism intended, sir," Peter Christopher said hastily.

Commodore Kelvin Renfrew tried to give him a hard look but gave up quickly because he was getting a crick in his neck. The boy was a fraction of an inch taller than his only slightly more famous father and cut exactly the

same kind of handsome dashing figure Julian Christopher had between the First and Second World Wars, in the days when he was a society dilettante racing America's Cup yachts at Cowes with that incorrigible rogue Nicholas Davey.

The likeness is uncanny!

"Ralph said you two were old friends," Commodore Renfrew observed, tersely. "Both of you come into my den," he commanded, turning on his heel and marching back into his relatively palatial office on the top floor of the Victorian building which butted onto a high barbed wire topped iron fence separating the dockyard from the closely-packed streets of the 'city' of Senglea. He waved for his guest to sit down, all the while in motion, radiating nervous energy in every direction. "I had a good chin wag with Mr Hobbs yesterday while you were meddling in the industrial relations of my bailiwick, young man," he went on, bristling momentarily before he dumped himself into the big chair behind his even bigger mahogany desk. There were grey and buff Manila folders and files on the desk, and a dozen large, partially unfurled blueprints and mechanical, engineering and electrical schematics apparently strewn at random.

Peter Christopher forced himself to stop studying the fascinating detritus on the Dockyard Superintendent's desk.

"I apologise about that, sir. It won't happen again."

"Oh, never mind," the older man said instantly, as if he had already forgotten about the transgression. "If you hadn't stuck your oar in I'd have had to lock the blighters out and then there would have been a general strike in the dockyards. I'd have probably have had to sack that little so and so Joseph Calleja, too. As it was somebody had time to whisper in my ear that sacking the blighter on my first day in the job would have gone down like a lead balloon in these parts!"

Peter Christopher decided that the best thing to do was to say nothing.

"Right! Talavera!"

"Yes, sir," the younger man acknowledged, holding his breath.

"We'd have to rebuild her from the deck up to restore her to her former Fast Air Detection Escort status. I know she's not seen a huge amount of service but we're talking about a twenty-year-old hull with a 1945 vintage machinery set. Not to mention she's taken a fair old bit of stick lately. So, we're not going to put her back the way she was last autumn."

"Sir, I," the destroyer's proud commanding officer began to object.

Commodore Renfrew raised a hand.

"Ralph assures me that we've got the equipment to hand to sort out your Type 965 air defence bedsteads. Your existing ranging and gunnery control radar will have to go but we'll weld something better onto the foremast. We won't waste time rebuilding the amidships Command Information Centre or attempt to refit a Sea Cat launcher aft. Too much fiddly electronics work involved and the idea is to get Talavera back to sea sometime in the next three to four weeks. However, in her present state Talavera is missing roughly sixty or seventy tons of top weight in comparison with her post Fast Air Detection Escort conversion, all of which weight can be loaded back on above main deck level without unduly mucking up her undoubtedly fine sea-keeping characteristics. So," the older, now grinning man declared, "we'll use the opportunity to put some torpedo tubes amidships and a clump of anti-aircraft guns on the stern."

The Dockyard Superintendent jumped to his feet and beckoned his guest to peer at the somewhat hastily drawn line plan he unrolled.

"A quadruple 21-inch torpedo mount, sir?" Peter Christopher queried, thinking aloud. "Do we actually make those things anymore?"

"We've got several of them in fairly good condition in a storehouse," Commodore Renfrew chuckled. "No idea where they came from. Probably the second mount off ships on which post-1945 we'd bolted so much modern radar and electronics that they'd have capsized if we hadn't removed top weight elsewhere. My design people say we can get at least two or three twin twenty-millimetre mounts on the stern deck house without having to strengthen it, probably another one on the stern where the Squid anti-submarine mortar used to be. How do you feel about a couple of barrels in single mounts on the bridge wings? Or on the foredeck between the bridge and the back of 'B' Turret? There might be room to accommodate a couple of forty-millimetre Bofors guns somewhere amidships, too?"

Peter was feeling a little drunk; decisions that normally tied design committees in knots for weeks and months - it was not unheard of for decisions to be so long delayed that ships were scrapped without ever getting into dockyard hands - were being addressed with a cavalier abandon. Suddenly, the process was simplicity itself; *we don't have this kit so you can't have it, but we've got other stuff we can weld onto your spare deck*

space so let's do that instead!

The Royal Navy's role in the Mediterranean was no longer one of explicitly fighting a long-range enemy with missiles and fast jets, it was one of challenging and stopping suspicious vessels, chasing down pirates and patrolling coastal waters. The age of the gunboat was back; or at least that was Talavera's fate.

He shook his head, ran a hand through his hair.

"All the extra barrels will make her look a little untidy, sir," he observed wryly, "but personally, so far as I'm concerned you can put as many guns on her as you like! The more the merrier!"

Chapter 16

Thursday 13th February 1964
Tudor Hall, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

"Sir Henry," Margaret Thatcher invited, magisterially as was her wont on these occasions, "would reiterate the agenda for today's Cabinet please?"

"It will be my pleasure, Prime Minister," replied the wily old grey fox who oversaw the complex workings of the great machine of state that was the Home Civil Service. Sir Henry Tomlinson looked up from his notebook. "Item one; the combined war situation review compiled by the Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Joint Intelligence Committee to be presented by Admiral Sir David Luce. Item two; the crisis in Northern Ireland. Item three; a Home Office report on the approach to establishing contact with survivors living in the Greater London area and how to plan for the re-opening and reconstruction of key economic and industrial assets within that area. Mr Jenkins will speak to this. Item four; any other business."

"Thank you, Sir Henry." The Prime Minister looked to Admiral Sir David Luce, the First Sea Lord. "Sir David, you have the floor."

Fifty-eight-year-old Admiral Sir John 'David' Luce was the man who had, in the last months of the pre-October War World, overtaken his old friend Julian Christopher – to whom he had been junior his entire career - in the race to be pencilled in as the next professional head of the Royal Navy. When the incumbent First Sea Lord had disappeared in the cataclysm, he had stepped directly into his current role approximately six months early. At the same time, Julian Christopher had become the hero of the nation bringing home the Operation Manna convoys; when otherwise, but for the war, he would already have been quietly retired from the service.

The First Sea Lord shrugged off his weariness and nodded acknowledgement to his political mistress, the woman whom, without the implicit support of the Chiefs of Staff, could not and indeed, would not have risen to or accepted the burden of the Premiership. Not that there had ever been any real question of Sir David Luce, or the other Chiefs of Staff at the time – Air Marshal Sir Charles Elworthy, or General Sir Richard Hull –

interfering in the succession following the assassination of Edward Heath. Her Majesty the Queen had spoken and the Chiefs of Staff were honourable men to whom the very thought of acting counter to the wishes of their sovereign monarch was anathema.

Sir David Luce took a final glance at his notes.

"The situation of our forces in Malta remains stable," he began, trying not to sigh with relief. He was a former submariner who had taken part in the abortive bloody fiasco of the Dieppe Raid in 1942, and later worked on the staff that planned and executed the Normandy Landings in June 1944. He had commanded the cruisers HMS Liverpool and HMS Birmingham in the early 1950s, the latter during the Korean conflict. Afterwards, he was Director of the Royal Naval Staff College and Naval Aide de Camp to the Queen. A once lean, now thin, forthright but immensely charming man, his intuitive understanding of the political nuances had smoothed his path to high command.

Before leaving London to raise his flag in the Pacific, Julian Christopher had wished him well, prophetically forecasting that if the worst comes to the worst 'you are the best man to handle a crisis at home; I always wanted to go down in history as a *fighting admiral*'. It had been meant as a private joke and taken as such at the time, lately, the First Sea Lord thought about that conversation most days. David Luce was confident that if he put his mind to it he could charm the back legs off a donkey; but had never doubted that Julian Christopher was the *only* man for the impossible job in Malta.

"The consensus of opinion is that the suicide ship which caused the loss of HMS Amphion with all hands was probably a Red Dawn vessel which had failed to receive a signal to desist its offensive mission in the confusion following the nuclear strikes on targets in the region the previous week."

He turned a page.

"We now have a more comprehensive after-action report on the nuclear strikes and our own casualties in the theatre since hostilities commenced some weeks ago."

The tiredness washed over him at moments like this when the true scale of the madness was writ so large.

"Greece," he prefaced. "The city and port of Thessalonika was destroyed by a large, relatively low altitude airburst on the landward side of the main conurbation. At least three hundred thousand people probably died. Given

that the city was under bombardment from land and sea at this time, our presumption is that a large number of the assaulting troops must also have been killed in the strike. We think this is a reasonable assumption because Red Dawn operations in this area ceased after the strike. Elsewhere in Greece it seems as if Athens and the port of Piraeus have fallen to Red Dawn forces. A pall of smoke still hangs over the area. As of this time yesterday, sporadic outbreaks of fighting are ongoing within a twenty-mile radius of the city. Our hypothesis is that most of the Greek islands in the Aegean are already in Red Dawn hands but that other than Athens and perhaps, a few isolated mainland ports, Red Dawn has no other significant bridgeheads on shore. Notwithstanding, the situation in Greece, as elsewhere in the region is chaotic."

Another page...

"Adriatic and Balkans," Sir David Luce said, looking up and making eye contacts around the table. "Aviano Air Base appears to have been targeted by a Hiroshima-sized air burst. In the range of fifteen to twenty kilotons, that is. The attack came some hours after the last American military personnel had departed the area. There had been concerns in Malta that usable, or shall we say, recoverable US military assets might have been left behind at Aviano due to the haste with which the US Air Force evacuated the base. However, since it seems the air burst was only several hundred feet above the western end of the main runway our worries on this score are no longer pertinent."

He paused briefly, book-ending another paragraph of his briefing.

"We have very little intelligence on the nuclear strikes in the Belgrade area. It is likely that a weapon in the megaton range went off above the south-eastern suburbs of the city and that several; as many as three, Hiroshima-size airbursts were aimed at airfields and military concentrations in the vicinity of the city. It was first believed that Sarajevo had also been targeted but aerial reconnaissance confirms that the city is relatively undamaged at this time. Our general analysis is that the Red Dawn mechanised columns which entered Yugoslavian territory from both Romanian and Bulgarian territory are still engaging defending forces as many as fifty miles inside Yugoslavian territory. One thing we did not actually believe when we first detected it was," he shook his head, "the almost total cessation of air operations in support of the – supposedly – Red Dawn ground forces operating in Greece and Yugoslavia. The same thing happened over

Cyprus, but I will come back to that in a moment."

The First Sea Lord spoke with a quietly clear voice that carried to all corners of the room; he was a man who had never needed to say a thing twice. People tended to listen to what David Luce said the first time.

"Crete, the Aegean and the general naval situation north of the line Crete – Cyprus, and Cyprus itself," he went on. "We believe Crete is in the hands of Red Dawn and has been for several weeks. Aerial reconnaissance indicates very few centres of population have avoided major degradation. Our best guess is that some form of scorched earth policy may have been applied to the island and the greater part, perhaps all, the populations of most of the major towns massacred or driven out."

Both the female labour MPs sitting as observers gasped.

Enoch Powell's composure was glacial.

"There is evidence that several – I hasten to add, not all - of the Greek Islands in the Aegean may have suffered the same fate. Cyprus," the First Sea Lord went on. "The warhead that badly damaged Limassol harbour and sank HMS Blake was another Hiroshima-sized device. HMS Blake currently lies on her port side capsized to a list of about sixty-five degrees in about thirty to forty feet of water, meaning that a substantial part of the vessel is still above water. I can confirm that some three hundred and fifty survivors from her crew are safe at RAF Akrotiri, largely due to the selfless actions of local fishermen and rescue helicopters and boats sent out from Akrotiri. HMS Blake had thirty-eight nuclear warheads recovered from the former CENTO stockpile at Akrotiri onboard at the time she sank. Observations of the wreck confirm that no attempt has been made by unauthorised third parties to board, or to salvage the warheads or any other part of the wreck."

A pained look flickered in his eyes.

"You will be aware that one of HMS Blake's escorts, HMS Londonderry was destroyed in the attack on the port, and further, that the frigate Salisbury and the destroyer Decoy were later sunk by enemy aircraft while attempting to block the invasion of Cyprus via the east coast. I must now report that all of the men on the Londonderry and all bar forty-eight men from the crews of the Decoy and the Salisbury are now presumed missing in action and therefore, dead. Given that HMS Dreadnought and reconnaissance aircraft flying out of Akrotiri, Malta and Aviano had identified as many as fifteen major Red Dawn-flagged surface units and detected the presence of diesel-

electric powered submarines operating in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, resupply of Cyprus by sea remains impracticable at this time due to the superiority of enemy forces in this area. I can confirm that the Red Dawn fleet appears to include at least two former Soviet cruisers, the old Turkish battlecruiser Yavuz, and numerous former Turkish and Soviet destroyers. In the next few days United States Navy nuclear-powered attack submarines will take up station in the Eastern Mediterranean. As soon as they are on station Admiral Christopher will proceed with the preparations to resupply and to relieve our garrison on Cyprus. I have assured Admiral Christopher that the resources will be made available to him to mount a major amphibious assault to recapture the *whole* of the island of Cyprus. I have no specific timescale for this operation at this time but Admiral Christopher is keen for it to be mounted before Red Dawn has time to 'get a second wind'."

"What of HMS Dreadnought, Sir David?" Margaret Thatcher inquired.

"She will shortly be returning to Malta, Prime Minister. We've worked her hard these last three months and she's badly in need of time in dockyard hands."

Next page...

"Eastern Mediterranean," the First Sea Lord continued. "You will know that HMS Victorious was badly damaged by fire after a submarine attack employing a nuclear warhead-tipped torpedo sank her close escort, HMS Undaunted. Victorious's condition is under assessment at Alexandria. HMS Undaunted was lost with all hands and HMS Victorious suffered over a hundred-and-fifty fatalities and a similar number of seriously injured casualties. All in all, in the twenty-four-hour period prior to the Red Dawn nuclear first strike on Malta, the targets in Italy and the Balkans, and on Egypt, the tactical and strategic situation in the Eastern Mediterranean was already rapidly deteriorating."

Admiral Sir David Luce stopped momentarily; ready to field questions on anything he had said to date.

The room was silent.

"Malta. Malta was targeted by at least three inter-continental ballistic missiles, the warhead of one of which failed to *initiate*. There can be no doubting the enemy's intention was to destroy Malta as a base of operations and to kill everybody on the archipelago. The missile which failed to go off landed in the sea approximately one mile from the southern coast of the main

island. Given that the two warheads which did go off were in the low megaton range, it may be presumed that had the third weapon functioned correctly we would be discussing the deaths of eighty percent of the population and the destruction of ninety-five percent of the military infrastructure, assets and capability of the Maltese Archipelago. We believe that it was a no more than a cruel misfortune that the USS Enterprise, the USS Long Beach and the five vessels of the 7th Destroyer Flotilla were operating in the general area of the second air burst."

Another brief pause for reflection.

"Shortly before the attack on Malta a two-megaton airburst occurred in Egypt seventeen miles south-east of the Great Pyramids of Giza, a desert region. Some minutes earlier a weapon with a probable yield in the one to two megaton range, airburst over the centre of Ismailia in Upper Egypt. It is feared that as many as a quarter-of-a-million people perished in Ismailia. You will know that the city lies on the Suez Canal, which at this time is blocked to all traffic as a result of two ships transiting the Ismailia section of the canal having been sunk."

The First Sea Lord glanced at his wrist watch; time was always pressing but he was concerned not to inadvertently commit an error of omission.

"Casualties: since the bombing of Limassol the Royal Navy has suffered the loss of two thousand and seventy-four men killed or missing presumed killed. Over one thousand two hundred men have been seriously wounded in action. The cruiser HMS Blake, the destroyers HMS Decoy and HMS Undaunted, the frigates HMS Londonderry and HMS Salisbury, and the submarine HMS Amphion have been sunk. In addition, the aircraft carrier HMS Victorious has been seriously damaged. In this period the Royal Fleet Air Arm has lost seven aircraft supporting operations at sea, and four in operations-related training accidents. HMS Victorious's entire air group, other than two Sea Vixens flying a combat air patrol over the battle group and one Westland Wessex flying a search and rescue mission at the time HMS Undaunted was destroyed, was lost when the ship was attacked. Many other ships have sustained damage and will require significant periods in dockyard hands before they rejoin the fleet. Our best information about casualties among the ground forces defending Cyprus is that we have sustained over two hundred dead, and about twice that number wounded. Perhaps, as many as fifty civilian dependents and contractors have also

become casualties. The relatively low rate of casualties among the garrison on Cyprus reflects the fact the garrison withdrew in good order into defended enclaves in the centre of the island and around Akrotiri in advance of the invasion, and that the enemy's artillery and air support was, generally speaking, poorly handled."

The First Sea Lord looked around the table.

"I have three more things to cover then I shall surrender the floor, Prime Minister," he explained, knowing how the Angry Widow hated meetings to drag on unnecessarily no matter how important their purpose.

Margaret Thatcher nodded.

Sir David Luce was the one man in her Cabinet she could trust not to 'drift off his brief'.

"I will not attempt to seriously address the question of why there has been no second nuclear strike; although last Friday's exercise was so badly executed one might venture the opinion that Red Dawn lacks the capability to mount an *effective* strike." True to his word he did not delve further into this conundrum. "What I will say is that the subsequent cessation of aggressive action against our forces in the Mediterranean could not have come at a more opportune time. The USS Enterprise is currently docked in Malta undergoing emergency repairs preparatory to returning to the United States; in the meantime, the fleet carrier USS Independence has anchored off Gibraltar where urgent remedial work is being carried out on two defective catapults. On the completion of this work Independence with take up station in the Western Mediterranean with a substantial task force in company. Elements of the USS Enterprise's battle group will remain based at Malta and will be available to support operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, the fleet carrier HMS Eagle, in company with the cruiser HMS Belfast sailed from Portsmouth last night en route for Malta. At Malta they will join HMS Hermes, at presently refitting, the Commando carrier HMS Ocean, and the Big Cats – forgive me, the cruisers Lion and Tiger – to form the basis of a fleet that will retake the *whole* of the island of Cyprus."

"Remind colleagues of the provisional timescale for that operation please, Sir David," Margaret Thatcher murmured.

"Mid to late March at the earliest, Prime Minister," he replied. "Assuming that is, the landing force can be assembled in Malta by that date. Realistically, the first assault wave might be going ashore on Cyprus before

the end of the first week of April."

Enoch Powell cleared his throat and spoke for the first time since the opening pleasantries before Cabinet commenced.

"What if the *Krasnaya Zarya* horde resumes the offensive, First Sea Lord?"

Sir David Luce looked to Margaret Thatcher.

"You may speak plainly with Mr Powell. Everybody in this room is a patriot regardless of their political affiliations or ideological differences."

The First Sea Lord turned in his chair and met the Member for Wolverhampton South West's one-eyed, unblinking stare.

"There is a view that the first use of strategic nuclear weapons – including the strikes on Aviano, those aimed at Malta, and possibly at least one of the strikes on Belgrade were by ICBMs launched from within the former Soviet Union – is an indication that Red Dawn may have over-stretched itself. If, as seems likely, Red Dawn now dominates, or at the very least, partially dominates or occupies a large tract of territory in an arc from Yugoslavia and Romania in the west, down through Greece around through Turkey and Asia Minor all the way to the Trans-Caucasus anchored on say, the Armenian or Georgian republics of the former Soviet Union, it is probable that they have outrun any conceivable logistics train, and perhaps, will they struggle to hold the ground they have seized even in the face of guerrilla-style resistance. Much of the ground they have taken is pretty unforgiving. The withdrawal of their naval forces from the Eastern Mediterranean may have more to do with an urgent need to secure seaborne supply routes in the Aegean, the Sea of Marmara and the southern Black Sea, than supporting future offensive operations. Moreover, at this time Red Dawn seems to have completely abandoned their forces on Cyprus."

"That is an interesting analysis," Enoch Powell declared, his voice nasal and piercing despite his rattling lungs. "But, if I may be so bold, stunningly complacent."

"Mr Powell," Margaret Thatcher retorted, knowing that the First Sea Lord was too much the consummate, charming professional to slap down the gaunt, tortured man who had just insulted him. "I find your remark unfair. Sir David is briefing this Cabinet on what is actually happening rather than indulging in open-ended speculation. That is not a luxury we can afford in our current situation. Pray share with us all the reasoning behind your last

remark."

"I am not a member of this Government, Prime Minister."

The Angry Widow raised an eyebrow and said, without a scintilla of irony or mischief: "Mr Powell, people tell me that you have the finest mind in Parliament. I would be failing in my duty if I did not employ it in this crisis. If you have something to say on this subject, please say it now or thereafter hold your piece!"

"*Krasnaya Zarya*," her bête noire said after a gap of several seconds pregnant with prickly disdain, "Red Dawn is a chimera. As the Russians say, *dym i zerkala*, 'smoke and mirrors'. *Maskirovka* is the Russian way of life, politics and war. *Maskirovka* or 'something masked'. One suspects that there are others like myself in this room who are not so easily seduced by this Red Dawn nonsense as our American friends. *Krasnaya Zarya* is a terroristic, anarchistic, nihilistic KGB *apparat*. An *apparat* ten times more intolerable to the surviving Soviet high command than it could ever be, in the long term, to us in the West. What better way to rid oneself of a rabble of troublesome, ungovernable malcontents and ultra-fanatical zealots than to give Red Dawn its head, let it run amok," Enoch Powell did not quite smile, his ruined face would not permit it, but it was with a gleam of malicious satisfaction that bordered on smugness that he delivered his punch line, "and let it burn itself out like a moth drawn to a flame even as it wins for one an impregnable new fifteen hundred mile long Marxist-Leninist bridgehead, from Yugoslavia to the Levant on the northern shores of the Eastern Mediterranean."

Chapter 17

Friday 14th February 1964
Koltsovo Airport, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev stamped his feet on the icy ground from which twenty centimetres of overnight snow had been cleared by the penal battalions marched in from nearby camps. The gulag-fodder had had to clear the snow as it fell before it could freeze; otherwise the main runway would have been unusable. Last night there had been nearly thirty degrees of frost, this morning it was a more tolerable minus fifteen degrees.

The First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR watched the Tupolev Tu-114 airliner as it rolled to a halt some fifty metres away. Only a handful of these magnificent machines had been completed before the Cuban Missiles War. Developed from the Tu-95 bomber, the Tu-114, with a range of over ten thousand kilometres was the fastest propeller-driven aircraft in the World. Hundreds might have been built to fill the skies had not Aviation Plant No 18 at Kuybyshev – where the aircraft was built – not been destroyed in the war.

The deafening roar of the Tu-114's four giant Kuznetzov NK-12 turbo-prop engines began to subside, the huge, and contra-rotating propellers slowed.

Leonid Brezhnev waited with a grim outward equanimity that almost but not quite masked the volcanic fury that burned just beneath his apparently impenetrable emotionless carapace.

He should never have trusted the fucking Romanians!

The KGB had put a bullet in the traitor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's head in his hospital bed and seized the bitch wife and children of that little shit Nicolae Ceausescu before the Red Air Force dropped a three-megaton bomb on Bucharest – or rather, air burst it a thousand metres above the centre of the city – and Romania had ceased to exist as a viable nation state.

Two sets of steps were being pushed into place.

Elena Ceausescu, her three children, the other senior Romanian party apparatchiks and military men the KGB snatch squads had pulled off the

streets of Bucharest would be disembarked from the rear of the Tu-114; Comrade Kosygin and the other survivors of the mission would receive an appropriately heroic welcome as soon as the band and the honour guard marched into position at the front of the aircraft.

Leonid Brezhnev chaffed at the delays.

He wanted to take his friend Alexei Kosygin and the valiant old soldier, Marshal Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov aside and find out what had really happened – or rather, gone so disastrously wrong – in Bucharest.

What had those fucking idiots Gheorghiu-Dej and his lap dog Ceausescu been thinking?

What did they think was going to happen when they betrayed the Mother Country?

The Tu-114's forward port door was opened and troopers in the immaculate uniforms of the 3rd Guards Tank Division began manhandling Yuri Andropov's stretcher down the steep, treacherous steps. The doctors who had flown out to collect the much-depleted delegation at Otopeni Air base had not thought Yuri Vladimirovich would survive the flight home. Originally, it had been planned that the mission would return directly to Chelyabinsk but the plan had been changed because the medical facilities in Sverdlovsk were without equal in the post-war USSR.

Before the war Sverdlovsk had been the fourth largest city in the Soviet Union; remarkably, neither it, nor Chelyabinsk approximately one hundred and thirty kilometres to the south, had been attacked on the night of the war. The two undamaged cities, some nine hundred miles east of Moscow, had been like islands of hope in the first days after the cataclysm and since then, the bedrocks upon which the Central Committee – mainly Kosygin and he - had started to rebuild. That so much could have been achieved in so short a time; and that the potentially disastrous but essential 'spoiling' war in the Mediterranean and the Balkans had initially gone so well, only for all their plans to be – possibly - completely de-railed by *Krasnaya Zarya* maniacs and those pathetic *little* men in Bucharest, was very nearly beyond forbearance.

Presently, Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin stood before his partner in the 'collective leadership'. The two men exchanged the normal formal kisses, gripped hands, hard. Alexei Kosygin, looking and feeling as grey, cold and worn out as he felt, saw the murder in Leonid Brezhnev's hooded eyes.

People saw Leonid Ilyich's leaden footed, clumsy gait and social

awkwardness, and foolishly misinterpreted his long silences in meetings for slowness of mind and thought. Brezhnev personified the dignified Russian bear and people wrongly assumed that Kosygin was his puppet master. However, beneath the stolid peasant mask lurked a brain the equal of any of his Politburo contemporaries and a will that was relentless, because nothing in life had come easily to Leonid Brezhnev.

Brezhnev had been born the son of a metalworker 1906 in what was now Dniprodzerzhynsk, formerly Kamenskoye in Tsarist Russia, but renamed in 1936 in honour of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police, the forerunner of the NKVD and the KGB. Brezhnev had joined the Komsomol, the Party youth wing in 1923, becoming a full member of the Party in 1929. In the 1930s he had worked as a metallurgical engineer in the steel industry of the Ukraine. During his compulsory military service, he became a political commissar at a tank factory, and later a director of the Dniprodzerzhynsk Metallurgical Technical College. Like so many able men who survived Stalin's pre-Great Patriotic War purges, after the German invasion in June 1941 he was rapidly promoted. By 1942 he was deputy head of political administration of the Trans-Caucasian Front, and afterwards of the 1st Ukrainian Front whose Political Commissar was none other than Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev...

"You look tired, Alexei Nikolayevich?" Leonid Brezhnev suggested, breaking his friend's chain of thought.

"Ah," the slighter, older-looking man grunted. "Next time I say 'wait and see', Leonid Ilyich," he grimaced, "I will take my own advice!"

Brezhnev coughed a laugh, his breath misting instantly in the frozen air.

"The Securitate did not give you a hard time?"

"No, they were too busy with Yuri Vladimirovich. I think the clowns actually believed he was in charge of *Krasnaya Zarya*!"

Leonid Brezhnev looked past Kosygin.

"Where is the Comrade Marshal?"

Kosygin allowed himself a smile. Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov had drunk himself into a comatose stupor on the flight back from Romania; as had many of the other survivors. Only Kosygin and the physicist Andrei Sakharov had religiously abjured the free-flowing Vodka.

Sakharov had been horrified when he had learned the fate that had

befallen Bucharest; he was an interesting man showing the first signs of becoming an interesting *conflicted* man. Kosygin could not help wondering if the father of the Soviet H-bomb had belatedly started down the same road that Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the American A-bomb had walked when his usefulness to his masters had waned.

"Vasily Ivanovich is in almost as bad a way as Yuri Vladimirovich," Kosygin half-smiled, raising his gloved hand in a glass raising gesture.

"Klavdia Andreyevna was beside herself with worry," Leonid Brezhnev went on sympathetically. His friend's wife had been unwell for several weeks and it had been all he could do to persuade her not to leave her sick bed in Chelyabinsk to make the early morning journey through the snow to Sverdlovsk. "My wife is comforting her. Be assured that Klavdia Andreyevna was the first to know that your flight had departed safely from Bucharest and was being escorted home by our fighters."

"Thank you. We are lucky men to still have our wives by our sides. Very lucky men." Yuri Andropov's wife and children had perished in the war, as had so many of their colleagues' spouses, offspring and siblings, parents, aunts and uncles. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had been turned into a great charnel house. The tragedy was far from over; millions of those the thermonuclear fires had temporarily spared in October 1962 had since succumbed to the cold, hunger, and disease or simply lost the will to live.

The tragedy surpassed anything experienced in the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis and it lived in the souls of the survivors; a flame that would not die. Even Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin, the toughest and most pragmatic of men hardened by a life of fear and strife in the service of the Mother Country wanted only one thing, revenge. However, not just any kind of revenge; no, he wanted vengeance upon the West of a particular flavour. Revenge of a flavour and a colour that would forever and for all time deny the 'victors' of the Cuban Missiles War the spoils of *their* victory, and eventually, perhaps, restore the Mother Country to its rightful place in the order of things. The West had not defeated International Socialism, the march of Marxist-Leninism might have been temporarily halted, briefly in its tracks, but it had *not* been defeated.

"The weather is supposed to clear from the south later," the grim-faced First Secretary of the Communist party of the Soviet Union growled as he

and Kosygin, his First Deputy Premier settled into the back of the big black armoured car for the short trip to the main terminal of Koltsovo Airport. "We'll warm ourselves inside and drink to your return while they defrost the helicopters to take us back down to Chelyabinsk."

"I broke my own first rule of diplomacy, Leonid Ilyich," Kosygin confessed darkly, staring out at the long row of MiG-21 supersonic interceptors beneath their camouflage shrouds in the middle distance. "I gave those bastards in Bucharest the benefit of the doubt."

"Never again," the other man rumbled menacingly.

"I think they eventually meant to hand us over to the West," Kosygin added bitterly.

"As if that would have made any difference if Kennedy and the English Witch had had the guts to finish off the job they started in the October attack!"

Both men understood why President Kennedy had ordered a massive first strike against the USSR in October 1962. He would have known he could win the war if he struck first and the people in Cuba, nobody knew if it was Castro's people or his Soviet advisors, had given the American President the perfect excuse to pull the trigger. There was a compellingly twisted logic to it; and both men might have done exactly the same thing had they been in John Fitzgerald Kennedy's shoes. What they could not and would never understand was why after landing such a devastating, crushing first blow the Americans had not struck again and completed the job. It was like a heavyweight boxer landing a punch that shattered his opponent's jaw promptly retiring to his corner and at the moment his foe was at his most vulnerable throwing in the towel.

What hunter shot a bear and walked away without checking to see if it was dead?

Was it weakness, shame or hubris?

The fools had even stopped sending over their high-flying U-2 spy planes until a couple of months ago; long after the time when there would have been anything on the ground for them to see! The Red Air Force was aching to shoot down the interlopers – sitting ducks - trespassing in *their* skies.

There were several messages awaiting the 'collective leadership' of the USSR when the two men shuffled into the sparsely appointed lounge of the civilian section of the control tower. The furnishings of the room – a place

where VIPs could relax and be fed and watered by uniformed Interior Ministry stewards and hostesses – were faded, peeling and a little dusty. Very few civilian flights came into Koltsovo Airport these days and the military lived in their bunkers beyond the airfield boundary fence, rarely emerging during daylight hours.

Leonid Brezhnev scanned the messages.

"The Americans have done nothing!" He scoffed contemptuously. "The last intact capital city in Eastern Europe goes up in smoke and what do they do? Nothing!"

"It is early yet," Alexei Kosygin counselled sagely. "What does our," he hesitated, his head fogged with sudden and over-powering weariness, "our contact in Malta say?"

The First Secretary offered him the message sheets.

"There is nothing from Malta yet."

Kosygin slumped down in one of the low leather chairs.

He nodded. "Leonid Ilyich," he began, and against his better judgement continued, "I had a lot of time to think in that cell in Bucharest."

"We came for you as soon as we could..."

Kosygin raised a tired hand.

"I know, I know, we knew it could go wrong but there is only so much one can plan for. Please do not concern yourself on that account." He met Brezhnev's eye and each man looked to the other. "We wished it to be known that we were weak and for that information to be communicated to the West; it was an essential element of the plan we have worked so hard to execute this last year. *Krasnaya Zarya* might have destroyed us all by infiltrating our missile forces; instead, its recklessness has allowed us to identify many previously anonymous enemies in our midst and to purge them once and for all. Assuming that the West takes no retaliatory action against us here in the Mother Country in the next few days we should be able to resume preparations for the," his lips twisted into a parody of a sardonic smile, "the great leap forward as planned."

Leonid Brezhnev guffawed.

"But that wasn't what I was going to say," Kosygin declared doggedly. "I would be lying if I said there wasn't some small part of my brain that is trying to talk me into asking for reparations, rather than risking another global war to take what we want and what we are entitled to."

“The British are exhausted,” the other man objected. “The Americans obviously don’t have the stomach to risk another nuclear exchange. As for the *little* countries that stand in our way,” a dismissive shrug of his broad shoulders, “what can they do to stop us, Comrade?”

Kosygin rubbed his eyes. They had had this conversation many times in the Politburo. Despite the antics of *Krasnaya Zarya* thus far everything had gone more or less to plan. The limited use of tactical nuclear weapons had achieved ‘limited’ *strategic* ends on the battlefield and so unsettled their enemies that nowhere, other than on the island of Cyprus had the initial assault forces failed to achieve *all* their objectives. Inevitably, there would be a discussion about whether the ‘Cyprus mess’ needed to be tidied up before the next phase of operations commenced but they could have that argument later. Otherwise, the military planners were more than satisfied with the outcome of the recent battles; the south western flank was secure, the combined fleet had demonstrated its existence to good effect and unexpectedly inflicted significant losses on the Royal Navy, and the next time *Soviet* forces took the offensive they would be unencumbered by the dead weight of the undisciplined *Krasnaya Zarya* horde.

Contemplating the next step south towards the warm waters of the Indian Ocean Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin took immense comfort from the knowledge that *Krasnaya Zarya* was being systematically liquidated, and that its surviving lunatic adherents were being rounded up and marched off to swell the ranks of the penal battalions responsible for restoring the roads, railways and airfields vital to the defence and the reconstruction of the Mother Country.

Yet, some small part of him was still tempted to demand reparations.

Yes, he wanted to face down the murderers across a peace table.

War was an inherently risky affair...

Chapter 18

Sunday 16th February 1964
Tigne Point, Sliema, Malta

It was a cool, windy evening in the aftermath of the short, sharp gale which had blown across the Maltese Archipelago the previous day and night. By intuitive mutual unspoken accord, the lovers had nodded one to the other and risen to their feet.

'Peter and I will go for a walk now,' Marija had informed her family – or rather, the crowded house full of her extended Maltese-Sicilian *clan* – each and every member of which positively doted on their 'little princess'.

Peter Christopher had turned up for the 'family dinner' at the Calleja home in the apartment at the top of Tower Street, Sliema, in a version of his dress uniform. He had mislaid his Mess waistcoat somewhere between the Battle of Cape Finisterre and HMS Talavera's wallowing, half-sinking arrival at Oporto in December; his loaned trousers were a couple of inches too short in the leg and rode half-way up his calves when he sat down, but fortunately his jacket was brand new, immaculately pressed and bore his new lieutenant-commander's additional half-stripe. His shirt and trousers, both freshly laundered on the RMS Sylvania, where he and most of his crew were billeted while Talavera was in dockyard hands, were brilliantly white. Marija had beamed beatifically at him on the doorstep and nobody had seemed to notice he was kitted out in a partially borrowed rig. He had been a bag of nerves on the drive round the creeks from the Grand Harbour via Floriana, Msida, and Gzira to Sliema; in the event the whole Calleja clan had welcomed him like royalty. Marija's mother had hugged him and clung to him with such ferocity that he thought his feet were about to lift off the floor even though that lady's head only came up to the middle of his torso. Marija's father had been wryly severe because he thought somebody ought to be and had enjoyed reminding him of their only previous meeting; the occasion when Peter had gone to the Dockyard Offices fully intending to insert a large, noisy flea in the duty manager's ear and not realised he was talking to his prospective father-in-law until it was too late. Joe Calleja was friendly in an

uncomfortable sort of way, keeping his distance. That was fair enough; their first encounter had not worked out very well for Joe and he was probably still feeling a little tender about things.

Nobody at the Calleja family gathering had mentioned the name of Marija's older brother, Samuel. Samuel had not just disappeared, his corporeal remains and memory had been surgically excised, as if, irrespective of the story which had been so expertly sold to the public at large, his own family knew in its collective heart that Samuel Calleja had never been quite what he seemed to be and that now, every tiny doubt harboured down the years suddenly assumed an outrageous new significance.

Outside the apartment Marija had taken Peter's hand, they had crossed the road and slowly walked up a very slightly rising street, an avenue between wall to wall two and three storey buildings until presently, they arrived in front of the bomb-damaged Cambridge Barracks Headquarters building. Marija guided him along another narrow street, and then down the steep hill towards the waterfront.

"Joe and I came down here on the night of the war," she explained when they stopped at the sea wall. The ships in Sliema Creek; HMS Broadsword, HMS Dunkirk, newly arrived from Gibraltar, and HMS Oudenarde were showing faint, hooded bow and stern lights, but were otherwise darkened despite the bright street lights along The Strand from the Cambridge Barracks to the bridge between Sliema and Lazaretto Creeks that joined the main island to Manoel Island upon which so many men and women had died when the 100th Bomb Group's big bombs had obliterated the Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief on Malta. "That night was the first time I met Jim Siddall."

Peter Christopher was silent. Alan Hannay had told him the story of how it had been the big Red Cap – Royal Military Policeman – who had rescued Joe Calleja from the hands of what his father now believed to have been an illegal and, in any event, never officially sanctioned, CIA-sponsored interrogation camp at the Empire Stadium in nearby Gzira. Anybody suspected to be working for the Central Intelligence Agency, and most Americans, had been thrown off the archipelago soon afterwards; being replaced by British 'Internal Security Department' thugs who had subsequently been responsible for filling the numerous detention 'depots' with suspected 'troublemakers, left-wing agitators, and apologists for

terrorists'. Although his father had emptied the detention camps within days of his arrival on the Maltese Archipelago, habeas corpus had only been reinstated – albeit hedged around with miscellaneous 'security' caveats – in early January.

"Jim was a good friend to me," Marija said, staring dreamily across the darkness of Marsamxett at the curtain walls and ramparts of Valletta. "If anything had happened to you I might have married him even though I don't think I could have loved him. Not the way I love you, anyway."

"If you had married him I would have understood," Peter muttered, squeezing Marija's hand. She leaned against him, her head resting on his right shoulder.

Suddenly she giggled.

"What?" The man asked, not knowing what to make of it, and gently curious.

"Men," she sighed fondly.

"I mean it," he went on. "If anything ever happens to me I'd hate to think you'd wrap yourself in mourning forever."

"How long should I 'wrap myself in mourning'?"

Peter chuckled, knowing she was teasing him.

"I like your family," he told her.

"Good." She gently tugged his hand and they began to walk, very slowly towards the ferry quay. "I never once tried to *run* for Jim," she reassured the man, mischievously seraphic. "Not once."

They walked on.

"All this is still a bit of dream for me," he confessed.

He and Marija were living in an armed camp.

That morning he had watched the low black hull of Britain's only nuclear-powered hunter killer submarine ease into a dry dock deep within French Creek over which secretive awnings had been draped ahead of the deadly vessel's arrival. Taking a whaler back to the RMS Sylvania to dress for the evening he had counted four long sleek US Navy guided missile anti-aircraft and anti-submarine destroyers moored in Kalkara Bay and another tied up fore and aft at the emergency buoys in the middle of the Grand Harbour. One of the Big Cats, HMS Lion was moored alongside Parlatorio Wharf with the new frigate, HMS Leander berthed outboard of the big cruiser. Just inside the northern Grand Harbour breakwater HMS Sheffield,

the crippled veteran of the chase for the Bismarck in May 1941, was anchored as floating gun battery, and nearby was HMS Hermes, resplendent in a new coat of battleship grey paint with a squadron of Sea Vixens parked on her flight deck. Another carrier, HMS Ocean was absent, apparently transporting reinforcements to the garrisons on Pantelleria and Lampedusa, in company with a mixed bag of half-a-dozen escorting destroyers and frigates. HMS Talavera and HMS Scorpion were side by side in dry dock; and the race was on to complete their underwater repairs as fast as possible to free up the dock for the next 'cab on the rank', possibly HMS Victorious if she managed to get back to Malta under her own steam. There was new talk of offloading HMS Sheffield's wrecked 'C' turret, welding and riveting her stern back together and restoring her to active service. The Fleet was aching to finish unfinished business on Cyprus.

"I joined the Royal Navy to play with electronic gizmos and to travel to exotic places. It never occurred to me that any of *this* would happen."

"Would you have come to Malta but for the war?"

"The war? I don't know. That night of the war when Talavera was out in the middle of the North Sea *everything* changed, it was like a switch clicking in my head. I just knew what I had to do. *Everything* changed."

"I loved the *idea* of you from when I was still a girl. I know you did not love me the way I loved you, not a first."

Peter halted, looked down into Marija's darkly limpid eyes.

"No, it isn't that," he explained. "It was just that I didn't know *how much I loved* you until the World went barking mad."

She smiled, detached her hand from his and reached for him, stretching her arms around his neck. He did not need any further encouragement to bow his head and search for her lips with his own.

Marija broke their intimate clinch, breathlessly resting her forehead on his chest for long seconds, before stepping away half-a-pace.

"Something horrible could happen to us all at any time."

Peter Christopher considered her point and could not help but agree. Another salvo of ICBMs could be hurtling towards Malta right now. There had been that incident a few days ago in which HMS Amphion was lost, barely a hundred-and-fifty miles from where they stood. They said Bucharest was gone, although that was just a Wardroom rumour. Until a week ago the Royal Navy had been throwing ships into the fire as if it was refighting

battles of earlier wars. The enemy – Red Dawn, whatever that was – had attacked Limassol and HMS Victorious's escorts with tactical nuclear weapons; it was probably only a matter of time before the Americans, or perhaps, the V-Bombers based at RAF Luqa struck back.

And then what?

Round upon round to atomic tit for tat until nobody was left standing?

The idea made him shiver with despair.

"Yes, something awful could happen at any time," he agreed. "But I can't live like that. No," he corrected himself, "I *refuse* to live like that."

Marija said nothing, nodding proudly.

"If one day everything ends in a blinding flash," he added, whispering, "so be it. But until that day I intend to live my life like the free man that I was born. I *refuse* to live in fear. I plan to live *normally*."

There were tears in Marija's eyes now. Peter Christopher thought she was going to bury her face in his chest anew. She sniffed, collected her strength and gazed into his face, her lips working mutely while she attempted to organise her thoughts and her words.

"Peter, there has been no time to talk about *things*. There are a lot of *things* that trouble me deeply, that I don't even know if you want to hear me speak of, but the way things are..."

His sudden concern creased her face with worry. She shook the long hair from her brow, placed a tentative hand on his torso, her fingers tracing tiny, frightened circles on his jacket breast pocket.

"You know what happened when I forgot that I cannot run," she continued, forcing a strained half-smile. "I am not as most other women of my age. Beneath my skirts I am..."

Belatedly, Peter Christopher saw where she was going and instinctively, wanted to forestall her.

"Skin and bone like me?" He queried softly.

"Ugly," Marija said hoarsely.

"I have a few unsightly nicks and stitches under my finery, too," he offered.

"I am trying to be serious, Peter."

The man admitted defeat; knowing he was never going to be capable of refusing Marija anything once she had made up her mind. Every time he looked at her he felt her inner strength, her inner belief in the rightness of

things. Yet even the Heroine of Vittoriosa-Birgu had her Achilles heel.

"Sorry," he murmured, putting on his most crestfallen look, complete with a dramatically trembling lower lip.

Marija giggled, reminded herself she was trying to be serious.

But that was so hard with this man!

"Under my skirts," she reiterated, backing away and passing her hands over her lower abdomen and her left thigh, "I am *ugly*. Everything was broken and it was put back together as best as possible but," she shrugged helplessly, apologetically, "I am not as other women you," he could tell she was blushing deeply with embarrassment in the gloom, "may have *known*. Margo says I am being stupid but I am frightened, Peter. She says I can bear children but, I don't know and I..."

Peter stepped towards her and wrapped her in his arms.

He planted kisses in her hair.

"Our wedding day will be the happiest day of my life," he informed her, somewhat more formally and stiffly than he had meant. "When we are married there won't be anything, *anything* that we can't sort out between us. I love you exactly the way you are. *Exactly* the way you are."

"You do?"

He held the love of his life at arm's length so that he could lose himself in the soft, liquid pools of her eyes, he was shaking with a strange tension that began to evaporate only when he realised there was no fear in Marija's return gaze.

"Yes. Do we understand each other, *Miss* Calleja?"

Marija nodded, pursing her lips to stop herself giggling.

"Yes, *Lieutenant-Commander* Christopher."

In a moment he had swept her off her feet, she screeched a laugh of delight as he swung her in a slow circle and their lips melded together, careless of the watching eyes and in that moment, they were utterly oblivious to the uncaring threat-filled World in which they lived.

Chapter 19

Tuesday 18th February 1964
Camp David, Thurmont, Maryland

In the weeks since James William Fulbright, the fifty-eight-year-old Missouri-born Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations had been appointed as the late Dean Rusk's replacement as Secretary of State on Christmas Eve 1963, he felt like he had been living his life in one or other of the Presidential fleet of jetliners. When the President had asked him to return to the United States and 'weekend' at Camp David he had initially bridled, protested that there was work to be done shuttling between 'the parties in Europe and the Middle East'. However, Jack Kennedy had been quietly insistent that he return and he had given in with good grace. He was dog tired and badly needed a break from the constant travelling. It was only when he had landed at Andrews Air Force Base on Saturday morning that he first learned that the House of Representatives, sitting in joint session, after a litany of blustering threats had finally tabled a Bill of Impeachment against the President.

Fresh snow had fallen overnight and the temperature was several degrees below zero as Fulbright and his Marine Corps minders, two men from the squad who had been with him throughout his recent travels, toting automatic rifles walked with him from his bungalow to the President's 'villa' that morning. The Secretary of State who was still technically – 'technically' because he had not sat in the House since joining the Administration – the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, was scheduled to leave for Philadelphia that afternoon. Arms needed twisting that only he could twist. The Vice-President had stayed in Pennsylvania freely dispensing the famous 'LBJ treatment' to wavering representatives and disaffected former supporters of the President. Other members of the Administration would descend on the city tomorrow morning.

Meanwhile, the President would remain aloof, above the fray.

Fulbright, who had been elected to Congress as long ago as 1942 was not without sympathy, albeit at on a purely philosophical, sentimental level with

the grievances of many of his fellow House members and was old enough to be experiencing a vague feeling of déjà vu. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had ridden roughshod over the rights and prerogatives of the House in the 1940s and memories were long. FDR had got away with it because America had won the Second World War and emerged as the richest and most powerful nation on the planet. Jack Kennedy could not promise the American people a repeat of FDR's triumph. Besides, FDR had died in the days before the final victory, a great, gallant knight in defence of democracy and freedom who had perished in the fight. Of such things are legends made. FDR had had a 'good war' to fight; Jack Kennedy had not been as lucky and whereas FDR's America had remained inviolate in his war; in the October War the sacred soil of the United States had been savagely defiled by her enemies and then beset with widespread internal political, criminal and sectarian strife, and ultimately, murderous insurrection.

While it was likely that a majority in both Congress and the Senate might genuinely believe that the President had usurped *their* powers and prerogatives and therefore, behaved unconstitutionally, Fulbright regarded the actions of many of his former colleagues as unconscionable and in many ways, despicable. A lesser man than John Fitzgerald Kennedy would have been circling the wagons by now.

Fulbright trudged up the path to the entrance to the President's villa where more Marines crunched to attention.

McGeorge Bundy, Jack Kennedy's newly re-appointed United States National Security Advisor, was already in the room when the Secretary of State was ushered into the President's presence.

Bundy had been with Jack Kennedy in the Oval Office the night of the October War. Last spring, he had been struck down by the influenza pandemic that had randomly carried away so many of the old, the frail and the very young in the northern states. Immunologists, virologists and the best medical minds were still puzzling over what had caused the repeated short-lived epidemics; the mystery remained unsolved although all manner of conspiracy theories and wild conjectures about germ warfare had been all the rage last summer. In any event, McGeorge Bundy had been struck down and disappeared from the scene until his unheralded re-admission to the Presidential circle in recent days.

The Secretary of State and Bundy were different kinds of men but

Fulbright recognised the inherent wisdom of re-introducing 'Mac' Bundy back into the fold. Astutely, the President had brought him back without fanfare and as far away as possible from the public gaze because there were a lot of people on the Hill who secretly suspected – wrongly in Fulbright's opinion - that 'Mac' was as culpable as any man for the catastrophe of the October War. In the circumstances, Naval Support Facility Thurmond, more popularly known to the man in the street as 'Camp David', was the ideal place to quietly begin the rehabilitation the Administration's prodigal son.

Camp David had been the country retreat of Presidents of the United States since 1942. Sixty miles from Washington DC in the Catoctin Mountains, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had called it the USS Shangri-La – allegedly because the base was run by the Navy and it reminded him of the mythical Himalayan paradise described by British author James Hilton in his 1933 novel 'Lost Horizon' – but Dwight Eisenhower, the least sentimental of all recent American Presidents had, uncharacteristically mandated the name 'Camp David' in commemoration of his father and his grandson, both named 'David' in the 1950s. Protected with missionary zeal by the Marine Corps, Camp David was the one place in America where the Administration could conduct its business in absolute privacy.

McGeorge Bundy looked twenty years older than his forty-four years; his hair was thinning and straw grey, his waxen pallor that of a man who had survived a life-threatening serious illness without ever really recovering from it. The Secretary of State had been shocked to see the decline in the much younger man. Bundy's physical collapse served as a cruel metaphor for the hopes and dreams of that Inauguration Day in 1961 when everything and anything had seemed possible. The notion of some kind of new Camelot had been so seductive that nobody had wanted to admit that real life was not like that. The last sixteen months had been the brutal vindication of that truth.

"Mac," Fulbright nodded, shaking the younger man's bony hand.

"Senator," McGeorge Bundy smiled but it was a pained expression.

Jack Kennedy watched the two men thoughtfully. He had agonised over bringing Bundy in from the cold, LBJ and Bobby had been ambivalent, not least because when eventually, the Warren Commission on the *Causes and the Conduct of the Cuban Missiles War* got into its stride 'Mac' was inevitably going to be in its sights from day one. Thankfully, Mac's participation in the briefings and discussions of the last twenty-four hours had

allayed the worst of his fears. Inside the wrecked physical shell Mac's mind was needle sharp; and being outside the 'big game' not knowing what was really going on had been slowly killing him. Now at least he had a reason to carrying on fighting.

Bundy was the second son of a wealthy Boston family intimately involved in Republican – rather than Democrat - politics. Emerging from Yale he had spent Hitler's war in US Army Intelligence; after that war he had co-authored Henry L. Stimson's – FDR's Secretary of War's – autobiography, *On Active Service in Peace and War*. Stimson had been a family friend of the Bundy's for over two decades and in the way of such things, McGeorge Bundy's early career had met very few obstacles. This was not to say that his career would have been any less brilliant with or without Stimson's influence; because Mac was that sort of guy. In 1949, aged only thirty, he had joined the Council on Foreign Relations – along with Dwight Eisenhower, Allen Dulles and the diplomat George Kennan – to study the Marshall Plan. In 1954 Bundy, aged just thirty-four, was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard and elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Art and Sciences. Later when he became Jack Kennedy's National Security Advisor many considered Bundy the most brilliant of the 'best and the brightest' men around the charismatic young President.

But all that was before the fall.

Coffee was poured and the men settled around the crackling, sizzling log fire. Fulbright wondered where Jackie and the kids were hiding; he had heard that the Secret Service had nightmares about the security of the Kennedy's Hyannis Port compound and the President's young children now lived at Camp David when their parents were on the stomp.

The Secretary of State did not think it was any coincidence that Bundy had returned to the Administration within days of the President's declaration that he was running for re-election that autumn.

"The Egyptians and the Israelis will not sign up, with us, to a mutual defence pact," he announced, "and that is the problem at the heart of all the other issues in the Middle East."

"Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt in combination are militarily more significant than the State of Israel," McGeorge Bundy countered. "Persia," he quirked a grimace, "or Iran, whatever, is still effectively a quasi-British

protectorate. I don't understand why we aren't looking towards putting Americans on the ground; specifically, to guard the gulf oil fields?"

"Guard it from whom?" Fulbright inquired flatly.

"Local insurrection? The British are struggling to keep a grip of things in Oman and Yemen. Abadan could blow up in their faces at any time."

The Secretary of State nodded.

"We have minimally re-supplied several British garrisons in the region and will continue to do so but there is a problem. You know that, Mac."

"The Arabs don't want our GIs on the ground."

"Quite. They don't like the Brits hanging on either but they know the Brits aren't strong enough to be more than an under-strength, glorified colonial police force. But for the October War the Brits would already be pulling out and the Arabs expect that to happen sooner rather than later, anyway. Egypt's concerns, obviously, are of a different character and magnitude following the atrocity at Ismailia. But don't imagine for a minute that President Nasser has suddenly had a change of heart about the British Imperial yoke; it is just that he is a realist. He has a regional threat – Israel – on his eastern borders, and now Red Dawn threatening, at the very least, free navigation in the Eastern Mediterranean not to mention randomly lobbing H-bombs in his direction. Given that Egypt was a Soviet client state before the October War you can understand that the regime in Cairo feels a little," he grimaced, "*schizophrenic* about recent developments."

"We are guarantors of the State of Israel," McGeorge Bundy rejoined, testing the older man's logic.

There it was; the fracture point between the President's two closest foreign policy advisors. Whereas Fulbright wanted a new, pragmatic Middle Eastern policy based on the geopolitical strategic vital interests of the United States; Bundy advocated an adulterated version of this approach which treated Israel as a 'special case'.

Similar fault lines would inevitably become evident elsewhere in the World. In South East Asia, for example, where despite the 'peace dividend' cutbacks to the military, the Administration was still Hell bent on propping up its proxies in South Vietnam and elsewhere. The 'Saigon Problem' had been put on the back burner after the Battle of Washington but Fulbright knew that sooner or later he and the President might easily be at loggerheads over it. However, the 'Saigon Problem', and others, paled into insignificance

in the light of recent developments in the Mediterranean.

Fulbright tried hard not to frown at Bundy.

A vocal minority within the House impeachment lobby received substantial campaign and other political funding from Zionist and other pro-Israeli groups, supposedly based in the United States and therefore entitled by the strict letter of the law to *lobby*, who were afraid that the Administration was going to abandon Israel to the wolves if the going got too tough. He sympathised with Israeli concerns, if only because nobody understood as clearly as the Government in Tel Aviv that the long-term strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East, did not, and rationally, could not, lie with unconditionally supporting one small country surrounded by hostile neighbours bent on her destruction. The fact that Israel was the solitary fully-functioning democracy in the region won it brownie points with the Administration – a lot of brownie points – but it did not materially alter the geopolitical calculus. America's primary interest in the region was oil. For better or worse the Arabs – and the Persians, of course - had the oil. That did not mean automatically betraying brave little Israel, but it did mean that it was a big mistake to take one's eye off the main thing – *the oil* – and spend all one's time and energy addressing the preoccupations of the Israeli Government at the cost of neglecting *all* the legitimate interests of *all* the other parties. This he had spent many fruitless hours in Tel Aviv trying to explain to the Israeli Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, and the legendary elder statesman of the small embattled republic, David Ben-Gurion.

Levi Eshkol was a fascinatingly pugnacious and dignified man who had been born in Russia and emigrated aged nineteen to Palestine in 1914 at a time when the Holy Land was still a part of the Ottoman Empire. By 1948 he was a member of the high command of the *Haganah*, now he was the leader of *Mapai*, the Workers' Party of Israel, something which would have played badly in sections of both the Republican and Democratic caucus, as would *Mapai's* party's *red hammer* symbol, but for the weight of recent living history. The Holocaust was still very raw in human memory and not even the genocidal carnage of the October War could wipe away the stain it had left on the psyche of civilization. Fulbright might be cerebrally pro-arabist; but that was irrelevant because the sanctity of the State of Israel was a given.

What was not a given was the wisdom of America acting as the unilateral guarantor of that sanctity.

“Are we really the guarantors of the State of Israel?” Fulbright queried provocatively. “That’s an easy thing to say but is it helpful? In what meaningful way are we the guarantors of the State of Israel, Mac?”

McGeorge Bundy turned the argument around.

“Before the war we were looking at a situation where, sometime in the next decade, Western industries and societies were going to become totally dependent on oil from the Middle East, mainly Saudi oil but increasingly that of the various, at that time, pro-Western despotic emirates and sheikdoms around the Arabian Gulf, and in Iraq and Persia. Because of the October War the West no longer needs all that oil, Senator. Let’s be honest about this, Europe won’t be burning any globally significant tonnage of oil for the foreseeable future. The British will need our help to get by but to all intents, the United States will be broadly self-sufficient in terms of our own domestic energy needs for the next five to ten years. Moreover, because the previously rebuilding and re-industrialising post-World War II economies of Western European are no longer competing on the global oil market the price of oil will remain low – dirt cheap, frankly – for the foreseeable future. In this scenario there is no reason whatever for us to carry on compromising our principles sucking up to the Arabs. Several of the regimes in the Middle East are medieval, Bill! Hell, we ought to be telling the Saudis to stop meddling in the affairs of their neighbours!”

Fulbright was too wise an operator to rise to the bait.

It was not as if the Saudi Arabians were the only guilty party when it came to ‘meddling in the affairs of their neighbours’, or for that matter, in clinging to essentially medievalist traditions. Many of the countries in the region were hardly *countries* at all in the modern sense. Syria and Iraq were creations of the Versailles Treaty, nations whose borders were created because hard-pressed colonial civil servants were under pressure to draw lines on maps – any lines would do – so that the leaders of the victorious Great War powers could return home claiming they had solved the problems of the World, not just sown the seeds for future wars. Syria and Iraq were jigsaws of ethnically and religiously incompatible territories and factions, and Iran, under the rule of the Shah, the son of a usurper who had seized power in a coup d’état in the 1920s, yearned to behave as if it had somehow inherited the mantle of the ancient Persian Emperors.

Although McGeorge Bundy was right in one way, he was wrong in

another that was much more important. If the recent past had taught any lessons it was that the American people were best served by a foreign policy which employed the power and prestige – what remained of it – of the United States to maintain the peace of the World. If that meant focusing on damping down the potential for conflict across a whole region, then allowing policy to be dictated and distorted by a single – albeit an island of fiercely democratic ideals, the State of Israel - country was simply *not* geopolitically pragmatic.

"We should be the guarantors of the security of our friends and allies *throughout* the World, Mac."

The President had been watching the two men fencing.

"Bucharest?" He asked, changing the subject.

The latest over flight and intercept analysis had been put under Bundy's and Fulbright's doors that morning. A high-flying RAF photo-reconnaissance Canberra had been chased out of Romanian air space by two MiG-21s as it approached the ruined city at fifty-two thousand feet. However, not before its ultra high-resolution side-scanning cameras had catalogued the utter destruction of the southern suburbs of the former Romanian capital.

"A random terroristic type attack," McGeorge Bundy suggested. "Red Dawn must have a stock of recovered ICBMs. Every time they get one or two operational they shoot them off..."

The Secretary of State quashed this instantly.

"Romania was most likely being used as the jumping off point for Red Dawn military operations in the surrounding territories. Bucharest might have been Red Dawn's western capital for all we know. Why would Red Dawn nuke its own capital, Mac?"

Bundy shrugged.

"We're dealing with crazy people, Bill," he conceded. He moved on. "The British think Red Dawn has 'shot its bolt'."

It was the President who shook his head.

"That's just what's in their newspapers and they've told the BBC. Red Dawn may have 'shot its bolt', or it may have achieved its initial objectives and called a halt. Nobody knows for sure. The reality of the situation is that the whole north-eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean is either in Red Dawn's hands or threatened by it. Moreover, apart from on Cyprus we have no viable forward operating bases and no boots on the ground anywhere in

the region."

His Secretary of State nodded his agreement and expanded on his underlying concerns.

"The problem is that in the Arab World the Lebanese, the Syrians, Jordanians, Iraqis, Persians and the Gulf States including Saudi Arabia, with the notable exception of Egypt, are perfectly happy going with the 'Red Dawn have shot their bolt' scenario. The presence of British, and Commonwealth forces – mainly Australian – at places like Abadan, in Aden and the main airfields in the Arabian Peninsula, is promoting an unwarranted complacency."

"Most of those countries are a long way from the nearest Red Dawn lodgement?" Bundy put to Fulbright, who did not reply. "Look, without wanting to sound parochial, we have problems we must confront closer to home. The Administration has more trouble than it needs attempting to fulfil our treaty obligations to the United Kingdom. The last thing we need is to start accruing new overseas obligations."

The Secretary of State scowled. Ivy League academics like Bundy probably had their place; just not in the real world of international relations. The younger man had been ill-advised to return to the Administration but Fulbright could live with Mac's meddling if that was all it was. The Warren Commission would have ripped off Dean Rusk's head if he had still been alive; if it came to it he would not hesitate to offer them McGeorge Bundy's head as a substitute.

Chapter 20

Wednesday 19th February 1964
Samothrace, Aegean Sea

Nicolae Ceausescu's fever-wracked body lay a little apart from his Securitate bodyguards and the surviving crew members of the Mil Mi6 former Red Air Force helicopter. Everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong after he had been driven away through the streets of Bucharest in a convoy of armoured cars. Elena and the children had not been in the park where they had agreed she would wait to be picked up; but AK47-wielding plain clothed KGB men had been. Two of his people had been killed and the constant stabbing, fiery tendrils of pain in his right calf reminded him of the fragmentation round which had torn away a fist's width of flesh and muscle. He was sitting in a puddle of his and the other dead and wounded Securitates' blood by the time they got to Otopeni. They had patched him up in the helicopter; but there was only so much the flight crew medic could do with a standard emergency dressing kit other than dose him up with morphine. An injured Securitate had bled out on the flight south, during which the helicopter seemed to have been a magnet for small arms fire.

Fortunately, the Mil Mi6 was a new, robust machine. If it had not been they would all have been dead by now. One stray pot shot from the ground had ricocheted around the cockpit, missing both the pilot and co-pilot before disabling the compass. Another hit, unsuspected until its consequences were self-evident, had resulted in a partial hydraulics failure and a fuel leak. By then it was pitch dark, a storm had enveloped the craft and they were flying on fumes. It was only in the morning when a party was sent to investigate the nearest village that it was discovered that they had crash-landed on the Greek island of Samothrace.

That was five mornings ago. Ceausescu's bodyguards had carried him to the nearest settlement, the eerily deserted port of Samothraki. Many of the sun-baked one room houses had been burned, some had been destroyed by explosives, there were bullets pocking the walls. However, other than a few bodies decomposing in the ruins there was little trace of the people who had

lived in the shadow of Mount Fengari, rising over five thousand feet into the clear blue Mediterranean skies. From the shore they saw several small boats sunk in the harbour, otherwise the moorings were empty. They had found a little tinned food, dried fruit and fish, some ragged cloth that could be torn into bandages, catgut to sew up his wound, but nothing else of any utility except firewood from the smashed houses. Now the food was gone and every fresh water cistern they had discovered had been fouled with the carcasses of dead animals.

Nicolae Ceausescu wanted to lash out.

The idiots had brought him to the wrong fucking island!

He had wanted to shoot the pilots. He would have ordered it without a moment's hesitation – even though a quick clean death was better than the traitors deserved – had not some small voice whispered in his head, counselling caution. There were only nine survivors in his group, few enough to defend *him* if they encountered hostile forces, or to carry him.

The pain in his leg had grown steadily worse each day. Feverish perspiration bled off his brow and soaked his increasingly filthy clothes. Even his wife, Elena, had betrayed him. If she had listened to him she would have known where to go in an emergency, not wasted time arguing the toss. But no, she always knew best. His lifetime of experience within the Party, most of it within its higher echelons counted for nothing. Only Elena knew the infallible paths to the top.

Nothing he achieved was ever quite good enough for Elena...

The plan had been to fly to Thasos where there was known to be a well-equipped and highly organised communist guerrilla group fighting the Military Junta in Athens. They might have provided him with a boat and a crew to head south. He had to get to somewhere with a radio so that he could talk to the British or the Americans, and somewhere far enough away from the hub of *Krasnaya Zarya's* operations that his signal would not draw the vengeance of the horde down about his head.

Krasnaya Zarya!

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had been a fool, duped by his former Soviet masters. Why had he not seen through the lies? Now at last he understood why Gheorghe had been so sentimental about the business of bringing the *Troika* to Bucharest. Gheorghe had never wanted the Securitate to lay a finger on the members of the *Troika*. Yes, they had agreed Andropov would

have to be *disappeared*; beyond that, they could afford to be civilised about things. That was what Gheorghe had decided. The members of the *Troika* were not their enemies, simply men who did not understand the new realities of their own situation. A short, sharp object lesion should suffice while the Romanian Army and the Securitate brought *Krasnaya Zarya* back under control. The important thing was to be able to go to the West with clean hands; stabbing former allies in the back was a price well worth paying if it saved their necks.

Interrogating Andropov *before* he was *disappeared* had been Ceausescu's idea. Gheorghe did not need to know about it, not officially. Just minutes before the *Troika's* plane had touched down at Otopeni Air Base his old friend and mentor had lost his nerve. If Andropov confessed to being the leader of *Krasnaya Zarya* they would settle for putting a bullet in his head and dumping the body in a shallow grave out in the forest.

Ceausescu had put Gheorghe's *sentimentality* down to his illness and had decided to treat Andropov like any other enemy of the state. The Securitates had softened him up as they would have softened up any prisoner. Ceausescu had let them get on with it; they knew their jobs. And then without a question being asked the Russian had started confessing to something which had sounded so bizarre that it could not possibly be true.

The Soviet Union still existed beyond the Urals.

Not as a mere shadow of its former glory but as a diminished yet still intact state capable of and indeed, was actively planning to make a new war against the British and the Americans. What Andropov described as large 'strategic reserve' forces had survived the Cuban Missiles War intact. The Russians still had missiles, tanks, jet fighters, ships and tens of thousands of soldiers; all it lacked was the reserves of fuel and ammunition necessary for a 'long war'.

A long war?

What was that about?

According to Andropov the High Command moved from city to city although the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was in a pre-war bunker complex near Chelyabinsk.

Krasnaya Zarya was just the 'first wave'.

Krasnaya Zarya was expendable; so expendable that the Red Army planned to crush it before it launched the coming *'hammer blow'*.

Andropov had boasted that ‘the Red Army will roll right over whatever is left of *Krasnaya Zarya’*.

Andropov had said the British were finished.

The British had been driven out of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Yankees had been humiliated. Where had the Yankees been when their friends in Greece and Turkey needed them most? Elsewhere in the region nobody trusted the Yankees or the British to save them, they were alone. Sooner or later the Egyptians or the Persians would turn on the weakened British, safe in the knowledge that the Americans no longer had the stomach to stand behind their ‘old NATO ally’. One more kick and the fallacy of British Imperial power would ‘tumble down around Queen Elizabeth’s ears’.

Maskirovka!

Andropov had repeated the term time and again.

Maskirovka! Something masked? Smoke and mirrors; military deception? Keeping one’s enemy guessing, persuading one’s enemy to look in entirely the wrong place? The art of catching one’s enemy unawares when the main blow falls?

Krasnaya Zarya had successfully drawn the attention of the British, the Americans, and of the whole World to Greece, the Aegean and the Anatolian plains of Turkey. However, something had gone wrong and *Krasnaya Zarya* had run amok; Red Army, Air Force and Naval units had had to abandon their own war missions to put down the enemy within. *Krasnaya Zarya* had subverted whole formations of the Red Army, seized control of nuclear weapons, and risked drawing down a devastating, annihilating second atomic blitz on the Mother Country. Thus, the grand plan was temporarily stalled, on hold while, from the Caucasus to the Adriatic the full might of the Soviet Armed Forces was deployed to mercilessly crush *Krasnaya Zarya*.

The *grand plan* was called *Operation Nakazyvat*.

Operation Chastise.

The scale and the breadth, vision and ambition of the strategic masterstroke described by Yuri Andropov as the fists and booted feet pummelled his twitching body, and he jerked spastically from the repeated electric shocks administered via electrodes attached to his genitals and his ears, had taken away Nicolae Ceausescu’s breath.

The necessity to crush *Krasnaya Zarya* had caused Phase Two of *Operation Nakazyvat* to be delayed. The Securitates had tried to find out

how long the great strike was likely to be delayed. Unfortunately, Andropov did not know; he was a KGB apparatchik, not a solder and everything was strictly *need to know*. He guessed that *Phase Two* would be put back at least a month. Perhaps, five to six weeks. A lot of fuel and carefully horded munitions had been wasted by the Navy, and the elite paratrooper and tank brigades redeployed to put down the *Krasnaya Zarya* 'counter revolutionaries'. A lot of men, ships and aircraft were now in the wrong place.

According to Andropov a man with an odd sounding, possibly Armenian, name would have to 'sort out the mess' before he gave the go ahead to start Phase Two.

Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian...

Yes, definitely an Armenian...

Andropov said he was the best man for the job. Apparently, back in 1956 he had been the man who led the 8th Mechanized Army into the streets of Budapest to 'extinguish' the Hungarian uprising.

It seemed that Colonel-General Babadzhanian commanded two Soviet Armies; 3rd Caucasus Tank Army, and the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army, respectively assembling around the bombed cities of Volgograd – formerly Stalingrad – and Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. Both Armies had been stripped of their elite infantry shock regiments, these had been sent to ensure that *Krasnaya Zarya's* assaults halted on the pre-planned stop lines in the Trans-Caucasus region, that those lines were held securely, and that the 'war in the west did not escalate out of control'.

Andropov was very insistent that Phase Two would be jeopardised if the 'war in the west sucked away too many troops' from the 'southern push'. The Soviet Union had tens of thousands of soldiers; but not an unlimited supply of trained battle ready 'replacements'. Conscripts were fine for manning trenches or distracting enemy fire from the 'real professionals'. But for the tactics of 'lightning mechanized warfare' green conscripts were useless.

Blitzkrieg!

He had been talking about *Blitzkrieg!*

'What do you mean?

The southern push?'

In between spitting out teeth and pissing and shitting himself, Yuri

Vladimirovich Andropov, Director of the KGB in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, had told his interrogators *everything*.

'The push south to the Indian Ocean!'

While Soviet forces renewed the offensive in the east – on land in Greece and Yugoslavia, and at sea in the Mediterranean to 'pin' British and American forces down - two tank armies would strike south from the Caucasus, smashing down through northern Persia following the courses of the Tigris and the Euphrates through Iraq to the warm waters of the Arabian Gulf at Basra...

Somebody raised Nicolae Ceausescu's fever-ravaged head and tipped brackish cool water into his mouth.

Most of the moisture slurped and dribbled down his chin.

He collapsed back onto the lice-ridden straw mattress on which he had lain, helplessly soiling himself the last two days as the fever had wracked his shivering body. Now when men came into the room they leaned over him and talked among themselves as if he was invisible.

"We have to do something about his leg..."

"What do you suggest?"

"It's turning black and it stinks real bad!"

"I'm not going to cut the fucking thing off!"

"He'll die if we don't."

"What do we cut it off with? A couple of the guys have got hunting knives?"

A third voice: "We haven't got any anaesthetic."

"Tip some of that rot-gut ouzo down his throat."

"What if it makes him go blind?"

"If he goes blind at least he won't notice we cut off his fucking leg!"

The voices were far away and Nicolae Ceausescu did not know who they were talking about. His body convulsed, his thoughts twisted. What was nightmare? What was reality?

Krasnaya Zarya...

If only he could tell people in the West what he knew about *Krasnaya Zarya...*

If only...

"Did the bastard just say something?" A gruff voice growled.

"Something about that fucking Russian, I think."

There was a harsh, barking laugh. “Andropov?”

“That’s the one. He cried like a baby before we even got started!”

“If we’re going to do something about his leg we have to do it now,” another man decided angrily. “We’ll need more people to hold the bastard down.”

Sometime later a blinding light stabbed into Ceausescu’s eyes, his head was raised, his jaw held open. Instantly he was choking on a metallic, stinging, burning liquid filling his mouth.

They were trying to murder him!

They were pouring battery acid down his throat...

Blackness, nothingness.

His head was ringing and he was gagging, literally on something tightly tied between his teeth.

The pain was distant, but soon near.

Like a red-hot branding iron searing his bare flesh.

And somebody nearby was screaming.

It was a dreadful, keening animal cry of agony,

It was several seconds before he realised the animalistic shriek was his and soon afterwards, mercifully, he lost consciousness.

Chapter 21

Wednesday 26th February 1964
The Citadel, Mdina, Malta

"I hoped I would find you here," Arkady Pavlovich Rykov called while he was still several steps away from the woman. He had not meant to surprise her but she started in alarm. Clara Pullman had been staring into the distance, her eyes focused on the faraway great red dome of the Church of the Assumption of our Lady, St Mary. She had mentioned to Marija Calleja that she would like to learn more about Malta – practically everything on the island seemed too enchanting to be true – and her young friend had taken her Mosta yesterday. It had been a lovely afternoon; she had escaped her own preoccupations and Marija had briefly escaped the escalating whirl of preparations for her forthcoming wedding. Clara knew very little about the Maltese way of getting married, having assumed it was simply very, well, *Catholic*.

Poor Marija's nuptials seemed to be turning into a state wedding with a cast of hundreds, perhaps, thousands. *The Times of Malta* had run a front-page feature about her with a quarter page picture – of Marija looking positively seraphic – with a blow by blow account of the factors determining the whys and wherefores of every aspect of the actual wedding ceremony. Marija had wanted something private in a chapel near to where she lived in Sliema, ideally in the small church in which she had worshipped her whole adult life but that was impossible because so many people wanted to attend, and the politics involved in her marrying the son of the Commander-in-Chief were positively Byzantine.

Until two days ago Marija had been at her wits end before she learned that the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Roman Archdiocese of Malta had written to her parents and to the father of the groom, graciously offering the Cathedral of St Paul at Mdina to the 'happy couple' on Saturday 7th March, with the service to commence at one o'clock that day 'war exigencies permitting'. This was the happiest of outcomes – St Catherine's Hospital for Women was situated within yards of the Cathedral – and ensured that the

wedding would be ‘a true carnival’. All this Marija had confided to Clara on their afternoon out, cementing the foundations of a new friendship that the older woman, in her present *situation*, craved.

Latterly, Clara’s life had become a very lonely, dangerous thing. She was mentally and emotionally exhausted by constantly having to pretend to be somebody and something that she had not been for many years and hoped never to be again. Meeting Arkady Rykov’s dull-eyed gaze she prayed he did not see straight through her.

She cleared her throat genteelly.

“Doctor Seiffert told me that you called yesterday when I was away from the Citadel,” Clara informed the man, her emotions roiling just beneath her carefully manufactured mask of equanimity.

“I’ve missed you.” Arkady Pavlovich Rykov was dressed in a lightweight, somewhat creased brown suit. He wore no tie and had about him a down at heel look. Today he did not want to be noticed or remembered, he was a master of losing himself in a crowd, of merging with the background, becoming invisible unless a searcher looked him directly in the eye.

“I shouldn’t have just moved out. That was, well,” Clara shrugged, suddenly feeling a little cold, “not fair.”

Rykov shrugged, pursed his lips.

“Do you know the first thing Lavrentiy Beria told me?” The KGB defector posed rhetorically.

Clara shook her head.

“Never tell somebody a thing that you don’t *need* to tell them,” the man went on, stepping up to the edge of the chest high rampart to see where she had been looking when he had disturbed her.

Clara stood beside him, avoiding physical contact.

He had told her his darkest secrets and much later, after she had stopped being afraid; she had no longer felt many of the things she had felt for him before. Where once there had been a bizarre devotion, what she had taken for love, there was a void called Arkady Pavlovich Rykov. She thought she had loved him when she had not even known what his name was, she had thought she had loved him when he had almost got her killed several times, and she had gone on trying to love him even after she had learned who he was and glimpsed the darkest corners of his past life. Oddly, she had not stopped loving him when she witnessed him attack another man like a wild animal; it

was only when he confessed he had tortured and killed women in cold blood that the part of her that had still loved him had died. He had confronted her with his evil because he had had to tell somebody before it destroyed him, consuming him from within like some excoriating poison; knowing that in confessing his sins that he might lose her forever and then he would be totally alone on Malta. She had been safe before she learned his secrets; now she was living on borrowed time.

"Marija took me to Mosta yesterday," Clara said distractedly. "I think she saw how miserable I was and she wanted to cheer me up. Neither of us was needed until the evening so we jumped on a bus and off we went."

Nobody at the Hospital looked at her as if she was a fading courtesan and although she had forgotten practically everything she had learned in her training at Bart's Hospital in London just after the 1945 war, everybody was helpful, understanding without her having to say a word. "We walked around the Church of the Assumption of our Lady. We sat a while. We said our prayers, or at least, Marija did. For somebody who is so sensible and practical, she is very spiritual. I rather envy her that."

When she had not been taking time out to genuflect, meditate, or to pray, Marija had babbled and gossiped like a schoolgirl. The magnificent dome of the Church of the Assumption of our Lady, known locally either as the 'Rotunda of Malta' or the 'Mosta Dome' was one hundred and twenty-two feet across, making it either the third or the fourth biggest *unsupported* dome in the World, according to Marija. To bear the weight of the huge dome the church, which was consecrated in 1871, had thirty feet thick masonry walls. The German Luftwaffe had once – inadvertently it was believed because the Maltese were a forgiving people – attempted to destroy the church. In a daylight raid on 9th April 1942 while over three hundred parishioners waited to celebrate early evening mass two bombs had struck the building; a 50-kilogram bomb that had bounced off, and a 500-kilogram device which had penetrated the dome and come to rest among the shocked congregation. Miraculously, the bomb had not exploded and after priests had shepherded their flock, none of whom had suffered any injuries in the raid to safety, a bomb disposal team had removed the offending bomb and dumped it out at sea.

Arkady Rykov viewed her thoughtfully. The former KGB man who had been her lover for most of the last year was silent.

“If we stayed together,” Clara said, in a virtual whisper, “deep down I would always be afraid of you.”

Arkady Rykov digested this.

“Yes, I know.”

“You should go now.”

The man made no attempt to move.

“The British think I lied to them about Red Dawn,” he informed Clara, dispassionately. “British Intelligence was so thoroughly *penetrated* before the war there are men, and probably women, who will bring me down if they can. That is the way of things.”

“What are you telling me this, Arkady?”

The former KGB man chuckled grimly.

“In case we never speak again, my love.”

Clara watched the man walk away, salty moisture blurring her vision. She turned, sniffed back her tears and looked again at the marvellous vista of the island stretched out beneath the walls of the Citadel from her eagle aerie viewpoint hundreds of feet above sea level.

She stared sightlessly; unaware of the time slowly passing...

Presently, gathering clouds scudding across the archipelago from the north-west covered the sun and the breeze became biting, chilling. Shivering, Clara came down from the walls and began to make her way the short distance back to the Hospital where Margo had given her use of the top floor room next to Marija’s.

Margo Seiffert was a strange woman; so tough and yet so protective. It was as if she intuitively understood that Clara was bruised and sad, adrift, and had automatically taken her under her wing. It began to rain as she reached out to pull the bell handle to the hospital’s main doors onto St Paul’s Square. Glancing up for no reason she caught movement at the edge of her peripheral vision, half-turned her head and saw Peter Christopher and Marija sheltering in the portico of the Cathedral. The lovers did not notice her as she disappeared into the hospital.

“You are not angry?” Marija asked for the *third* time.

“About the big wedding, no!” Peter Christopher said for the *third* time, adding emphasis and quiet vehemence to his reassurance.

“The Archbishop wishes to preside during the ceremony,” Marija sighed, finally satisfied that he meant what he said, “but Father Dominic from the

Church of St John's in Sliema will assist him. I have known Father Dominic since I was this high," she explained, lowering the flat of her right hand to approximately the level of her knees. "But you already know that..."

That was the thing; they had been carrying on a fourteen-year long conversation – letter by letter – and they had few secrets one from the other. The more familiar they became with the physical reality of actually being together, face to face, the more they realised that most of the things young lovers normally talked about was old ground, old news.

"Just because I already know a thing it doesn't mean I don't want to hear you tell me about it all over again," the man declared with utter sincerity.

HMS Talavera had finally been refloated yesterday morning, towed deeper into French Creek and berthed alongside a fitting out dock. Peter Christopher had spent that morning going over the wiring schematics that Ralph Hobbs, the 'Chief Radar Man' responsible for overseeing the installation and maintenance of the electronics suites of all the ships of the Mediterranean Fleet passing through the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta, had sent him. Ralph was being run ragged and Peter was one of the few people on the island whose second opinion he not only respected but trusted. The storehouses back in the United Kingdom were being emptied to update and equip the ships sent to Malta but a lot of the aerials, distribution boxes, controls, switches, power boards and cathode ray displays were 'one off' constructs lacking comprehensive, or in some cases, *any* documentation. The people back home were scraping the barrel and hoping experts like Ralph Hobbs would make the equipment they were digging out of forgotten stores and cupboards, work on real ships.

"Ralph Hobbs has put in a request to make me his 'Technical Naval Liaison Officer'," he told Marija. "I'm not terribly keen about it because I don't want them taking Talavera away from me."

"There will be other ships, sweetheart." Marija was experimenting with alternative endearments; exploring how each new option rolled off her tongue. *My love* seemed a little excessive; there would be time for that later. *Dear heart* sounded like something out of a Jane Austen novel. Within the frame of reference of her own immediate family for as long as she could remember her Mama had called her Papa '*Husband*', prefixing this according to mood or whim with a '*dear*' or a '*my*'. Decisions, decisions, so many decisions...

“Not like Talavera,” Peter protested, frowning.

Marija put her right hand over his heart and looked up into his face, instantly seizing his entire attention.

“I should be jealous,” she teased gently, “how can I compete with a great big Battle class destroyer. I mean,” she continued, struggling to keep a straight face, “HMS Talavera has great big guns and *she* can *run* at thirty miles an hour for two thousand miles!”

Chapter 22

Thursday 27th February 1964
Great Hall, Christ Church College, Oxford

It had been decided to align the pews and chairs requisitioned, borrowed, ‘found’ and scavenged from around the College in a pattern reminiscent of the debating chamber of the shattered House of Commons in Westminster. Seating had been provided for some four hundred persons, as well as a standing area for the gentlemen of the press. Although the Great Hall of Christ Church College was not that much bigger than the previous home of the Commons, it seemed to many of those present noticeably less claustrophobic. The Speaker and his clerks sat on a low stage beneath great dark, grime-stained windows.

Margaret Thatcher had been Prime Minister for approximately two-and-a-half whirlwind months. In that time, she had begun to reconstruct the ‘special relationship’ with the United States, formed a new Government that she was convinced was capable of leading the nation forward, and staked her Premiership on the earliest possible return to ‘politics as normal’. Fully aware that in a few hours time she might be a footnote in the United Kingdom’s post-cataclysm history she had no regrets. She and her Cabinet sat to the right hand of the Speaker; otherwise honourable members sat in cliques and clubs, clans and loose confederations of a dozen kinds on both sides of the divide between the Government ‘front bench’ and the notional ‘opposition’ across the so-called ‘aisle’.

Iain Macleod, the Minister of Information and therefore the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom’s key propagandist coughed bronchially, breathlessly. He and Airey Neave, Margaret Thatcher’s former chief of staff at the Ministry of Supply, had arrived at a rough and ready accounting for what was laughingly called ‘the state of the parties’.

Perhaps, fifty percent of Labour Party Members of Parliament were nominally loyal to the Party’s leader, James Callaghan. Within that caucus of support there was, however, rumbling dissent. The rest of Jim Callaghan’s MPs were split between factions on the left of his Party, by far the largest

grouping being led by Michael Foot, the firebrand pacifist MP for Ebbw Vale in Monmouthshire. However, while Michael Foot's followers were likely to be a noisy thorn in Margaret Thatcher's side, the real imponderable was the mood of her own *supporters*.

At the last pre-war General Election Harold MacMillan had been endorsed with an increased majority. In that election the Conservative and Unionist Party had returned 365 MPs to the Commons, the Labour and Co-operative Party 258 and the Liberals a paltry 6 members. 'Supermac' had therefore enjoyed a majority of over a hundred MPs and it was this fact – regardless of casualties in the October War – which had given first Edward Heath, and then Margaret Thatcher, leave to form Government's under the auspices of the War Emergency Act.

Of the 629 MPs elected to the old House of Commons, 387 had thus far signed the newly re-opened Members' Register, of whom 191 were Conservatives or Ulster Unionists, 192 Labourites and 4 Liberals. Notwithstanding that the head count was significantly *less* in the Labour Party's favour than she had expected, the Angry Widow had resolved in advance that she was not willing to continue in office without a 'properly' expressed democrat mandate.

New elections would have been her first choice; but that was neither practical nor sensible in the present climate. The war in the Mediterranean might have gone cold in recent weeks but preparations were well-advanced to re-conquer Cyprus and to re-establish the Anglo-America presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Grim times lay ahead and increasingly, she was afraid that the cataclysm – far from brutally concluding the clash of irreconcilable East-West ideologies – had settled nothing. In any event, she was not prepared to carry on without the transparent consent of the surviving elected representatives of the British polity.

The Speaker of the House of Commons banged his gavel. The gavel was a new innovation; previously such an implement would have been useless since the speaker traditionally sat in a chair raised above and some distance away from his clerks' desk rather than *at* the head of *that* desk.

"The House will come to order!"

Sir Harry Braustyn Hylton-Foster had practically had to be carried into the Great Hall. Illness and the routine privations of the age had taken a heavy toll on his constitution, leaving his formerly military bearing hunched,

diminished, and his gaunt face an ashen mask. In this cruel new age when a man began to decline, that decline tended to be rapid and terminal.

Margaret Thatcher was humbled by the daily examples she came across of men and women surmounting terrible adversities simply to carry on doing their jobs and fulfilling their duty.

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster had been Speaker of the House of Commons since 1960. Like many of the MPs present today in the House he now represented a 'rotten' war constituency; the Cities of London and Westminster. The Angry Widow's own constituency of Finchley had been similarly obliterated, and a head count of the MPs who had thus far signed the new Members' Register, indicated that over twenty percent represented non-existent or sorely reduced 'seats'. Exacerbating the self-evident 'democratic deficit', in the chaos of the last year as many as fifty, more or less intact, Parliamentary constituencies had been without a legitimately elected representative. Of the 232 absent Members of the old House of Commons, at least a hundred had perished on the night of the war, mostly in the capital, a dozen were *known* to have died elsewhere, killed in the Soviet strikes or dying shortly thereafter of injuries or radiation sickness. Another forty to fifty MPs of the class of 1959 were thought to have succumbed to old age, pre-existing medical conditions or disease in the intervening months. In total, 74 members of the last House of Commons remained unaccounted for; it was not known how many had abdicated their responsibilities, cultivated local fiefdoms in their own backyards, or were serving in the armed forces – although anecdotally, at least a score of men were believed to have rejoined their old Regiments or Squadrons and not requested leave of absence to attend the Great Hall – and as many as thirty MPs in the 'old House' had simply disappeared without a trace.

Margaret Thatcher had been chilled but not overly surprised when the details of the Members' Register had been correlated against the death and casualty rates among the general population. Death, it seemed, was intrinsically democratic; its geographic and demographic signature roughly matching the fates of the Members of Parliament in the 1959 House of Commons.

At the time of the cataclysm the population of the United Kingdom was around fifty-three million people, some seven to eight million of whom lived in the Greater London area, over four million in Scotland, a little under two

million in Wales, and some one-and-a-half-millions in Northern Ireland. The weight of the Soviet strike had fallen exclusively on the forty-five million people living in England, disproportionately impacting the capital where between five and six million people had died in the first twenty-four hours after the attack. However, if London, the East Coast and the urban and rural North-West had been hit hardest, the subsequent breakdown of basic services and the inability of the surviving health services to in any way deal with the enormity of the disaster, had made cholera and typhus, influenza, measles and poliomyelitis prolific killers of the old and the young, the infirm and the injured alike, scourging every corner of the United Kingdom with similar cruelty. Malnutrition, lack of heating fuels, the breakdown of the electricity grid and damage to or the destruction of as many as a third of all the homes in the country had probably doubled the initial death toll of the actual Soviet retaliatory strike. Between thirteen and fourteen million people had perished in England since the October War; only the young, the vigorous and the fit – and the privileged and the protected - had survived. Tragically, the latest statistics showed that infant and post-natal mortality rates were still running, month on month, at somewhere around nine times the rates calculated for 1961.

The parlous state of the nation was best illustrated by the fact the *most optimistic* of the recent estimates for population *decline* produced by the Home Office's statisticians; projected a fall of *only two to three* percent in the overall population in the coming year. The man factors offsetting a drastically reduced birth rate included a growing influx of survivors from the continent into the south coast ports, and a lower than expected 'die off' in the last two winter months. This latter was wholly attributable to the success of Operation Manna. The arrival of the great convoys had reversed planned cuts in the standard food ration and dramatically eased the fuel situation at exactly the same time that the previous year's intensive *winter planning* ensured that a large number of lightly damaged houses and buildings had had their roofs repaired and windows boarded over. The provision of dry, heated, sheltered places in which the majority of the surviving population could see out the winter was probably saving tens of thousands of lives every week.

Set against this qualified good news there was overwhelming evidence that a contributory factor in the projected ongoing population decline was the – understandable and entirely rational - unwillingness of women of child-

bearing age to risk conceiving a child. Who could blame any woman for not wanting to bring a baby into this cold, hostile, radioactively poisoned new World?

Margaret Thatcher's anger threatened to choke her every time she stopped to contemplate the folly of the men – and it was the *men* – who had sleep walked into the cataclysm of October 1962.

Looking around the Great Hall, the Prime Minister saw relatively few of the old, grey men of that generation which had dominated the higher echelons of British political life before the war.

The *sleep walkers'* time had come and gone.

"The House will come to order!" The Speaker demanded.

The groundswell of conversation subsided to a mutter.

Several MPs coughed, practically everybody had rattling chests.

Across the Great Hall sitting a little apart on the crowded front bench Enoch Powell eyed his quarry with hungry intent. His faction had coalesced around him. Not all his supporters were back-woodsmen or traditionalists who viewed Margaret Thatcher as a usurper. Several of the Powellites had been passed over for ministerial posts in the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom, others had refused to serve in junior positions that they regarded as being beneath their dignity. Others had been alienated by Edward Heath's belated attempts to purge the dead wood he had inherited from Harold MacMillan's administration. Moreover, a small number of the Honourable Member for Wolverhampton South West's most devoted followers actually believed – or had at least, honestly convinced themselves - that they were obediently acting in accordance with the wishes of their constituents.

It would have surprised her opponents to discover that Margaret Thatcher had not, in truth, worried overmuch about the numbers game. Iain Macleod, still the Chairman of the Conservative and Unionist Party, guessed that as many as forty percent of the Tory MPs in the Hall would back her; either because she was, whatever they thought, their leader or because of their visceral detestation for Enoch Powell and the pseudo-Leninist wing of the Labour Party.

By far the largest anti-UAUK clump of MPs straggled about the tall, spindly tousled-haired former journalist, Michael Foot. While he was unlikely to acquire new converts to his cause this afternoon, Foot's eloquence

and the fervour of his ‘party within a party’ as Jim Callaghan put it, might well give wavering moderates cause for thought on both sides of the political spectrum.

Iain Macleod thought the House was split three ways, with the Government guaranteed perhaps as many as one hundred and forty to fifty votes, including as many as sixty from Margaret Thatcher’s own Party, and about ninety from the Labour side of the Unity Administration. Michael Foot could depend on thirty or forty true believers, Enoch Powell sixty to seventy exclusively Tory votes. Inevitably, with so many undecided, undeclared and frankly, bewildered MPs’ votes to be played for, the debate was likely to be ferocious.

The Speaker was making a meal – a veritable dog’s breakfast - of restating the protocol of Parliamentary business appropriate to a debate consequent upon the emergency recall of the Commons.

Margaret Thatcher tried not to scowl too obviously.

“This is not an *emergency recall* of the House!” She hissed to Iain Macleod. “What on earth is the old fool up to?”

“None of the previous senior clerks to the House survived the war, Margaret,” her Party Chairman reminded her lowly. “We had to recruit clerks locally. They know all about administering College meetings and the modes of service in chapel, but...”

“The bloody man ought not to have to rely on his clerks, Iain!”

Iain Macleod did not attempt to argue the point or to defend the Speaker further. There had been talk about appointing a new Leader of the House to manage the UAUK’s business in Parliament; but they had never got around to organising it and it had not seemed to be a problem until now. The Angry Widow fulminated as she awaited her turn to take her bow.

One of Enoch Powell’s acolytes had been invited to lodge an early day motion with the Speaker, and now that the game was afoot she wanted to get on with it. It was a peculiarity of the faulty memories of the main protagonists, and symptomatic of the desperate times in which they lived, that nobody on the front benches of the re-called House of Commons recollected, or initially, gave the weight and credence it deserved to the fact that the last – pre-war - Leader of the House of Commons had been none other than the Honourable Member for Enfield West, presently mostly an uninhabitable bomb site, a certain Iain Norman Macleod. The role had been superfluous in

the aftermath of the cataclysm. Within days of the October War a provisional government had emerged, which in turn had hastily developed into the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration, at which juncture Iain Macleod had ceased to be a member of 'the Cabinet' and therefore, technically ceased to be the lawfully appointed Leader of the House of Commons...

However, now that Iain Macleod thought about it – not that anybody had thought over much about it since the Prime Minister's rash promise to re-open Parliament in such an insanely crashing rush - he was probably still the best candidate for the job. Except he had not thought about and now he felt like an ass! His old *One Nation Conservatism* partner in crime across the aisle, Enoch Powell, whom he had regarded as a close personal friend in those heady days working together in the *Conservative Research Department* after the 1945 war was silently laughing at him.

The Speaker, resplendent in his powdered wig and eighteenth-century finery leaned towards him.

"The correct procedure is for the Leader of the House of Commons to make himself available to the House for questions *after* he has made a business statement. This would have enabled the proposer of the EDM – the aforementioned Early Day Motion – the opportunity of mentioning it in the chamber by referring to it by its number in the list of questions to the Leader of the House that day. This would allow the EDM to be printed in *Hansard*, the record of the proceedings of the House, thus satisfying convention and enabling my clerk to place it on the order paper for this, or an *early* date thereafter..."

Iain Macleod shook his head in undisguised exasperation.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" He muttered as he rose to his feet. "A point of order, Mr Speaker!"

Everybody agreed Iain Macleod had made a good fist of being Leader of the House of Commons in his two-year stint before the October War. He had brought great energy and a well-honed understanding of the ways and means of Parliament to the post; all in all, he had got things done and pushed through the Government's business. Edward Heath, the Chief Whip, and he had fought a constant uphill battle against the complacency engendered by the Party's many uninterrupted years in power and the somewhat soporific effect of its huge Parliamentary majority. He deserved better than to be

lectured by a well-meaning old buffer like Harry Hylton-Foster about what was and was not the customary ‘normal procedure’ in the good old days before the World tried to blow itself up.

“What is it, Mr Macleod?”

“With respect, Mr Speaker. The House has *not* been recalled in emergency session. It is my understanding that it is for the House to determine if and when it sits again. It is a thing understood by all members present that the Government has come to this place for one reason, and one reason alone. The matter we are here to debate is one of paramount national concern. The date for this session of the House of Commons was promulgated several weeks ago and we all know why we are here. I say to you respectfully; pray permit the members of this House to get on with it, Mr Speaker!”

Sir Harry Hylton-Foster had proved to be a popular, and in the main, a respected Speaker but when he was first appointed the manner of his appointment had caused a deal of unnecessary bad feeling between the two main parties. The reason for this was that at that time Sir Harry still held the post of Solicitor General for England and Wales and therefore, by definition, could not be and was not the full-time ‘Speaker’ of the House of Commons. Plainly, one could not be a Government Minister and the Speaker at the same time; the roles were mutually incompatible. A Government Minister owed his allegiance to his political master, the Prime Minister. The Speaker of the House of Commons was exactly that, the man who *spoke* for the *whole* Commons. What had made it worse was that Harold MacMillan had not troubled to discuss Sir Harry’s appointment, as tradition and common courtesy demanded, with the then Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell.

“Am I to deduce from the authority with which you speak,” the frail man in the ceremonial garb inquired, “that you are to be restored to your former office of Leader of the House, Mr Macleod?”

The Minister of Information had not expected the question. He glanced over his shoulder at Margaret Thatcher who assented with an immediate curt nod.

“Yes, Mr Speaker,” he confirmed dryly. “It would seem so.”

“Well, in that case is the Leader of the House ready to deliver his statement as to the business of this place this day?”

Iain Macleod found the grace to smile as he composed his thoughts.

He puffed out his chest and eyed the restless ranks of the unholy alliance hoping against hope that this was its moment to trip up the unstoppable phenomenon that was Margaret Thatcher. He could see it in their eyes that they knew this was their moment; and that if they failed today then power might be beyond their grasp for perhaps a decade.

Iain Macleod cleared his throat.

“It is this Government’s desire to obtain an unequivocal mandate from this House to restore fully ‘normal politics’ to the United Kingdom not later than the autumn of 1965; to vigorously prosecute the war against our enemies in the Eastern Mediterranean and to safeguard our people wherever they may be in the World; furthermore, it is this Government’s purpose to commence the generation-long crusade of the reconstruction of our bombed cities. In the present absence of ‘normal politics’ it is the Government’s policy to submit itself this day to a vote of confidence in this place.”

Chapter 23

Thursday 27th February 1964
Giraud Corn Exchange Building, Broad Street, Philadelphia

In the last United States War Plan Book before the October War Philadelphia was not identified as a ‘viable site for a relocated governmental infrastructure’ because it was assumed that the fifth largest city in the Union would have – probably – been a priority Soviet target. However, in the way of these things contingency planners continually observe real events and modify their plans accordingly over time. *After* Armageddon Philadelphia became a much more ‘viable’ option if or when the ‘governmental infrastructure’ needed to be ‘relocated’ in future. Unfortunately, the planning process had only just re-commenced by the time of the Battle of Washington; and bald statements of ‘high-level first principles’ were very little use in unravelling the chaos intrinsic in the attempting to create an entirely new Federal administrative hub on top of the much smaller scaffold of Pennsylvania’s State, and Philadelphia City’s existing governmental machinery.

Notwithstanding two months of bedlam, Lyndon Baines Johnson, was proud of what *his* people had achieved in Philadelphia. Despite being obstructed and harried at every turn by Congress and the Senate, and having to rely on contractors infinitely more interested in putting their hand in the till than relocating the nation’s capital, he now oversaw a skeletal functioning continental bureaucracy and, assuming that sooner or later it took its collective finger out of its collective butt, a House of Representatives successfully transported to and replanted in Pennsylvania. That all this had happened in the wake of a failed coup d’état, at a time when the Administration was attempting to stop the country tearing itself to pieces, while simultaneously beginning to re-mobilize its sleeping military might against the dark forces which had turned the capital into a battlefield in December, spoke to everything that was best in the United States of America. Moreover, for the first time since he had signed on to the Kennedy Presidential ticket in 1960, it signalled the arrival of the Vice-President as a

fully paid up integral member of the Administration's inner circle.

Now as he awaited the arrival of the President's cavalcade in the imperial splendour of the hall of the former Giraud Corn Exchange Trust building less than a quarter-of-a-mile from City Hall, the new home of the House of Representatives, he found himself reflecting on how close the United States had come to World War IV in December.

The threat of an unwanted and frankly, nightmarish, war with the British had crept up on the Administration. Never had the phrase 'the enemy within' been more true; Red Dawn had infiltrated the Pentagon and the State Department, souring relations with America's oldest, most loyal ally, making clandestine pacts with Franco in Spain and the fascists in Italy, and successfully subverting patriotic US soldiers, sailors and airmen to do the unthinkable: to launch surprise attacks on Royal Navy ships at sea and bombing raids on British bases in the Mediterranean. LBJ shivered with dread every time he thought about how close they had come to a real shooting war with the British.

B-52s had bombed the base of the British Mediterranean Fleet at Malta!

If it had been the other way around with RAF V-Bombers attacking and crippling the US Navy's command and control centre at Norfolk, Virginia the way those four Strategic Air Command B-52s had blinded – inflicting damage massively compounded courtesy of the EMP damage caused by the recent Red Dawn ICBM near misses – the British Mediterranean Fleet, blocked anchorages and docks with broken ships and killed and maimed hundreds of highly-trained service personnel and innocent Maltese civilians; every available Minutemen would have been flying before anybody stopped to ask what was actually going on.

It hardly bore thinking about...

Congress had still not wised up; over a hundred 'representatives' had signed a motion demanding the extradition to the United States of Captain Simon Horatio Collingwood, the commanding officer of the British nuclear submarine HMS Dreadnought 'to account for his aggressive actions resulting in the loss with all hands of the USS Scorpion'. The poison had seeped so deep into the psyche of a sizable section of the country's ruling class that it was going to be very hard to stop the poison spreading.

J. Edgar Hoover had bent his ear again that morning. The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation had been in Seventh Heaven ever since the

Battle of Washington.

The old faggot saw enemies everywhere.

'Congress is full of commie-stooges and fifth columnists,' he claimed.

LBJ doubted it. On the other hand, if the Director of the FBI had told him that Congress was full of self-serving, self-righteous pricks so accustomed to having their snouts in the trough that they no longer knew whether it was day or night, he might have agreed with him. Notwithstanding that witch hunts did not interest the Vice-President he recognised that men like Hoover were invaluable in times such as these.

A Secret Serviceman's radio crackled.

"One minute, sir."

The Vice-President nodded and continued to look around the former headquarters of the Giraud Corn Exchange Trust, requisitioned six weeks ago from its bankrupt owners to be the Philadelphia 'White House'. Its proximity to the relocated House of Representatives apart, the building recommended itself for its interim role in every way. It was truly grand, obviously 'presidential', it was built like a fortress and had a huge vault – a likely bomb shelter in this troubled age – and plenty of rooms within it, and its adjoining thirty-one storey office block to accommodate not just the Presidential Staff but the new Philadelphia offices of both the State and the Treasury Departments.

There had been alternative sites mooted for the Philadelphia 'White House'; but LBJ had stopped looking once he stepped into the empty Giraud Corn Exchange Trust building, a rotunda designed by the Architect Frank Furness in 1908 as a reproduction of the Pantheon in Rome. Furness had constructed the exterior structural fabric of the great edifice with nine thousand tons of Georgia marble; and the interior with Carerra marble quarried in Italy. A relief of Stephen Giraud, the bank's founder was carved above the colonnaded entrance, and the oculus of the rotunda's one-hundred-foot diameter dome was one hundred and forty feet above where the LBJ and his Secret Service detail awaited the arrival of the President. Behind him the desks of the clerks and tellers were long gone, officials now worked behind temporary head-high screens either side of the roped off route to the circular staircase down to the vaults. Marines hefting automatic rifles stood guard at every door leading off the rotunda and at the head and at the foot of every staircase. In the vicinity of the building streets had been shut and mobile

road blocks – M-60 Patton main battle tanks and M113 armoured personnel carriers - positioned to deter and prevent attacks by car or truck bombs.

Jack Kennedy strode into the airy grandeur of the rotunda and warmly shook his Vice-President's hand. The younger man was tanned from his recent travels in the South, radiating unusual good health and vitality. His smile was guardedly confident and determination glinted in his knowing green-grey eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr President."

"Good to see you again, Mr Vice-President."

The two men marched towards the steps down to the vaults where a secure situation room had been set up in the last fortnight. The old grills and alarms had been removed, a filtered air conditioning system installed. Next month heavier blast doors would be fitted, the old-fashioned spiral staircase replaced by something more functional and a modern elevator would replace the existing museum piece.

"Bobby and John McCone got here ten minutes ago," the Vice-President told the younger man as their footsteps rang on the polished marble floor. The rotunda had a cathedral stillness despite the dozens of staffers working in their partitioned 'spaces' and the clatter of distant typewriters.

"What's this I hear about a subpoena being served on General LeMay?" Jack Kennedy demanded as the men began to descend below ground.

"The House is setting up a Joint Committee to oversee the Bill of Impeachment but they'll be squabbling over who gets to sit on it, and the Committee's rights and prerogatives for a couple of weeks yet. In the meantime, they've decided to go after LeMay ahead of the first session of the Warren Commission. It's complicated. The House Minority Leader wants to be seen to be doing something so he's trying to get a piece of Earl Warren's action." LBJ grunted his disgust. "The trouble is the Armed Forces Committee is suspended pending your assumption of its responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief in time of war. You wouldn't credit how royally pissed off those old boys on the Committee are now they don't have the free run of bases and military facilities. Right now, nobody in uniform gives a shit what any of them thinks so they're having to fly club like everybody else, they don't get to be seen in fancy restaurants with the guys in uniform picking up the tabs and the big defence contractors cut them out of the loop the day you signed the Executive Order. The Administration holds the Armed Forces

budget; why kiss butts in the House?"

The Attorney General and the Head of the Central Intelligence Agency rose to their feet when the two men swept into the brightly lit, steel-lined bunker. General Curtis LeMay, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral David McDonald, the Chief of Naval Operations were already standing, deep in conversation by a whiteboard at the opposite end of the pristine new situation room. They straightened respectfully.

Jack Kennedy wasted no time. Drawing up a chair he waved for the others to sit down around the familiar table LBJ had had brought to Philadelphia from the warehouse storing the furniture removed from the White House while repairs were in progress.

"John," the President demanded, fixing John Alexander McCone, the Republican industrialist he had brought in to the Administration to clean up the CIA after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, "tell me about this second U-2 we've lost?"

The question was asked flatly, without censure. The men in this room were beyond scoring points or assigning blame, leastways, not within their own circle. They had too many enemies in common for them not to be grimly united in their work.

"As you know, Mr President, setting up at Dhahran was always problematic," the older man prefaced.

The United States had pulled out of the base the year before the October War but the Saudi Government had permitted the hurried reactivation of the airfield after the nuclear strikes on its neighbour, Egypt. The hasty deployment of two U-2s to Dhahran had now ended, comprehensively, in disaster.

"We badly needed aerial surveillance assets to cover the region and the runway at RAF Luqa was too short." He shrugged. "I signed off on the transfer to Dhahran when it became clear that the Israelis weren't going to give us unconditional access to the facilities we needed without time-consuming haggling. Given that the security situation in Egypt post-Ismailia is uncertain and that President Nasser was unable to guarantee the safety of our people and equipment, Dhahran was the only realistic option."

"Nobody's blaming you, John," Jack Kennedy assured him.

The Director of the CIA scowled.

John McCone was perfectly capable of blaming himself when he thought

he had made a mistake and he was in no mood to dissemble.

"There may have been issues with the integrity of the fuel or some other maintenance issue with the U-2 we lost on Monday. U-2s are complicated pieces of equipment and I ordered the aircraft to commence operations before the full ground crews were in theatre." John McCone sighed. "However, the aircraft we lost last night managed to get off a message that it was under attack. According to the mission profile by then the aircraft had completed a pass over Tbilisi and was heading up north over the Caucasus Mountains to give us coverage of the Chelyabinsk-Sverdlovsk region. The aircraft had already completed the main part of the mission, to overfly the Armenian border with Turkey. The northern leg was simply a post-action damage assessment exercise. There are big areas of the former USSR's southern and eastern republics where we have either no post-war coverage, or very spotty coverage."

Jack Kennedy had not known that until recently.

I ought to have known that! Shouldn't I?

Curtis LeMay cleared his throat. Having heard the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency abase himself before *his* Commander-in-Chief, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was not to be outdone.

"We commenced a program of after-action reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union ten days after the October War," he reported. "U-2 serviceability was low at that time so most of the work over the Western USSR was done by Martin B-57s. I suspended these flights around this time last year due to climatic conditions then prevailing over the central and eastern areas of the Soviet Union. My boys were coming back with pictures of clouds most missions and," he shrugged, "I postponed further flights until the summer. By then the Air Force was busy delivering its part of the 'Peace Dividend'. Post-action battle assessment is still on my 'to do' list, Mr President. I take full responsibility for the failure to get the job done sooner."

Jack Kennedy waved this away. The American Government would have been decapitated, he would be dead by now, and the nation would be in an unimaginably parlous state if Curtis LeMay had not ridden to the rescue at the height of the Battle of Washington. *Old Iron Pants* had a vault full of credit banked with *his* President.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, General." He looked back to the Director of the CIA. "Okay, John. The Russians may have rediscovered the

capability to shoot down our spy planes. What does that tell us?"

With a sidelong glance the CIA man batted the question back to Curtis LeMay.

"It means they've got a state of the art functioning integrated air defence system up and running somewhere between the Caucasus Mountains and the Urals," Curtis LeMay stated with grudging respect. If he had had one of his famous cigars in his mouth he would have chewed it to shreds and spat out the pieces.

"We recognised all along that elements of the Soviet war machine," John McCone said, unconcerned that the airman had stolen a little of his thunder, "possibly significant elements, might have survived the war. However, to find a sophisticated air defence element operational so close to the northern borders of Persia and Iraq, and very nearly adjacent to the Armenian frontier with Turkey where we know there has been recent heavy fighting – we assume between Red Dawn and Turkish forces – is hardly likely to be coincidental. On the other hand, if Baku and the Caucasian oil fields are intact then it makes a kind of sense to position, or to leave in place, any air defence systems that might have survived the war."

The Vice-President frowned with concentration, raising a hand to indicate he wanted to speak. Something was troubling the Texan. Oil was dirty, smelly stuff that was best left in the ground unless you had something to do with it; so, if somebody had plans for it that would be a thing worth fighting over.

"If the oil fields are still there?" Lyndon Johnson drawled. "What's happening to the oil?" He looked around the table. "What does Bill Fulbright think about all this?"

Bobby Kennedy had been in a thoughtful reverie.

"Fulbright's due in England about now." The President's younger brother was suddenly conscious of the changing mood of the room. The Secretary of State had been shuttling around the Mediterranean and the Middle East desperately trying to recruit allies, stitch back together old alliances and to repair relationships soured by neglect and mistrust since the October War. Fulbright's schedule was insane. After returning to Virginia for a brief interlude at Camp David and a whistle stop round of arm-twisting in Philadelphia he had flown straight back to Europe to visit Malta and was currently stopping over in England to consult with the British Foreign

Secretary and to brief the Angry Widow.

The Angry Widow...

By tomorrow Margaret Thatcher might not be the British Prime Minister.

"What's Bill going to be telling the British, Jack?" Bobby Kennedy asked his brother.

The President's smile was not sanguine. The finest intelligence analysts in the country were unable to settle upon a coherent story. Nobody really knew what was happening in the territories so recently conquered by Red Dawn; or why the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean had suddenly fallen quiet in recent weeks. A unilateral unspoken ceasefire was in place from Cyprus to Belgrade, Bucharest had been nuked off the face of the Earth and Red Dawn seemed to have turned inward upon itself, except very little of that made sense. In the last few days the RAF had flown a number of Canberra spy missions over the Balkans, Greece and the northern Aegean and into the Sea of Marmara; tantalisingly, the images these flights had brought back were still being analysed in Malta.

"That the only thing which unites Colonel Nasser's so-called Arab League is a mutual hatred of Israel," he said, recollecting his most recent conversation with his peripatetic Secretary of State. "Nobody in 'the league' trusts anybody else; the Saudi's think that their neighbours are looking for an excuse to march in and steal their oil, none of the smaller Gulf States want to upset the Saudis or us or the British but they all wish we'd all just go away, and Oman and Yemen are too preoccupied with their own civil wars to worry about anything else."

The British understood all of this and they actually had small numbers of fully acclimatized troops – no more than a dozen under-strength infantry battalions - in Aden and elsewhere attempting to keep the warring factions at arm's length. The only way America could quickly paper over the existing fracture lines and build any kind of united front in the region was to buy the allegiance of the parties. Problematically, even in the short term that was not going to address the Arab-Israeli problem. More pertinently, neither he nor Margaret Thatcher currently had the deployable military assets available to guarantee the security of any – forget *all* – of the ruling elites in the Middle East; ignoring the question of whether spending precious and very limited military treasure in the sands of Arabia was actually a good thing in the first place.

Bill Fulbright had summed the whole debate up in seven words: ‘We don’t actually need the oil anymore!’

Jack Kennedy clasped his hands over his stomach and looked around the room.

“Okay. I’m about to be impeached; General LeMay has been subpoenaed by the House Committee on Impeachment, presumably to upstage the opening sessions of the Warren Commission into the Causes and Conduct of the Cuban Missiles War; our closest and most reliable overseas ally, Margaret Thatcher may not be the British Prime Minister this time tomorrow; and somebody in the former Soviet Union has unexpectedly remembered how to shoot down our spy planes.” He paused in his assessment of the current situation. “The USS Enterprise is on her way home so badly damaged she might have to be scrapped; and the USS Independence is still tied up at Gibraltar with catapult ‘trouble’. Closer to home Congress is perfectly willing to fund aid and arms shipments to the Irish Republic on allegedly ‘humanitarian’ grounds despite having been informed, privately and publicly by Director McCone that every dollar they send to the Republic of Ireland is fuelling the civil war in Northern Ireland and tying down troops the British desperately need in the Mediterranean.”

He had mentioned this last complaint with only mildly scathing disbelief because nothing that Congress did these days surprised him.

“Gentlemen, has anybody got any good news for me?”

Chapter 24

Thursday 27th February 1964
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

The rain slashed down from a leaden sky as Senator William Fulbright, Secretary of State of the United States hurried down the steps to the wet tarmac and shook the British Foreign Secretary's hand. The two men abbreviated the normal civilities and soon dropped into the back of the waiting Rolls-Royce.

"What was the weather like in Malta, Bill?" Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson inquired as the downpour hammered the car's windows with fresh violence. The Secretary of State's Boeing 707 had had to orbit the airfield for nearly an hour before a break in the storm had allowed it to land.

"Warmer!" The fifty-eight-year-old Arkansan guffawed. If anybody had told him eighteen months ago how easily he would relax with, and how completely he would let down his guard in the company of a British Foreign Secretary he would have laughed out aloud. Now it seemed like the most natural thing in the World. Dean Rusk's people at the State Department had regarded the slightly built scholarly Englishman as a closet socialist and anti-American agitator. Nobody in the State Department had shed tears when he had been sidelined as Harold MacMillan and Dwight Eisenhower rebuilt the 'special relationship' splintered during the Suez Crisis. The State Department had never cared for Anthony Eden, MacMillan's predecessor; Eden had never forgotten how long it had taken for the United States to get blood on its hands in the 1945 war, nor how shamelessly America had claimed the laurels at its end.

The doomed British, French and Israeli conspiracy to seize back the Suez Canal from Gamal Abdul Nasser's grasp in 1956 had worked out well for the State Department. True, the Soviets had used the Eisenhower Administration's distraction over the Suez Crisis to put down the Hungarian uprising, but Ike was never going to go to war with the Soviet Union over a country about which he and the American people knew next to nothing. No, Suez had worked out just fine for the State Department; Britain's declining

military clout, and her total dependence on American dollars after her humiliating withdrawal from the Canal Zone, had signalled the accelerated disintegration of the British Empire and confirmed the United Kingdom's status, in many eyes across the Atlantic, as a client rather than a partner of the United States in World affairs. Unseating Anthony Eden had been the icing on the cake; and MacMillan, Eisenhower's old World War II buddy had wasted no time plunging the knife into his Party leader's back. History could be a bitch.

"But," Fulbright chuckled, "I'm Southern Democrat, so what would I know?"

Tom Harding-Grayson chuckled.

"How did your 'briefing' with the Fighting Admiral go, Bill?" The Secretary of State had visited Malta specifically to 'get better acquainted' with the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean.

"Your guy doesn't take any prisoners," the American replied cheerfully. "But that's good. Until I met Curtis LeMay I wasn't used to senior military men giving me straight answers to straight questions."

"Admiral Christopher understood he had been dealt a weak hand when he accepted the post."

The Secretary of State hesitated.

"Sir Julian arranged for me to have a brief private meeting with Captain Collingwood," the American continued.

"Ah," the Foreign Secretary had asked Sir David Luce, the First Sea Lord, if he could engineer this very interview. However, he thought it best not to mention this to the Secretary of State. "How went it?"

"Is it right that HMS Dreadnought didn't fire a single torpedo on her first war patrol?"

"I believe so."

"Captain Collingwood said it was his opinion that the captain of the Scorpion manoeuvred so as to make it impossible for the anti-submarine aircraft in the area to attack the Dreadnought without endangering his own ship?"

Tom Harding-Grayson remained silent.

"I've had members of the House and senior US Navy officers queuing up to swear on their mother's graves that Collingwood murdered all those men

on the Scorpion, Tom."

"I'm sure a properly convened and conducted Board of Inquiry will establish the facts, Bill."

"If only!" The American groaned. "Captain Collingwood offered to travel to the States to give evidence under oath. That was *after* I told him he would likely be lynched as soon as he got off the plane," Fulbright breathed a long, reflective breath. "Do you know what he told me?"

Having spoken to the First Sea Lord about the remarkable man in whom Sir David Luce had personally entrusted the command of the Navy's most modern and most dangerous warship, he did not actually need to hear what Captain Simon Collingwood, RN, had said to the US Secretary of State because he could guess *exactly* what he had probably said.

Fulbright told him anyway.

"He said he owed it to the memory and to the families and the friends of *his fellow submariners* who died on the Scorpion to make public what really happened that day."

"The Prime Minister won't consider it," Tom Harding-Grayson told the other man. "Nor will Her Majesty. Her Majesty has taken a particular interest in Captain Collingwood's career."

The two men thought their thoughts as the big car purred down the narrow, uneven roads towards Oxford, paced ahead and behind by Ferret armoured cars and trucks carrying the Secretary of State's personal close bodyguard. Overhead, an RAF Westland Wessex helicopter thrummed low, quartering the countryside ahead of the convoy with machine gunners ready at both port and starboard open doors.

"Funny old business in Bucharest, don't you think?" The Englishman asked presently.

"It is a 'funny old business'," Fulbright agreed, noncommittally. "When will you know the result of this 'no confidence' vote in your Parliament, Tom?"

"The vote will be a ten o'clock tonight."

"I was surprised when you said you'd come out to the airport? I thought you'd want to be there?"

"I'm not actually a Member of the House of Commons. Margaret's given me my marching orders; I am to stand in the next General Election or if there is a suitable by-election in the meantime. I warned her I'd be standing

as a Labour candidate but she did not bat an eyelid." He sobered a little. "I'm not at all sure what we will do if the vote goes against us tonight. There will probably have to be an election of some kind although the state the country is in at the moment I don't know how practical that would be."

The Foreign Secretary checked his watch.

"Would you care to visit our new Parliament? They'll be getting under way about now?"

Spaces had been reserved for the two men in the Great Hall of Corpus Christi College. They entered just as Iain Macleod was settling back onto the pew below the Speaker's low raised stage and a scrawny man with tousled fair hair and a disjointed, disorganised air slowly rose to his feet several rows back on the opposite side of the hall.

Fulbright did an inadvertent double take at the eccentric figure around whom a crowd of uniformly grey, sour-faced and dourly dressed people had clustered in undisguised malicious anticipation. He was a little surprised by the pleading, almost sorrowful voice that after several moments waiting for quiet, projected itself effortlessly into the corners of the ancient auditorium.

"Mr Speaker," Michael Mackintosh Foot, the fifty-year-old Member of Parliament for Ebbw Vale appealed plaintively, "I beg to move that this House has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government."

The American Secretary of State was struck by the inherently gladiatorial nature of the debate, face to face, the challenge hurled down like a gauntlet at one's opponent's feet; for all its gentility this substitute chamber was more bear pit than debating club.

The man at Fulbright's side observed the slowly unfolding drama with mixed and somewhat perturbed emotions.

Tom Harding-Grayson had known Michael Foot for many years. Not that closely, admittedly, because they moved in different social circles but as acquaintances who sometimes talked in corridors, and occasionally at literary and journalistic events which they had coincidentally both been attending. The Foreign Secretary's wife, Pat, had made a name for herself as a novelist in the early fifties, although her material had gone a little out of fashion when she began to introduce politics to her writing. Pat had always been more publicly open about her left of centre leanings, not an option open to him as a career civil servant in the Foreign Office. In any event, he had always enjoyed friendly relations with Michael Foot, a profoundly decent, kind and

well-intentioned man who was happiest operating on the left wing of his Party, and was, to boot, a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

"In this debate I do not plan to rehash the mistakes that were made by 'Supermac'," Harold MacMillan's nickname, spoken in a fashion dripping with sarcasm, stirred a rumble of discontent on the rows behind Margaret Thatcher's front bench. "What profit is there dwelling on the mistake's of 'Supermac's' motley collection of Tory time-servers, placemen and relations? The dead cannot speak and the broken and the disposed have no voice in our *National Government*!"

If Michael Foot had stepped across the aisle and slapped his Party Leader James Callaghan in the face with a wet fish – a large flounder - he could not have signalled a more fundamental personal breach or made certain a more final and irrevocable fracturing of the Labour and Co-operative Party of the United Kingdom.

"Oh, my goodness," Tom Harding-Grayson muttered.

"What is it?" Fulbright asked lowly, the keenest of political animals sensing that he was missing something important.

"I've just realised what Margaret is up to, Bill." As he spoke an unconsciously impish smile played on Tom Harding-Grayson's pale lips. He suddenly found himself considering what part his old friend Henry Tomlinson might have played in the setting of this particular trap; and then took himself to task for thinking his old friend capable of such Machiavellian logic. No, this was the Angry Widow's doing. Either she was the most naturally gifted and cunning strategic political thinker of her generation; or she had inadvertently stumbled onto a magic formula with which to change the rules of the game.

Michael Foot had hurled the most dreadful insult any member of the Labour Party could throw in the face of his leader; he had accused him of betraying his roots and siding with the enemies of the working classes. He had accused him of aping Ramsey MacDonald, who had joined the Conservatives and the Liberals in the National Government of the 1930s. MacDonald had torn the Labour Party asunder, split it down the middle and the scars remained, red raw and livid three decades later. Whatever happened today a significant part of the Labour Party would go its own way, fatally undermining James Callaghan's leadership. Callaghan must have known this

was the most likely outcome of any attempt to validate the Unity Administration's ongoing mandate but if he had baulked at the prospect, he could have resigned from the Government at any time in the last few weeks and probably, still retained the leadership of what was left of his Party. That he had elected to await the outcome of the confidence vote suggested that he too had identified a once in a generation opportunity to decisively break and remake the landscape of British politics.

In the same way James Callaghan had written off the left wing of his own party, Margaret Thatcher had realised that little could be achieved while she, and the nation, were weighed down by the rump of 'Supermac's' faithful old guard. The back woodsmen from the shires, the little Englanders, the men who dreamed of no more for the country than its restoration to some idyllic rural stasis that had never actually existed other than in the poems of A.E. Houseman, and who saw everything in terms of class and one's rightful station, had no role in any of the futures envisaged by the grocer's daughter from Grantham. The class which had sleepwalked into the Third World War had had their day and if they chose, en masse, to march out of the Conservative Party and enlist in the ranks of the Powellites, well, she would be the last person in England to shed a tear. Margaret Thatcher was a small 'c' conservative who had been tolerated and condescended to by the grandees of her Party before the war, one of a handful of *token* women in what, under Harold MacMillan, had been a middlingly indolent and very complacent privileged Gentleman's *club* populated by and large by the 'right sort of chaps' who belonged to the 'right sort of clubs'.

Michael Foot had thrust his left hand inside his jacket and adopted the declamatory pose he had patented on a hundred platforms; the exact pose he had struck at the end of each annual Aldermaston CND march in Trafalgar Square. He fixed the Prime Minister in his sights.

She met his stare with steely blue eyes that glinted with the light of battle and a hint of something that he thought, just for a moment, he recognised as pity...

No, I must be imagining it.

The public knew Michael Foot for his fiery rhetoric and his deeply held convictions. He was a man who had remained true to his socialist beliefs through thick and thin. He had condemned Neville Chamberlain's Government for appeasing fascism; he had been Aneurin Bevan's biographer

and disciple but broken with him and for some years with the rest of the Labour Party, after Bevan had renounced unilateral nuclear disarmament in 1957. Returning to Parliament after a five-year absence in 1960 he had promptly rebelled and had had Labour Whip withdrawn by the Party's then leader, Hugh Gaitskell. The rift had been so deep he had not come back into the fold until Gaitskell's death – or rather, disappearance – on the night of the October War. Outside of Parliament Foot had enjoyed a long and varied career in journalism including becoming the editor of the major organ of the left in British politics, *Tribune*, and writing for the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Herald*. Before the October War he was one of, if not *the* highest profile political pundits on British television, and despite his chronic asthma no man had worked harder or spoken on more soap boxes than Michael Foot in opposition to Supermac's *ancien regime*.

Michael Foot's many friends and widespread admirers knew him to be a generous man whose motives were pure and whose disputatious nature was leavened with a gentleness of spirit and a disinclination to cling overlong to a grudge.

He was that most rare thing; a genuinely good man.

Watching from the wings Tom Harding-Grayson felt a little sorry for him, it was not enough to be a 'good man' if one had a fatal flaw. Michael Foot honestly believed that the pen was mightier than the sword and that there was nothing reasonable men – and women – could not resolve by means of free and frank discussion.

The Angry Widow did not believe in any of those things.

She believed that actions spoke louder than words.

Michael Foot, a decent and rational man who tended to get carried away by the persuasiveness of his own rhetoric had made the mistake of assuming that his political foe, the thirty-eight-year-old widowed mother of twins, did not actually know what she was doing; when in fact, she had brought all her most dangerous political enemies to this one place on this day for one reason.

One reason!

Yes, she could lose everything with a single throw of the dice but she did not think that was going to happen. There was nothing Michael Foot could do – or wanted to do, his principles would not permit it - or say that would save the old Labour Party tearing itself apart this afternoon.

Enoch Powell might yet see the trap and withdraw his hand; although

that was unlikely. Even if he recognised the trap for what it was he probably would not be able to stop himself testing it.

Michael Foot, the loquacious and honourable scion of the left, and Enoch Powell the implacable standard bearer of the right of the old pre-war Unionist cause; dinosaurs both, were racing to embrace their inevitable downfall.

Neither man could see beyond the illusion of the attractive, feisty widow with the hectoring manner.

Neither man recognised the bare-knuckle street fighter standing behind the blond bombshell’s dazzling smile.

Chapter 25

Monday 2nd March 1964
Island of Samothrace, Aegean Sea

The big ships had been sighted about an hour before sunset. It had been a warm, clear day with light winds that barely ruffled the surface of the sea. The lookout positioned high on the hillside behind the abandoned fishing village had seen the smoke first, a rising column of grey-blackness slowly emerging out of the haze. Several of the Securitates had got excited and started babbling about taking the boat out to meet the approaching ships.

'They will kill us all!' Nicolae Ceausescu had rasped. His voice was like the rest of his emaciated, pain-wracked body, a whispering shadow. His beard had grown, his hair was a filthy tousled mess and he stank. They all stank. They were all hungry and thirsty for every well and cistern had been fouled with dead goats and dogs and cats before the island's tormentors had dragged its original population off in big grey warships; just like the one's preparing to anchor offshore in the gathering dusk.

Within hours of interrogating the crew of the small damaged fishing boat which had put into the port of Samothraki to make repairs over a week ago, the band of survivors had camouflaged the wreck of the Mil Mi-6 helicopter in which they had escaped from Bucharest two weeks ago. The boat's crew, two men in their late twenties, a teenage boy and a sinewy hard-faced woman in her forties only spoke Greek but eventually Ceausescu's Securitate bodyguards had discovered that the 'Russians' had first come to Samothrace about six months ago.

They had returned several times since.

First 'they came to steal our boats and our young men'. Only a few of the island's women had been molested on that first visit; the next time the 'big ships' returned the 'Russian soldiers' had rounded up all the men and *every* woman was 'violated', even little girls. Some of the women were killed; the rest had been loaded onto a small rusty merchant ship while their surviving men folk were forced to watch by soldiers in Red Army uniforms carrying Kalashnikov assault rifles. Afterwards the soldiers had marched the

village's men away; there had been shooting and, in the morning, there were bodies floating in the water all along the shore.

Ceausescu had ordered his Securitates to treat the woman from the fishing boat 'with respect'. He had been intensely irritated to learn the Securitates had beaten up the two men and the boy.

How the fuck did the imbeciles think they were going to get off this fucking island?

Fortunately, neither of the adults or the kid was seriously hurt, just bloody, angry and uncooperative for several days.

The former First Deputy Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Romania still lived, but only just. However, his pain-addled mind was slowly regaining a little of its former acuity, he had taken command of the survivors again and begun to re-assert his will over his fate.

Once the middle-aged woman from the fishing boat had understood she was not to be raped by her captors and that her men folk were not to be shot out of hand – and that the rough stuff had been a mistake, a misunderstanding that would not be repeated - she had organised the boiling of water, and using gestures and drawing pictures in the sand, persuaded Ceausescu's bodyguards to let her men bait lines and start to fish in the shallow water around their grounded boat. The resulting supply of clean drinking water and the nourishment provided by sudden bounty of a large number of small fish, had marginally improved the morale and the physical condition of every member of the marooned group.

Not least that of its leader, Nicolae Ceausescu.

His right leg ended in a suppurating stump several centimetres above where his knee had been. The stump throbbed, ached, and frequent spasms of agony lanced up his butchered thigh and stabbed him like red hot needles in his groin and abdomen. He would have been dead but for chance. Unknown to him, one of his Securitate bodyguards had studied medicine in the 1945 war. The man had never finished his training; the Fascists having interned him during his second year at medical school in Timisoara. The man had apologised to Ceausescu a few days ago when it was apparent that his patient had recovered sufficiently to understand what he was saying.

'I had no surgical tools but you would have died, Comrade.'

Ceausescu's grip on life remained tenuous.

He was a bag of bones, incapable of sitting up without helping hands.

The Greek woman's name was Eleni.

Eleni reminded him a little of his wife, Elena, although notwithstanding her stern demeanour and obvious impatience with men in general and those around her now in particular, she seemed utterly lacking in the suspicion and meanness of spirit which had characterised his wife's nature. Eleni had tried from the outset to be of service to him. Mostly, Ceausescu assumed, because she realised that her fate and that of her three men folk depended on the whim of the dying leader of the bandits into whose hands they had fallen.

Before Eleni began to nurse him, Nicolae Ceausescu had been contemplating asking one of the Securitate to blow his brains out. Death would be a merciful relief. They dribbled gut-rot Ouzo into his mouth when the pain got too much for him; they had no drugs, no antiseptics and no potable water. Although he did not want to die; anything was preferable to the living Hell to which he had been condemned.

And then Eleni had begun to nurse him.

She had him moved from the dark stinking hovel where the group had been hiding, taken outside where, sheltered by a windbreak he could feel the sun on his face and she could wash him. Each morning she cleaned his stump with sea water, each day it hurt terribly but a little less than the day before. There was something about the touch of her hands on his body, contact again with gentle hands that somehow made his suffering bearable...

Now it was Eleni's lean, strong arms which supported him while he studied the big grey ships steaming imperiously towards the island. His strength exhausted he lowered the ancient Zeiss binoculars. A Sverdlov class cruiser, half-a-dozen smaller vessels and a second big ship sailing slightly apart from the rest of the flotilla farther out to sea trailing a long cloud of black, sooty smoke.

Eleni picked the binoculars out of his hands.

A Securitate took them and studied the approaching fleet in the failing light.

"They look like they are coming here, Boss," the man decided unhappily.

Eleni started talking.

"What is she saying?" Ceausescu demanded. His voice was a feeble croak.

There was a pause, and more incoherent babbling.

"She says thinks the Russians cleared the island to use it for practice..."

Before the implications of this could sink in there was a ripple of flame in the distance, livid crimson fireballs travelling quickly across the water brilliantly illuminating dark silhouettes otherwise virtually invisible in the descending gloom.

The shrieking of the four eleven-inch shells fired from the main battery of the Turkish battlecruiser Yavuz arrived moments after the projectiles smashed into the coastline about a mile east of Samothraki.

Closer inshore the side the Russian cruiser briefly disappeared behind a wall of flame and billowing smoke as all twelve of her six-inch guns belched a broadside.

“They’re practicing landing troops,” the Securitate with the binoculars suggested as the cruiser’s broadside ripped up the side of Mount Fengari two miles from the group’s exposed position.

Nicolae Ceausescu’s mind was working overtime.

This was the first naval activity they had seen since their arrival on Samothrace. If the Soviets were about to launch Phase Two of Operation Nakazyvat these waters would surely be filled with ships heading south; cruisers, destroyers, troopships and tankers, and the skies ought to be black with aircraft. Phase Two of Operation Nakazyvat – *Chastise* in English – would begin with a renewed assault in the west, *maskirovka,* more smoke and mirrors to make the British fall back on Malta ahead of the main blow – the *Schwerpunkt,* the real ‘centre of gravity’ of the offensive – fell over two thousand kilometres to the east seventy-two hours later upon the unsuspecting, weak forces protecting Persia’s northern border with the Soviet Socialist Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and naval assault groups steamed down the Caspian Sea to seize a bridgehead half-way to the Persian capital, Tehran.

“We cannot stay here,” Ceausescu decided.

Eleni must have understood what he said from the tone of his words. She spoke with voluble alarm.

“She says that the boat is still leaking and that there are too many of us, Comrade,” the Securitate translated after a short delay.

“How many can the boat hold without sinking?”

There was a further, squabbling interchange.

“Eight or nine adults, anymore and there won’t be room to man the hand pumps and the boat might sink in a storm.”

Ceausescu did the arithmetic.

There was no room on board the fishing boat for the crew of the helicopter.

“We’ll leave as soon as it is fully dark. We’ll leave the Air Force people behind on the island. See to it.”

An hour later with the sound of the brief burst of AK-47 fire ringing in his ears Ceausescu was gently lowered onto the one uncluttered area of deck – between the small wheel house and the hatch to the hold – and the old, creaking, leaking fishing boat drifted into deeper water. Onboard were the two Greek men, the boy, the woman Eleni, Ceausescu and his four surviving Securitates.

The big ships off shore had ceased firing once it was fully dark.

The fishing boat’s mast was raised, it was too risky to start the ancient engine and besides, the fuel tank was nine-tenths empty. The canvass slapped the mast loudly before it caught the wind, the boat heeled and began to slowly edge to the east, away from the lethal grey warships hiding somewhere close by in the night.

Exhausted, Nicolae Ceausescu fell into a nightmare tormented stupor.

His wife, Elena, was looking at him with accusative eyes. His children, Valentin aged sixteen, Zola whose fifteenth birthday had been yesterday, and twelve-year-old Nicu were viewing him as if he was a caged zoo animal.

“Why did you betray us, Papa?”

“I did not...”

The faces of his children faded.

He was standing next to his wife Elena in an overgrown yard and his hands were tied behind his back.

“This is your fault!” Elena was mouthing, her face a mask of contempt.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the machine gun opened fire. The noise was deafening; it seemed to go on forever. Why was there no pain?

He opened his eyes.

His wife lay at his feet, her body a broken, bloody mess.

Her eyes were alive, pits of hatred burning into his soul.

Ceausescu could not catch his breath; his chest was constricting...

“Keep him quiet!” One of the Securitates hissed.

The Greek woman, Eleni, had her hand over Ceausescu’s mouth. She risked lifting it for a second and when the man remained silent, she relaxed,

patted his chest and then his cheek. She leaned over him, breathed in his ear muttering words of comfort which he did not understand. The woman smelled of sweat and fish but her breasts were soft and warm as she cradled his head.

The tiny fishing boat rocked violently in the wake of a big ship. Water splashed over the side, washed across the deck. Ceausescu could hear the sound of a big ship's engines, the swish of her stem cleaving the clear waters of the Aegean. The taint of smoke came to his nostrils.

Coal smoke...

"Start the engine!"

The boat vibrated and shook, the propeller thrashed under the stern.

Ceausescu saw the approaching wall of iron and steel shouldering towards the tiny fishing boat in the faint moonlight. The onrushing ship was not so much slicing through the sea, as muscling it aside, a great ungainly raft of metal thrusting forward gushing sparks and cinders from her stacks.

"What the fuck is it?" Somebody asked, not quite believing what he was seeing.

And then the coal-fired leviathan built for a war that had ended over forty-five years ago was upon them.

Chapter 26

Wednesday 4th March 1964
Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk Military District

Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian, the Armenian born fifty-eight-year-old commander of the newly formed 1st Trans-Caucasian Front had flown over fifteen hundred kilometres to personally communicate his unhappiness to Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov.

The office of the Commander of the Soviet Armed Forces was a bare walled, austere place. The room was large and the great man's desk was huge but other than a couple of gun metal filing cabinets and a few dusty books piled on the sill of the wide southern-facing windows, the lair of one of the three most powerful men in the post-war Soviet Union was positively *nondescript*.

"It is my understanding that subsequent to the," Babadzhanian was a dapper, handsome man whom at a distance would have been mistaken for a man twenty, not just six years, his superior's junior, "er, mission to Bucharest, certain senior Romanian Politburo members remain unaccounted for, Comrade Marshal?"

Vasily Chuikov had not attempted to bully Babadzhanian. It would have been a waste of time. The man was a highly competent, driven professional whose loyalty to the Party was unquestioned and like Chuikov, Babadzhanian was a highly decorated hero of the Great Patriotic War.

Chuikov nodded. He wanted to keep this interview informal but Hamazasp Khachaturi obviously needed to clear the air so he had refrained from ordering him to sit down. Chuikov lit another cigarette.

"That bastard Ceausescu got away," he confirmed. "We got his wife and kids." KGB snatch squads had seized the wives and children of other high ranking Romanian Politburo and senior military commanders in the hours before the city was wiped off the face of the planet. Good riddance! "If the bastard turns up he'll think twice about betraying us."

"That's not the point, Comrade Vasily Ivanovich," Babadzhanian retorted. "We know that the sensitive information the Securitate obtained

from Comrade Politburo Member Andropov has the potential to undermine Operation Nakazyvat. It is therefore imperative that there should be no further delays in commencing Phase Two *actions*!"

Chuikov sighed like a bear with an ulcer.

He understood why Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin had vetoed his desire to take field command of the forthcoming operation – the 'collective leadership' needed him to guard their backs lest the 'young Turks' who had stayed loyal when Krasnaya Zarya had seemed to be the shape of things to come grew unduly restive – but it still rankled deeply. Notwithstanding that the he had fought enough battles and won enough glory for ten men in his long, bloody and extraordinarily distinguished career in the Red Army, Chuikov yearned for a glorious final curtain call. However, at the end of the day he had accepted that the best place for a man of his status and experience – and with his bad lungs and hardening cardiac arteries – was probably holding the hands of the men ultimately responsible for the fate of the Mother Country. Once he had come to terms with this there had only been one man he trusted to execute the crucial eastern element of Operation Nakazyvat.

Operation Chastise!

If Chuikov ever discovered the name of the staff officer who had thought up that name he would promote him two ranks! Other than wiping out two-thirds of their cities he could think of no better way to 'chastise' the Americans and their lap dog allies, the British, than by cutting their World in half and denying them the Arabian oil upon which their wealth and long-term prosperity ultimately depended.

Phase Two: the race to the Indian Ocean.

Perhaps, the 'collective leadership' would let Chuikov take over the reins for Phase Three; the actual conquest of Arabia? At his age he had earned his place in the sun. Realistically, he doubted Brezhnev and Kosygin would take pity on him but life was nothing if not full of surprises.

Babadzhanian stood stiffly in front of Chuikov's desk.

"We lack strategic depth," he reminded the man who was presently, Commander of all Soviet Land, Air and Sea Forces, Minister of Defence, First Deputy Secretary of the Soviet Union, and the third most senior surviving member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Chuikov did not care for his plethora of grand titles because he still liked to think of himself as a simple soldier's soldier. "We cannot allow ourselves to

be embroiled in static battles," Colonel-General Babadzhanian insisted. "We must strike before the West can mobilize."

"The KGB assures me that the West is preoccupied with its problems in the Eastern Mediterranean," Vasily Chuikov countered. "Maskirovska, Comrade Colonel-General! Maskirovska!"

"*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*," Babadzhanian snorted. "I don't remember those bastards warning us *Krasnaya Zarya* was about to seize the Samara Military District and start shooting our last fucking ICBMs at the British!"

Chuikov did not disagree. It had been the KGB which had assured the Politburo that it was so safe to send a high-level diplomatic mission to parley with the Romanian leadership that it had sent its own Second Secretary, Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov along for the ride! If Andropov ever got out of hospital he would have the analysts responsible for *that* appraisal publicly eviscerated.

Chuikov let Babadzhanian continue uninterrupted.

"There are worrying signs that the Americans and the British are stepping up their aerial reconnaissance activities. They seem to be targeting increasingly sensitive areas."

"The Americans haven't sent any more U-2s," the older man grunted. "Maybe we've shot them all down?"

Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian frowned.

Chuikov chuckled and held up his hands.

"Things are what they are, Comrade," he said, his ugly, evilly cherubic features creased, "you can't have your precious paratroopers back quite yet. And that's that! They are still *tidying* up the mess in Romania."

Both men knew that was a laughable understatement.

The forces sent to put down *Krasnaya Zarya* had ended up having to block a major Yugoslav Army mechanized thrust towards the Romanian border. With *Krasnaya Zarya* gutted as a fighting force other, previously loyal and reliable units had crumbled and in places a rout had only been averted by an airlift of large numbers of the elite shock troops earmarked for Babadzhanian's 'Southern Push' into the Balkans. The Romanian 'fuck up' – there was no other appropriate description for what had happened in Bucharest – had already delayed the launch of Phase Two of Operation Nakazyvat by three weeks. Eight tank brigades ought to have been racing

south by now.

The interrogation of captured senior figures in the Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej regime, including high ranking Securitates, conclusively proved the Romanians had been planning to play a double game all along. They had seen *Krasnaya Zarya* as a direct threat to the survival of the Romanian State, breathed a collective sigh of relief when most of the lunatics and zealots departed to rape and pillage in Greece and the Balkans; and then panicked when the missiles began to fly. By the time Kosygin, Andropov and Chuikov had flown in to Otopeni Air Base large tracts of the country were out of control, civil war was spreading like wildfire and the leadership was looking for a way out.

Some kind of appeal to the West; it was not exactly clear what Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had had in mind because the only man he seemed to have confided in was Ceausescu. The KGB wanted to give Ceausescu's wife 'the treatment' but neither Brezhnev nor Kosygin thought that was a good idea. If Ceausescu ever re-surfaced he was far more likely to be reasonable if his wife and kids still looked more or less the way they did the last time he saw them. Of course, if he turned up dead then the KGB could do whatever they wanted with the little shit's bitch wife and his whining brats.

"You know as well as I do, Comrade Colonel-General, that Phase Two cannot be launched until the Navy is ready," Chuikov told his subordinate. "That business at Constanta completely fucked up the Navy's plans."

Actually, the Navy had 'fucked up' its own plans by needlessly shelling the dockyards and in the process, blowing up its *own* arsenal and setting fire to its *own* oil storage facilities. If the Navy had waited a couple of days minesweepers would have cleared the deep-water channels and re-opened the port without a single shot having to be fired in anger.

The Red Air Force was almost as bad as the Red Navy. It had bombed and strafed several forward air fields in Bulgaria and Anatolia, destroying scores of their own aircraft on the ground and killing hundreds of irreplaceable air and ground crews. The abandoned former NATO air base at Incirlik had been wrecked by a high-altitude raid by seven Tupolev Tu-95s, in which over ninety tons of high explosive and incendiaries had been scattered across the target, rendering it unusable for weeks. It was a miracle Phase Two had only been delayed another twenty-eight days.

"All the Navy has to do is *demonstrate* in the southern Aegean, Comrade

Marshal. A couple of cruisers and few destroyers can manage that!"

One of the reasons Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov had *not* wanted a face to face interview with either Babadzhanian, or his equivalent ground forces commander in the west, or his naval or air force counterparts was that after the Romanian *fuck up*, it was vitally important that there should be no further breaches of security. The final planning for Phase Two of Operation Nakazyvat had therefore, been rigorously compartmentalised; meaning that none of the senior commanders knew *in detail* what any of the other commanders were tasked to do, or necessarily, what resources had been or would be allocated to them.

For example, Babadzhanian, as ground forces commander in the East had no 'need to know' that the mission assigned to the Black Sea Fleet and the former Turkish vessels now incorporated on its roster, had been dramatically upgraded following the degradation of the British Royal Navy's offensive capabilities during Phase One of Operation *Chastise*. The Red Navy, supported by the Red Air Force was now tasked with seizing and maintaining control of the Eastern Mediterranean and *destroying* what survived of the British Mediterranean Fleet and any American warships that were so ill-advised to approach Cyprus. It was too good an opportunity to miss; the USS Independence, one of the Yankees' so-called 'super-carriers' was currently at Gibraltar and the British only had a couple of small aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean. The Red Air Force bombers and fighters scheduled to move to forward bases in Greece and Crete ahead of the launch of Phase Two should make short work of these 'little' carriers. In any event, Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian did not need to know about the naval aspects of Operation *Chastise*. He had quite enough to worry about preparing his two – presently somewhat weakened - mechanized armies for the Blitzkrieg into Persia and Iraq.

"We shall let the Navy worry about that," Chuikov growled. "I personally selected you to command the most vital element of Operation Nakazyvat. I don't need you worrying about shit that isn't your responsibility, Comrade Colonel-General."

Babadzhanian had commanded the 20th Tank Brigade at the Battle of Kursk, the greatest clash of armour in history; and spent the rest of the Great Patriotic War driving the Nazis all the way back to Berlin. In an army replete with gifted and accomplished exponents of armoured warfare, few could

match Babadzhanian's accomplishments. The trouble was that the man knew it and humility was not his strong suit. Chuikov did not care; if anybody could drive the eight armoured divisions of the two tank armies waiting like giant murderous coiled springs in the Caucasus, fifteen hundred kilometres south from the northern border of Iran across mountains, burning deserts and the floodplains of two of the planet's greatest rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, all the way to Abadan and Basra on the Persian Gulf that man was probably Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian.

"Don't even think of trying to go over my head to the Politburo!" Vasily Chuikov barked with jovial menace that would have sounded hollow coming from any other man.

Chapter 27

Wednesday 4th March 1964
USS Iowa (BB-61), Philadelphia Naval Dockyard

The cold spring air of the grey morning shimmered with the heat rising above the aft stack of the battleship as the tugs hauled the eighth hundred and eighty-seven feet long forty-five-thousand-ton deadweight of the USS Iowa, out into the main channel for the short journey to the Fitting Out Basin. A flotilla of small craft bobbed on the murky waters of the Delaware River as the horns of the circling patrol boats discouraged the overly curious or excitable among the bystanders and the media launches, from getting too close to the leviathan.

The USS Iowa's nine 16-inch 50-calibre Mark 7 Naval Rifles had been raised to their maximum elevation of forty-five degrees. That was a nice touch by the Navy, thought Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Vice-President of the United States as he stood on the bridge of the behemoth surrounded by a crowd of TV men, jabbering press people – men and women – and a scrum of jostling photographers.

The battleship's captain, a lean grey-haired man who had commanded one of the USS Iowa's sisters during the Korean War ignored the interlopers.

Sixty-one-year-old Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt had left the US Navy in 1957 to manage his family's stud farm in Maryland. He had freely confessed to the Vice-President that 'patriotism be dammed, sir', and that nothing short of the command of 'one of the Iowas' would have induced him to return to active service. Schmidt was one of those old-time military types whose dignity was impermeably impenetrable; amidst the near chaos on the bridge of his ship he stood alone, aloof as if surrounded by an invisible armoured cloak.

Today was a shameless campaign publicity stunt for the Kennedy-Johnson Presidential ticket; the President would have been the star of the show – the unimaginably iconic theatricality of the Iowa being transferred from the Naval Inactive Maintenance Facility of the Philadelphia Naval Dockyard to the up-river Fitting Out Basin was something a candidate for

public office could not buy for love or money – had not he and Bobby decided at the last minute that the forthcoming Mid-West Democratic Primaries and the delayed, *Iowa Caucasus* could not be taken for granted despite the pollsters' predictions of a landslide. Even though there was no prospect whatsoever of a realistic Democratic opponent suddenly emerging from the back woods it did no harm to take local wannabees and malcontents seriously in the first rounds of an election campaign. The Vice-President was not about to complain about the President's absence. He was the one who had ended up standing on the bridge of a battlewagon looking decidedly *Presidential*. Not so long ago the Kennedy brothers would not have let him get anywhere near a jamboree like this; it was an indicator of how relations at the top of the Administration had improved since the Battle of Washington that the President, the Attorney General and he had reorganised the schedule of the 'top team' for the next five days over coffees and Kentucky bourbon without a single cross word yesterday afternoon.

LBJ had not met Captain Schmidt until that morning.

The commanding officer of the Iowa was not a man easily, if at all, impressed by politicians. That said, he was an old-fashioned gentleman whose apparently mild-mannered exterior clearly masked the soul of a workaholic, albeit paternal slave-driving martinet. According to Admiral David McDonald, the Chief of Naval Operations, 'Battlewagon Schmidt' was the US Navy's last 'great battleship man'. Schmidt was a gunnery expert who had cut his teeth in the 'battleship navy' of the 1920s and 1930s, been a senior member of the original design team for the Iowas, the Gunnery Officer, and then the Executive Officer of one of the four ships in the class late in the Pacific War. He had been aboard the USS Missouri when the Japanese Surrender was signed and had commanded not one, but two of the leviathans in the years before, during and after the Korean conflict.

The Iowa's safe transfer up river was the responsibility of the River Pilot and the tug masters but Anderson Schmidt had fired up two of Iowa's eight Babcock & Wilcox M-Type boilers and reactivated one of the four Engine Rooms. If something untoward happened he was ready.

'There are four Fire Rooms,' the stiff Richmond-born Virginian had explained, making the entirely reasonable presumption that a Texan Vice-President of the United States of America was unlikely to know his arse from his elbow onboard a Navy ship, 'or Boiler Rooms, as the Brits call them', he

explained. ‘The Fire Rooms each have two boilers, and each Fire Room is located forward of its respective Engine Room. Iowa has four shafts, each with its own Fire Room and Engine Room. Assuming she’s not been long out of dockyard hands and her bottom is relatively clean, the ship can make twenty-six or seven knots with just four of her eight boilers lit. If we want to steam faster we need to fire up everything we’ve got!”

Over a thousand of the Iowa’s two thousand three-hundred-man crew had already reported aboard. As David McDonald had promised, this was an ‘old man’s ship’. Apart from a small cadre of cadets and junior grade lieutenants there were no boy sailors or young men on the Iowa. It was likely that the average age of the battleship’s crew would be in the mid-thirties, perhaps, older. In the rest of the US Navy it was not unusual to find over half a ship’s complement aged under twenty-three years of age.

‘The Chief of Naval Operations wants the old girl in action inside two months,’ Captain Schmidt had smiled, ‘so that’s what Admiral McDonald gets. You can’t train a green kid much in two months. Back in the war,’ the Pacific War of 1944 to 1945 when the four Iowa class ships first came into service, ‘it took us six months to a year to shakedown these beasts. But calling back all *my* old-timers, well, that’s music to my ears, Mr Vice-President.’

LBJ felt like a Greek God chatting man to man with the distinguished-looking Captain of the battleship. He did not just look Presidential swapping anecdotes with Anderson Schmidt, he looked positively *regal* and that image would be flashed across America within hours and across the civilized World in days.

‘Tell me about the big guns, Captain Schmidt?’ He had invited his host.

‘Before they put a ship into mothballs the Navy makes a call about whether she’s ever going to return to service,’ the officer had explained, formally affable. ‘With the Iowas they hedged their bets. In the mothballing refit they didn’t lock everything down and hardly any essential equipment was removed. But,’ he chuckled, ‘the main and secondary batteries were inactivated. The best way to test the hydraulics and electrics is to elevate the big guns. Strictly speaking the main battery turrets are ‘three-gun’, not ‘triple’ turrets. Each gun can be elevated and fired separately, you see, Mr Vice-President.’

LBJ had not known if the Captain of the Iowa was blinding him with

science or simply playing up to the crowd. He had let the man talk.

'Each main battery gun is sixty-six feet long from muzzle to breech face, of which about forty-three feet protrudes from the gun house. Each gun and breech assembly weighs over one hundred and twenty tons. At maximum elevation – as you see them now – each rifle can propel a two thousand seven-hundred-pound armour-piercing round over twenty nautical miles. When the Iowas first joined the Fleet, it was decided that to aid artillery spotters when the ships were bombarding shore targets, each of the four ships in the class should incorporate dye bags into their respective propellant mixes. The USS New Jersey was assigned blue, the USS Missouri red, the USS Wisconsin green and the USS Iowa orange.'

Captain Schmidt had periodically moved away from the Vice-President to confer with his Navigation Officer, a greying, balding veteran in his late fifties, who was the man actually co-ordinating operations with the Pilot and the tug masters.

'What you can actually see of both the main battery and the ten dual-purpose twin 5-inch turrets of the secondary battery,' Anderson Schmidt had continued, 'is only a small proportion of the workings of the turret. Number One and Three main battery turrets extend down four decks below the main deck, Number Two turret placed between Number One turret and the bridge so as to super-fire over Number One turret, goes down five decks. Each turret weighs in excess of two thousand tons. Each turret can be rotated through three hundred degrees of arc at a maximum rate of transit of four degrees per second. The main battery can be fired beyond the beam, that is, 'over the shoulder' with the barrels of either the forward or the after turrets pointing respectively backwards or forwards. We try to avoid 'over the shoulder' *shoots* because the muzzle blast causes havoc in exposed positions in the superstructure. Back in the day the first time we tried it off Iwo Jima it was like being hit by a Kamikaze amidships,' the grey-haired old warrior guffawed affectionately in fond remembrance.

A question had popped into the Vice-President's head.

Notwithstanding he was painfully aware of the pitfalls of trying to pretend to know what one was talking about with so many witnesses – each and every one of them aching to see him make a fool of oneself – he had asked a question.

'I believe the big guns only have a finite number of firings during their

service life, Captain Schmidt?'

'They do indeed, Mr Vice-President. For all their sound and fury, they are tender monsters. Using the propellant available in the 1940s – Nitrated-Cellulose, or as we call it in the trade NC – we got about two hundred and ninety full bore, maximum range 'heavy' projectile-size shoots, out of each barrel.' He waved at the elevated barrels of the great naval rifles. 'After the Pacific War we switched to SPD, that's Smokeless Powder using Diphenylamine as a stabilizer, which doesn't burn as fiercely as NC, which was little better than the old-fashioned cordite mixes used by our first-generation dreadnoughts. SPD extended barrel life to around three hundred and fifty firings. Lately, we think we've cracked how to extend barrel life into the four hundreds. Magical stuff the 'Swedish Additive'!'

LBJ could not stop himself asking: 'The Swedish Additive?'

He had instantly wished he could take back the question the moment it left his lips but like an armour-piercing round launched at supersonic velocity from the barrel of one of the Iowa's big guns he had no way of stopping it short of its explosive landing many, many miles away.

'Highly secret, sir,' Captain Schmidt retorted. 'I can assure you that the old girl can store up to twelve hundred sixteen-inch rounds and we're not going to wear out any of our barrels if we have to use them all.'

Lyndon Baines Johnson had breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Regardless of the machinations of the House of Representatives across the Delaware River at City Hall, the Administration's fortunes were on a seemingly unassailable upward trajectory. All over America men – and a significant number of women - were receiving their re-enlistment papers, the shipyards, aircraft factories and a thousand other defence contractors were recruiting again. Army and Air Force Bases were re-opening, and units reforming. The reactivation of the USS Iowa was like a beacon lit to signal the reawakening of the nation. That very morning the New York Stock Exchange had finally broken through its pre-Battle of Washington level.

Before being driven down to the dock to board the Iowa ahead of her departure from the Naval Inactive Maintenance Facility for her trip up river, Johnson had breakfasted with Lord Franks, the urbane, unflappable British Ambassador.

The British build up for the expedition – *Operation Grantham* - to liberate Northern Cyprus from the now entrenched remnants of the Red

Dawn invasion force was going ahead, albeit a little behind schedule. The ongoing troubles in Northern Ireland had necessitated the transfer of another two battalions of mechanised infantry to the province. Troop levels in the six counties of Ulster now exceeded twenty-five thousand, of which some eighteen thousand were trained infantrymen of exactly the type desperately need for the Cyprus operation, and to reinforce British outposts elsewhere in the Mediterranean and the Middle East; not least around the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula where the Sultan of Oman, and several other neighbouring local potentates were crying out for troops to prop up their tottering regimes.

Oliver, Lord Franks, had been exasperated to learn that Irish-American allegedly 'charitable' and 'humanitarian' groups and societies in of all places, bomb-ravaged South Chicago, Boston and New York were still sending financial support under the cover of a high-profile 'Irish Aid' program to the impoverished Government of the Irish Republic. The British believed that only a tiny proportion of the largesse of American donors was finding its way to the 'impoverished citizens of the twenty-six counties of the Irish Republic'. The situation was intolerable, he complained. But for the maintenance of sea and air communications with Eire from Britain – at no small cost in vital resources to the rest of the United Kingdom – and the Thatcher Administration's willingness to permit food, medicines and other essential 'peaceful' traffic to be transhipped to Dublin from the United States via English and Scottish ports and airports, the Irish Republic would be on its knees, and people would probably be starving in the streets of the capital, Dublin. And yet the current Taoiseach, Fianna Fáil leader Seán Lemass, who before the October War had seemed to be a man with a genuine desire to heal at least some of the old wounds and to develop closer relations with the outside World, was apparently powerless to control the more extreme *Republican* and *Nationalist* elements in his own party and throughout Southern Ireland. Elements of a revitalised Irish Republican Army were waging an increasingly overt war against the British and *Loyalist* – the latter represented by the Ulster Unionist Party – cause in the North from bases in the Republic. Lord Franks had cautioned that if the current situation deteriorated to the point at which the territorial integrity of Ulster was threatened, Prime Minister Thatcher would come under 'extreme and sustained pressure from many sides' to authorise the use of deadly force against the IRA's bases across the border. In that eventuality, the nightmare

prospect of British ground troops invading the South would become inevitable.

Given that the Angry Widow had just delivered a crushing blow to her political opponents in the United Kingdom, Oliver Franks had warned the Vice-President: ‘It would be as well to remind the President that my Prime Minister’s over-riding concern is for the security of her *own* people. If it is a choice between alienating a section of the President’s natural constituency and doing her duty by the people of the United Kingdom and the six counties of Northern Ireland, she will *not* be amenable to calls for moderation.’

The Vice-President had tried to put the discordant note to the back of his mind. The Kennedy brothers – the whole Kennedy clan for that matter – still had a blind spot when it came to Ireland. The British had not minced their words with Jack and Bobby, the trouble was that Bobby in particular, was so out of touch with reality when it came to the ‘Irish Question’ that he had suggested at a dinner – less than a week ago - held in honour of the British Ambassador, the despatch of a US ‘peace-keeping force’ to Ulster. Lord Franks had been so astonished he had almost choked on his steak.

LBJ hated hostages to fortune.

Chapter 28

Friday 6th March 1964
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire

Margaret Thatcher interpreted the sunny morning as an unequivocal endorsement of her decision to fly to Malta. Not even a very unpleasant meeting with the American Ambassador – a man whom she liked and, in many ways, admired – Captain Walter Brenckmann on the subject of Irish-American 'meddling and rabble-rousing in Ulster' had substantially dented her good humour. She planned to forget about Ireland for the next three days. She and the twins were flying to Malta to attend the wedding of the Commander-in-Chief's son to - from everything she had heard - a most remarkable young Maltese woman.

"Jim," she sighed, throwing a patiently exasperated glance at the big, lugubrious man seated beside her in the back of the first of the two armoured Rolls-Royces in the heavily guarded convoy snaking across the English countryside. "I am not going to change my mind. I shall only be gone for seventy-two hours and as you well know, I have complete confidence in *your* ability to deal with whatever comes up in my absence."

James Callaghan, the Leader of what little was left of Her Majesty's loyal opposition – the Labour and Co-operative Party had splintered into three major and several smaller non-aligned factions after the resounding defeat of the no confidence motion in Margaret Thatcher's Unity Administration – was in no mood to share the Prime Minister's optimism or confidence. In fact, he did not really understand what she had to be so pleased about! If the Labour Party had been holed below the waterline and sunk; the dismissive way in which the Angry Widow had seen off the third of her own Party that had rallied behind Enoch Powell, had been just as fatally destructive to the long-term unity of the Conservatives.

His own problems were, of course, the most acute. Anthony Crossland, the Minister of Labour in the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom, and a likely opponent of Michael Foot for the leadership of the newly mooted *Independent Labour Party*, had resigned from the Government, and the

National Executive Committee of the rump of the *old* Labour Party and had tabled a motion demanding his resignation from the Government as a condition of its backing for him as Party Leader.

It was one thing for Margaret Thatcher to talk about breaking the mould of British politics and remaking it in a shape more suited to 'the age in which we live'; but she should not have done it before they had worked out what they were going to put in its place!

"Look," he explained flatly, "let's get one thing straight, Margaret."

"I'm all ears, Jim."

"I will have no part in forming some kind of *National* party. I am a socialist. You are not. Sooner or later, if and when we return to 'politics as normal' we will be on completely opposite sides of the political divide."

"Yes," she agreed. "So far as I am concerned 'politics as normal' resumed over a week ago. The Government has a mandate to govern in the short term that it never had before. A *real* democratic mandate, Jim! In a year's time when we go to the British people; that will be the time to worry about party politics and the verdict of history. By then we shall have made a start on reconstruction and hopefully we will have crushed Red Dawn forever." As always, she was a woman in a hurry. "I think Anthony Crossland acted hastily," she went on. "However, he has made up his mind and that's that. Who did you have in mind to replace him? The Ministry of Labour remains in your Party's gift for the lifetime of this Parliament."

"Barbara Castle," Jim Callaghan retorted, half-expecting an immediate rebuke.

"Oh," the Prime Minister murmured. "I thought she was one of Michael Foot's closest comrades?"

"Philosophically, yes. But not necessarily in terms of practical politics, Margaret."

"Of course." Margaret Thatcher sometimes wished she could think more like a professional politician, less intuitively, less literally. That was precisely why she needed men like Iain Macleod, Airey Neave and perversely, Jim Callaghan around her. She needed people who did not automatically agree with everything she said, and in some cases, were vehemently, ideologically against her. "Will she be able to work with the other members of the Cabinet?"

"That remains to be seen, Prime Minister."

Margaret Thatcher thought for a moment.

"Very well. If you would arrange to informally offer Mrs Castle an invitation to join the Government while I am in Malta please. If she is agreeable please ask Sir Henry Tomlinson to draft an appropriate letter and we will *both* sign it when I get back."

The twins were already waiting at RAF Brize Norton.

The two freshly scrubbed and presented ten-year olds were sitting with Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, the wife of the Foreign Secretary, in the VIP Lounge – nothing very grand, a moderately well-heated room in a Nissen hut behind the hangars guarded by a cohort of the Prime Minister's personal Royal Marine bodyguard – with excited, expectant eyes. Margaret Thatcher hugged her children with unrestrained maternal abandon in a way she would never have done in public before the October War. Presently, she looked up and met the eye of her friend. Pat, 'Patricia' was a name she had only remembered when her husband had been knighted, was sixteen years the Prime Minister's senior and worldly in countless ways Margaret Thatcher was not and probably never would be. Pat had become the twins' nanny and tutor, and in their mother's long absences, their de facto guardian.

Pat Harding-Grayson had travelled with the Prime Minister to the United States in January when she had engineered the Trans-Atlantic rapprochement; she had been Margaret Thatcher's quiet, reassuring *female* counsellor during those fraught days, as well as her trusted couturier and style advisor. Subsequently, Pat had become so involved looking after the twins that she had been unable to travel abroad again. However, for this particular overseas foray there had never been any prospect of her staying at home.

The Prime Minister's personal protection detail – the hand-picked Royal Marines proudly called themselves the AWP, the *Angry Widow's Praetorians* – formed a machine-gun toting honour guard as the two women and the twins bade farewell to the Deputy Prime Minister and boarded the awaiting Comet 4 at the nearby hardstand. A second detail of Royal Marine Commandos had already travelled to Malta to 'secure' the ground ahead of their 'principal's arrival'.

The Royal Air Force had wanted to lay on a special flight for the Prime Minister; she had insisted that her small party – Pat, the twins, herself and two secretaries, one military and one from the Cabinet Secretary's Office – would fly to and return from Malta on scheduled flights. Aviation fuel was

still relatively scarce and the RAF's fleet of transport aircraft was hard-pressed enough without having to accommodate 'freeloading politicians'. Besides, all the papers would now report that she had travelled 'tourist class' and appearances mattered. She was *not* one of those Tories who thought it was her class's right to rule, or who believed she was automatically entitled to every imaginable available perk and privilege. She was determined to be a part of a new classless, one nation Conservative Party. If she stood for anything; it was for change.

What had happened in the Great Hall of Corpus Christi College a little more than a week ago had convinced her that the shackles of the past were far from unbreakable. The Powellites and the socialists had persuaded only ninety-eight members of Parliament to join their unlikely alliance. Another twenty-one MPs had abstained. The other two hundred and sixty-eight Members of the reconvened House of Commons had summarily voted down the 'no-confidence' motion.

After Michael Foot had cavilled scornfully for over an hour Enoch Powell had got to his feet and delivered a withering, positively excoriating – somewhat theological – critique of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom's legitimacy, competence and '*societal morality and high-handed, arrogant usurpation of the fundamental tenets of a constitution born in a field at Runnymede*'. The Prime Minister had not been alone in struggling to and ultimately failing to work out what all that had meant in the Queen's English. The only thing that had not gone to plan was that most of the Ulster Unionists had voted against the Government or abstained because she had not *yet* declared war on the Republic of Ireland. Thus far, Sir Basil Brooke, the Leader of the Unionists had not resigned from the Cabinet but he was living on borrowed time. If he could not deliver his Party or do anything to quieten the situation – even with half the effective strength of the British Army currently committed to the six counties or deployed elsewhere in the United Kingdom in security roles associated with the 'Irish problem' - in the province then by what right did he remain in the Government?

If Margaret Thatcher had learned – perhaps, re-learned was a more accurate description – anything in her short tenure as Prime Minister it was that sooner or later it was pointless compromising with people who simply would not, or could not meet one half-way. The Ulster Unionists had sided with the Conservative Party for a generation while remaining a distinct sect

within the body of Tory politics; now she realised, not without a little sadness, that their singularly undiluted sectarian interests would be almost impossible to accommodate in or reconcile with practically any future she foresaw for the *United* Kingdom. However, this was an open sore upon the body politic of the British Isles that she would leave unpicked today. Today she was off on an adventure with her children and her best friend and awaiting her in Malta was the man she planned to marry.

Assuming, that was, he still wanted to marry her.

It was a mistake to take *anything* for granted these days.

Chapter 29

Friday 6th March 1964
HQ of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Mdina, Malta

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher refrained from beating about the bush because he understood exactly why the man sitting in front of him did *not* want to hear what he was going to say next. This being the case the deed was best done swiftly so they could both swiftly move onto more agreeable territory.

"I'm not quite sure exactly what kind of medal Her Majesty plans to stick on your chest when you get home, Collingwood," he smiled wryly, "but take it from me that it will be a bloody big one!"

Captain Simon Collingwood, still a little pale-skinned in his tropical rig although his forearms, brow and the point of his nose were pink, freshly burned by the Mediterranean sun, was wearing a studiously neutral expression. He had no intention of blotting his copybook with an ill-advised remark.

"Thank you for saying so, sir. One was only doing one's duty to the best of one's ability."

"Quite," the older man agreed. "The First Sea Lord has instructed me to inform you to hand over command of HMS Dreadnought to Commander Forton not later than 23:59 hours this day, Collingwood."

"That's a bit sudden, sir." This was not an objection, merely a dead pan observation in lieu of an objection.

"You will be flying back to England with the Prime Minister on Monday morning. Mrs Thatcher wants to hear all about your adventures."

"Oh, I see..."

Julian Christopher had never met the Dreadnought's illustrious commander until two days ago, at which time he had had no opportunity to exchange more than a few passing professional courtesies. Collingwood had given him a whistle stop tour of his command, introduced him to his officers and men. Every single one of his men, in fact, because that had mattered more than anything to him.

Now he viewed the younger man thoughtfully. The astonishing thing

was that but for the October War this *extraordinary* officer would almost certainly never have got the chance to command HMS Dreadnought! He had never even been on the list for command of one of the modern Oberon and Porpoise class advanced conventional boats! So much for the efficacy of the Submarine Service's command appraisal systems!

"We're sending you home to take over the Bureau of Submarine Construction. The 'Bureau' doesn't exist yet so you'll start with a clean slate. The First Sea Lord has ordered me to notify you that on arrival in England you will be promoted Rear-Admiral. In your new post you will report to Flag Officer Submarines but will have direct access to both the First Sea Lord and the Secretary of State for Defence. Sir David," Julian Christopher explained, trying to remember what his old friend had said verbatim in yesterday's telephone call, "Sir David has advised the Minister of Defence that all work on uncompleted conventional submarines should be temporarily halted and that *all* available resources should henceforth be devoted to the construction of nuclear-powered vessels. He believes that you are the best man to head up the program."

The commanding officer – for the next few hours, anyway – of the Royal Navy's first and only nuclear-powered submarine took the news stoically. Lieutenant-Commander to Rear-Admiral in eighteen months was a lot to take onboard all at once. Ought he to pinch himself?

The thing that registered was not his unexpected promotion – bypassing 'Commodore' – to Admiral, a thing unheard of in modern times but that through his own moral cowardice and unforgivable *dithering*, he now found himself in a deep personal hole that was entirely of his own making.

"I'm flattered, sir." Collingwood hesitated. He badly needed to confess his sins. "It was just that I was hoping to have a little longer to, er, address certain personal matters here on Malta before I was, er, posted behind a desk."

The Commander-in-Chief raised an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry. You must be on that plane on Monday."

"Of course. It can't be helped, sir."

It was not until Simon Collingwood stepped out into the street that it hit him and the numbness began to spread. He walked mechanically, retracing his steps back through the narrow alleyways to the gate house where he had left his driver, smoking and chatting with the other drivers.

HMS Dreadnought had been rushed into service this time last year, since when far too many quick fixes had been implemented to keep her at sea and he had very nearly worked the boat to destruction. The submarine needed six months, possibly a year in dockyard hands and the nearest dockyard which had the specialist technicians, capacity and equipment to heal her many ills was in England, either at Devonport or Barrow-in-Furness. Another option under discussion was to send her to the Electric Boat Yard at Groton, Connecticut. Understandably, with the Scorpion incident unresolved in Philadelphia, the Admiralty did not want *him* going anywhere near the United States of America.

Simon Collingwood had wondered when the axe would fall.

The Bureau of Submarine Construction...

He had thought his masters would take longer to make up their minds about his next posting; never mind, so be it. There was no point moping about things. In a way it made things more straightforward, he had run out of time to prevaricate with himself, or to put off the inevitable any longer. If he was going to make a complete fool of himself it was better to do it sooner rather than later. In this brave new post-war World, it was a criminal mistake to wait overlong, or to put off any decision that was better made quickly.

"Take me to the Pembroke Barracks," he directed his driver. The man had leapt to attention at his return, grinding out his cigarette underfoot.

Collingwood stared out of the window of the car as it pitched and rolled, jolted and groaned over the disintegrating roads that seemed ubiquitous wherever one walked or drove on Malta. The dusty prickly pear bushes were mostly fruitless. He had been advised not to attempt to peel and eat the flesh of the 'pears' raw. Eating them uncooked was a sure-fire guarantee of the runs. He would have liked an opportunity to explore the island, to feel the warm sun on his face. Back in England it would be spring almost, chilly in the mornings, often wet and cloudy, a little dour and sad he suspected.

The last year had been an insane roller coaster; getting Dreadnought to sea, the hurried working up and trials period, the first surreal patrol which had ended with the sinking of the USS Scorpion and the near destruction of the boat. He was still trying to make sense of the controlled madness of the last month; the incident-packed first official war patrol of a Royal Navy nuclear-powered hunter killer submarine. Dreadnought had steamed into the Grand Harbour with a Jolly Roger flying from the raised periscope stack, the

first submarine to return to Malta flying a Jolly Roger since World War II.

However, the thing he would never forget as long as he lived was the expression in Maya Hayek's eyes as she looked back at the submarine in the moments before she and the others were driven off in the Bedford trucks taking her to the refugee reception centre at the Pembroke Barracks.

He had demanded to know where the twenty-two refugees, two old men and the twenty women and children he had rescued from their sinking boats between Cyprus and Crete – in what already seemed like another lifetime - were being taken, what was going to happen to them and who exactly was responsible for their immediate welfare. He had delayed their departure for over an hour until he had been reassured, exhaustively on all counts, by an irritated lieutenant-colonel on the C-in-C's staff.

It had transpired that there were quarters already allocated to the refugees, that they would be checked and assessed by medical officers and allocated new documents as soon as they arrived at the Pembroke Barracks Reception Camp. Inevitably, the refugees would be stateless for a period while it was established if they wished to remain on the Maltese Archipelago, or to travel on elsewhere. They would *not* be 'sent back to wherever they came from unless they so wished' although nobody who had passed through the 'reception' centres yet had ever asked to be sent back! Moreover, while it was likely that officers from the Intelligence Staff would, at some stage, wish to interview the adults this was entirely routine for all newcomers. Thus reassured, Collingwood had spoken to all the adults, and very briefly privately to Maya, promising that he would 'find time to visit you all in your temporary home and satisfy myself that you are well and that you are being properly treated'.

He ought to have visited the Pembroke Barracks before now and he would have if he had not been in such a state of high anxiety. Normally, the calmest of men and as he had discovered in the last few months, positively icy in the direst and most pressured of combat, life and death situations, every time he thought of Maya and the two toddlers, Yelda and Yannis, that she and her younger sister had rescued from her Anatolian village ahead of the Red Dawn horde, the knees of the man of steel who commanded the Royal Navy's most efficient killing machine threatened to turn to jelly.

Simon Collingwood had never really understood how otherwise perfectly rational, sensible men so frequently made complete asses of themselves over

a woman. He had seen it happen innumerable times, shaken his head with despair, pitied the poor dope who had let himself be wrapped around some girl's little finger. It was only now, six weeks into his thirty-ninth year that Simon Horatio Collingwood, that noted confirmed bachelor and misogynistic curmudgeon when it came to allowing feminine distractions to interfere with his naval career, belatedly understood the profound error of his former ways.

He told himself that it was probably just a stupid infatuation but it was no use. He felt what he felt and he was in turmoil. One way or another he had to resolve his churning emotions before he flew back to England. He might never see Maya, or Yelda or Yannis again and he knew that if he flew away without 'sorting things out' he would never forgive himself. He would always wonder if he had done the right thing; or stupidly thrown away the one God-given chance that would ever be presented to him to embrace a partner for life in whatever awaited humankind in this strange, half-demented post-cataclysm World.

At the Pembroke Barracks the duty sergeant at the Guard Office saluted crisply and clattered to attention. He could not get rid of the fierce-looking Navy Captain who had turned up unannounced quickly enough. The camp Adjutant felt pretty much the same way. Escorting his visitor deeper into the establishment past rows of huts erected between ancient limestone fortifications, the sound of hammering grew louder.

"Some chaps from one of the destroyers in the hands of the Admiralty Dockyard at Senglea were detailed to come up here and, well, improve the condition of the accommodation for the displaced persons who are being sent to us," the Adjutant explained.

It transpired that the 'chaps' in question were wearing caps with the badge 'Talavera' on the brim and were being supervised by a four-square red-headed and bearded bruiser of a Petty Officer.

"Petty Officer Griffin, sir!" The man reported. "Talavera, sir! The MDF requested the loan of carpenters and electricians and suchlike, sir!"

"The *Malta Defence Force*?" Simon Collingwood queried, not unpleasantly or intending in any way to attempt to intimidate the man in front of him.

"Oh, that would be me!" Declared a flustered, girlish voice from behind his right shoulder.

HMS Dreadnought's commanding officer turned around. A slight, very

attractive young woman in her twenties with long, nut brown hair and wide almond eyes returned his stare. She was wearing a pale blue nursing smock and her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows.

"My boss, Surgeon Commander Seiffert," she explained 'was not happy about the new huts. So, she asked me to 'do something about it'."

"Oh, and you would be?"

"Marija Calleja," the woman replied, less flustered than before as she stuck out her right hand and perfunctorily shook Simon Collingwood's larger, much paler hand.

"Collingwood," he responded, knowing the woman's name rang all manner of bells, yet utterly unable to immediately recollect why. "Dreadnought," he added. "I promised the refugees we picked up in the Eastern Mediterranean that I'd personally inspect their quarters and ascertain their wellbeing and so forth when they left my care. I also promised I'd look into any grievances or complaints on their behalf arising from the same." He grimaced, realising that he had inadvertently made the bald statement sound like a threat. "And here I am. It will be one of my last duties as Captain of HMS Dreadnought, I return to England in a day or so."

"Captain Collingwood!" Marija cried, her face suddenly lighting up with delight. She turned to the rough-hewn Petty Officer who was starting to look nervous - if Marija had not detected the implied threat in the four-ringer's introduction, Jack Griffin had - and playfully cuffed his teak-like left arm. "This is Captain Collingwood, Jack!"

Jack Griffin rolled his eyes, momentarily forgetting that what he really wanted to do was dig a hole in the ground and jump into it.

"Peter," Marija explained happily, proudly, "my intended, sent Jack and his boys over here as soon as he heard Margo, sorry, that's Surgeon Commander Seiffert, was angry about the state of things here."

Suddenly, Simon Collingwood's feet touched terra firma anew.

He realised he was confronted by '*the Marija Calleja*' the fiancée of 'the famous son of the famous Fighting Admiral'. Wasn't the wedding tomorrow?

"The wedding is tomorrow?" He asked like an idiot.

Marija did not notice.

"Margo sent me here because I was being very 'irritating'," she confessed. "She said I would be happier if I was 'fully occupied'. So, she

sent me here to ‘irritate’ somebody else.” Marija’s thoughts were moving at hundreds of miles per hour and had been for days. Tonight, she had to go home and endure her Mama’s prattling and panic, and her Papa’s well-meaning attempts to convince her that everything was going to be ‘just fine’ tomorrow. “Jack,” she decided. “Send somebody to find Maya and the children.” When the red-headed and bearded Petty Officer hesitated, she added: “Chop! Chop!”

Jack Griffin shrugged, saluted and backed away. It wasn’t entirely clear whether he had saluted the stern-eyed four ring post captain or Marija Calleja. Not that there was ever any doubt about who was actually in charge.

“You know a Miss Maya Hayek?” Simon Collingwood inquired, again like an idiot, having registered the use of Maya’s name.

“Yes,” Marija nodded. “I was on duty when the people from your submarine arrived. Maya is sort of the leader of the women, so I see her every day I am here.”

“On duty?”

“You are speaking to Nursing Auxiliary First Class Calleja, of the MDF Medical Directorate,” she proclaimed, laughing. “Well, actually, I’m still only a volunteer, and as I am about to be married things are a little bit up in the air. I usually work at the St Catherine’s Hospital for Women in Mdina. You know, in the Citadel close to St Paul’s Cathedral.” Now that Marija had got into full flow there was no stopping her. “Maya, and the others, of course, say that you and your men were incredibly brave and that you saved them all from being murdered, or worse?”

The man flushed with embarrassment, momentarily tongue-tied.

Yelda and Yannis arrived first.

“Yelda’s name means *Summer Rose*,” the man muttered in disarray as the toddlers gleefully clung to his legs.

“Captain! Captain!” The youngsters cried happily.

And then Maya was standing in front of the helpless warrior.

Marija giggled, she could not stop herself.

It seemed that the heroic Captain Collingwood was at her new sister’s mercy.

Chapter 30

Friday 6th March 1964
Verdala Palace, Malta

Although the Verdala Palace had been the official residence of British Governors of the Maltese Archipelago for over a century, Admiral Sir Julian Christopher had until the last few days, eschewed its comforts and grandeur for much humbler and baser lodgings in Mdina and Valletta. His working day – in fact every day since his arrival on the islands – began before dawn and rarely concluded until well after midnight. Basically, he had had no time to spare to savour, let alone enjoy, the splendours of the magnificent castle – for that was what the Verdala Palace was – situated on the high ground overlooking the village of Dingli on the rugged western coast of the main island.

It was remarkable that such a tempting and vulnerable target had not been attacked by the Italian Regia Aeronautica fighter bombers ranging across the Maltese Archipelago that fateful evening in early December last year; standing proudly undefended on a hilltop it must have presented an irresistible temptation to the attackers and yet, it had remained unmolested, its ancient stones untouched and its tranquil gardens surviving as an unsuspected oasis of calm amidst the chaos and devastation being visited in and around Valletta.

The personal effects and belongs of the late Sir Hugh Staveley-Pope, the Commander-in-Chief's oldest friend in the Royal Navy and immediate predecessor, whom he had come to Malta to relieve from command, remained crated and stored in the cellars of the old palace.

When he mentioned this to Margaret Thatcher she blanched.

The conversation at dinner had been a little stilted, somewhat terse. It was a strange gathering; the Commander-in-Chief entertaining the Prime Minister, her companion Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson, the wife of the Foreign secretary, the ten-year-old Thatcher twins, Mark and Carol, both totally over-awed by the occasion, with Julian Christopher's old friend, Captain Nicholas Davey, Captain 'D' of the 7th Destroyer Squadron making

up the numbers and trying manfully to jolly things along.

In this endeavour the portly hero – one of many – of the desperate fight to save the grievously damaged American super-carrier the USS Enterprise, felt himself to be wading uphill through ankle-deep treacle. The Foreign Secretary's wife was an intelligent and gracious woman, and the Prime Minister's brats were very polite but the two leading actors were oddly subdued. Nick Davey had expected the indomitable Angry Widow to dominate the affair; and Julian Christopher to turn on his deadly charm and perhaps, to trot out a string of his best anecdotes. Instead, the whole thing was a tad flat and there seemed to be nothing he or Lady Patricia could do about it.

"Forgive me Admiral Christopher," the Prime Minister apologised, patting her lips with her napkin. "I'm not used to the warmth of the evening. If I might I shall step outside for a few minutes."

The Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations pushed back his chair.

"Might I accompany you, Prime Minister?"

The Foreign Secretary's wife and Nick Davey rose to their feet as Margaret Thatcher and the Fighting Admiral made their exit. They exchanged hopefully knowing looks.

Outside on the terrace, their privacy guaranteed in the inner walled garden below the broad, marble veranda, Margaret Thatcher and Julian Christopher stood a little apart. Neither spoke for perhaps a minute, each collecting their thoughts and unscrambling their wits. They had spent the late afternoon being filmed, cheered and enthusiastically acclaimed as they toured the bomb sites left by the devastating sneak attack on Malta three months ago. They had visited half-a-dozen cemeteries, bowed their heads in unison to honour the dead. As darkness fell they had stood on the Saluting Battery ramparts and gazed upon the might of the combined British and American naval expeditionary force assembling in the Grand Harbour. They had had no time to be alone, no opportunity to be private, and no opportunity to voice any of the intimate words that needed to be spoken.

"This place was built in 1586 by Grandmaster Hughues Loubenx de Verdelle. Hence the castle became the *Verdala Palace*," Julian Christopher explained. "As with most buildings on these islands it was built on the foundations of an even older building. In this case a hunting lodge owned by

a certain Jean Parisot de Valette, for his pains a previous Grandmaster of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and of Malta." He chuckled softly in the gloom. "I used to think being Commander-in-Chief of All British Forces and so forth was a bit of a mouthful until I came here."

The woman said nothing.

"It is too dark to see it now," the man continued, "but the Palace is pretty much surrounded by a *boschetto*, landscaped gardens by any other name. The gardens used to be much more extensive in olden times. The Knights of Malta allegedly came over to this part of the island to do their hunting. The original 1586 Palace was improved upon and upgraded by at least two other Grandmasters. By the time Napoleon arrived on the scene and turned it into a prison the towers already had five floors and the layout of the inner 'palace' was, allegedly, more or less as it is today. Sir William Reid was the first Governor of Malta to take the place in hand and make it his summer residence. That was in 1858..."

Margaret Thatcher giggled...

Julian Christopher did not quite believe his ears.

"Do you remember when we were at Balmoral Castle?" She asked.

"Er, yes..."

"Just before the attack? You told me all about the history of *that* castle?"

"Yes, indeed." He wasn't about to forget it!

"I hope it isn't an omen."

"The RAF has assured me that it will shoot down anything that comes within a hundred miles of the archipelago this weekend, Margaret."

"So much has happened since that day at Balmoral Castle," she responded, searching for the right words. "It worries me sometimes when one is cheered and feted like you and I were this afternoon. It frightens me that so many people are depending upon *us* to make the World right again."

Knowing that she did not really expect a reply the man held his peace.

Margaret Thatcher sighed.

"Before Ted Heath was assassinated in Washington you asked me if I would marry you, Julian?"

"Yes."

"Is your proposal still on the table?"

"Yes."

“If we were married; do you worry about what kind of marriage it would be?”

“No.”

She laughed uncomfortably and stepped down into the garden, following the marbled path by the light of the crescent Moon in the perfect inky black cloudless night sky. The man followed, touched her left elbow and took her hand in his. Still, they were separate, from long habit occupying their own personal spaces even in their semi-intimacy.

“Did you know that there is a man who calls himself the ‘King of London’?” She asked, both amused and a little vexed.

“The ‘King of London’?”

“His real name is Harold Strettle. Before the war he was a trades union official with ASLEF. That’s the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. Nobody knows if he is really the ‘king’ of anything but he seems to represent a group of many hundreds, perhaps, many thousands of men and women who are living in the ruins of London.”

“Living in the ruins?” Julian Christopher could not hide his scepticism.

“Yes. We were all surprised. There were rumours about people who survived the October War in basements, and in the London Underground’s deeper tunnels but it is only recently that Royal Engineer survey teams reached Westminster, Lambeth and the docks in the East End, and encountered a relatively large number of people living in the ruins. The Home Secretary has sent emissaries into the city to make contact with ‘King Harold’, and others.”

They walked into the darkness, turned a corner and strolled carefully towards an arched opening in the inner garden wall. Two shadows, automatic rifles with muzzles pointed earthward moved in the shadows as they approached. Julian Christopher did not know if Margaret Thatcher’s Royal Marine bodyguards frightened potential assassins but they certainly scared him. Just one look at them told him these men would run through brick walls to protect their charge.

“What would happen to us here if that bomb that fell in the sea last month went off now?” The woman inquired.

In the sea nearby was a two to three megaton unexploded hydrogen bomb. Had it detonated the British presence in the Mediterranean would have been eradicated in a split second.

“We wouldn’t know much about it, Margaret.”

“Ought we to try to find it? Raise it and disable it, that sort of thing?”

“It would have gone off by now if it was going to,” Julian Christopher replied wanly. “Best let sleeping dogs lie, and all that.”

“I suppose so. We now suspect that several bombs fell on United Kingdom territory without blowing up during the war. It sounds odd to say it, but things could actually have been much worse than they were.”

“Things can always be worse than they actually are,” the man concurred dryly.

Margaret Thatcher squeezed his hand.

“I’m sorry. We shouldn’t be talking shop.”

The man laughed softly.

“Why ever not, Margaret? I am your liege man, and all that. Besides, neither of us can help ourselves. By all means carry on talking shop!”

Margaret Thatcher considered this for some seconds before taking him at his word.

“I can’t get a straight answer out of President Kennedy as to why the USS Independence is still docked at Malta. How long does it take to repair a damaged catapult for goodness sake! That ship should be here by now!”

The Fighting Admiral fought to keep a straight face.

“An aircraft carrier’s catapults are like a battleship’s big guns, Margaret,” he explained, hoping he did not sound condescending.

“How so?” She asked, her momentary pique dissolving as if by magic.

Julian Christopher had slightly – but only slightly – stretched the analogy between an aircraft carrier’s catapults and a battleship’s main battery. He conceded as much then quickly qualified the apparent exaggeration.

“In the same way the calibre and number of large naval rifles determines the rest of the design of a battleship; a carrier’s catapults determine significant aspects of a carrier’s design. Although an aircraft carrier might not be, strictly speaking, built around her catapults in the same way a battleship is built around its big guns, nevertheless, catapults are integral to the architecture and construction of a carrier operating fixed-wing aircraft. Basically, what we are talking about is the mechanical, electrical, hydraulic, physical structure of the catapult at flight deck level, and the linkage of that assembly with its steam source, located several decks down and perhaps hundreds of feet distant from the working parts of the actual catapult on

deck."

"You are telling me that the problem might not be with the small part of the catapult system visible on deck? That most of the catapult *mechanism* is like an iceberg, invisible?"

"Yes, something like that. The USS Independence is approximately twice the size of our biggest carriers, the Ark Royal and the Eagle. Therefore, the amount of kit hidden from view, and the distances between the critical catapult components and the ship's fire rooms – boiler rooms, rather – are correspondingly larger, and farther separated. Rear-Admiral Detweiller, the commander of the US Navy units based at Malta, has told me that one of the Independence's forward catapults was destroyed by an accidental explosion in a steam line when she was in the Indian Ocean. Her starboard catapult was also damaged in this incident. This means that the Independence's only fully functioning catapult; is her angled amidships catapult which cannot be used when she is landing aircraft. Repair work is scheduled to take another sixteen days, after which an intensive five-day sea trial will be conducted. If the initial trials go well the Independence will sail for Malta and complete those trials en route. *If all goes well*."

"I'm talking shop because I am nervous," Margaret Thatcher confessed.

"We'll carry on talking shop until you aren't," the man suggested, amiably, unhurriedly. "You aren't feeling nervous, that is."

Their hands parted as they turned to face each other in the night.

"What are the Americans doing wasting time getting that old Second World War battleship ready for sea?" She demanded, deciding that they would indeed 'carry on talking shop' for the while. "Surely they'd be better advised speeding up the reactivation of one of their big aircraft carriers? Especially with the Enterprise on her way home and the Independence out of commission at Gibraltar?"

"None of their mothballed big carriers is going to be back in commission for six to nine months, Margaret. A carrier is a much more complicated weapons system than a battleship, and the big ones carry at least two times the crew of the biggest battleship. To get the Iowa back to sea as soon as possible the US Navy has called up every old battleship man on the Reserve List. These are men with years and years of experience of actually crewing the USS Iowa and her three more or less identical sister ships. All four Iowa class ships were laid up; two at Bremerton in the American Pacific North

West, the other two at Philadelphia. Of the ships berthed on the East Coast Iowa was in better condition than the Wisconsin so they opted to reactivate her now because they knew they could do it in a hurry. If you asked me 'why bother?' Well, I'd be hard pressed to give you a sound military reason for prioritising the reactivation of the Iowa, other than to say that right now I'll gladly accept any usable asset you give me. In a month's time we will be embarking on the biggest combined operation since the Suez fiasco to liberate Northern Cyprus. If that goes well we'll move on to Crete. After that, well that's more to do with politics than grand strategy. I'll wait and see what *you* order me to do after we've liberated Crete, if and when it happens. I know that there's a lot of loose talk about island hopping north across the Aegean but frankly, that will never be feasible unless the Americans take the lead. Honestly and truly, without the American nuclear subs guarding the flanks of the Cyprus invasion fleet and the long-range anti-aircraft capabilities of the US destroyers and frigates Rear-Admiral Detweiller is allowing me to partially integrate into the operation, I don't know if –at this time - I'd be in a position to recommend that we proceeded with Operation Grantham."

"Whoever thought up that name ought to be shot!" Margaret Thatcher decided ruefully. "A month's time? You said 'in a month's time'?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "Three US Navy nuclear hunter killers will be in position by the early hours of 29th March – Easter Sunday - when the first units of Task Force Alpha, that's the combined bombardment and assault flotilla, sails from Malta. Task Force Charlie, comprising the Eagle's and the Hermes's battle groups reinforced by Admiral Detweiller's units not tasked with the defence of the Maltese Archipelago in the absence of the rest of the Fleet, will move into position as Task Force Alpha approaches Cyprus. If all goes according to plan our troops will begin to go ashore two hours before dawn on Saturday 4th April. The Independence, and or the USS Iowa may be in theatre in time to take part in the opening phases of Operation Grantham; but my staff have been ordered to plan only on the basis of the ships, aircraft and men we definitely *know* to be available. If the Independence and the Iowa join the party nobody will be happier than I, but one fights wars with the navy, the air force and the army that one has not the ones we'd like to have."

They walked on, completing one, then another circuit of the garden,

neither speaking until the silence ceased to be a comfort and became by degrees, a little oppressive.

“We ought to go back indoors,” Margaret Thatcher declared.

“For what it is worth,” Julian Christopher said, his tone mildly self-deprecating, “I think we’d be a good team.”

“A good team?”

“Yes. If you recollect you asked me what sort of marriage we’d have?”

“Yes, I did, I suppose. Yes, I think we’d be a good team, too.”

“Is that a ‘yes’ then?”

They had come to the steps at the foot of the veranda. The lights from inside the Verdala Palace seeped across their faces for a moment.

“Yes, Admiral,” the woman said. “That would be an unequivocal ‘yes’.”

Chapter 31

Saturday 7th March 1964
St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina

Marija had prayed in the Cathedral for as long as she had been travelling to and living and working in the ancient Citadel perched on the highest ground on Malta. Doctor Margo Seiffert had first talked to her about a career as a nurse when she was still an infirm fourteen-year old. At first, she had run – well, limped - errands, cleaned floors, gossiped with the other nurses and the women and children who passed through the happy, welcoming, comforting doors of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women; when she was sixteen Margo had suggested she was ready to begin her training to be a nurse and assistant midwife it had seemed to be the most natural thing in the World. As she had lain in her cages of steel for weeks and months each year of her infanthood and early adolescence, she had always hoped for a life in which she might repay the kindness shown to her by friends and stranger's alike in the Royal Naval Hospital at Bighi and elsewhere.

She had found her vocation accidentally; not so her future husband. Whatever Peter now claimed *she* had always known that no other future had awaited him than the Royal Navy. Recent events had amply confirmed that he had been born to stand on the deck of a big grey warship, predestined almost, whereas, she had needed to be gently introduced to the vocation that she knew would forever be her joy and salvation. However, in all the years she had been coming to St Paul's Cathedral in the heart of the old city she had never seen it with the eyes of a woman on her wedding day.

The day had been a blur and yet, oddly, she remembered everything with crystal clear pin point clarity. Father Dominic from the Church of St John's in Sliema, a wise, sanguine, gentle man in his sixties who had been seriously injured several times working with the rescue teams during the bombing of Malta in the Second War, had told her that 'this is your day' and that 'on this day the World is at your feet', but she had not understood what he meant until that moment. Her senses were so heightened that nothing eluded her notice.

She had had to calm her Papa, normally the most measured and composed of men – other than when her Mama was taking him to task, obviously – because he had been a bag of nerves and trembling with anxiety as they walked up the steps from the piazza to the doors of the Cathedral.

Marija had repeatedly squeezed his hand in reassurance.

The Archbishop had 'interviewed' Marija and Peter Christopher two days ago. He had ascertained, perfunctorily, that Peter intended for any children of the union to be brought up as 'good Catholics', and Peter had replied 'oh, absolutely, sir' and thereafter there had been no more talk of doctrinal or liturgical matters. Instead, the Archbishop had proudly extolled the history and the tradition of the great church in which they were to be married.

On the spot where she and Peter stood to make their sacred vows – or close to it, nobody actually knew for certain – the Roman Governor, Publius had greeted St Paul after he had been shipwrecked off the north east coast of Malta. Publius, later beatified as St Publius, the first Bishop of Malta was martyred during the reign of Hadrian, the Emperor who built the 'Scottish wall', in Athens. A small church was built on the site around then and later a more substantial one which fell into disrepair and ruin during the Muslim period, before its reconstruction and re-dedicated by the Normans in the 12th century. When that building collapsed during the great earthquake of 1693 – few 'Maltese people realise that very, very occasionally the archipelago suffers very, very big earthquakes', the Bishop had smiled – a number of priceless and irreplaceable works of art had been saved: a Mattia Preti painting depicting the conversion of St Paul the Apostle, a Tuscan painting of the Madonna and Child, and frescos of St Paul's shipwreck. The great Irish Oak doors of that earlier church had been incorporated into the current Cathedral, a masterpiece in stone of 17th century baroque architecture. Designed by Lorenzo Gafa, who was like Marija, Birgu born, St Paul's Cathedral was the crowning glory of his long and illustrious career. Built between 1697 and 1702 at the eastern end of the rectangular piazza of St Paul's Square, its facade was delineated by three Corinthian pilasters with bell towers at each end. Internally, the plan was of a classical Latin cross beneath a vaulted nave, with aisles and two small side chapels. The building was topped by an octagonal red dome, and underfoot the floor was richly tessellated, everywhere there were sculptures made of Irish wood, and

paintings and sublime iconography adorned the walls of the interior.

"Do you, Marija Elizabeth Calleja," asked the Archbishop solemnly, "take this man Peter Julian Christopher to be your lawful wedded husband?"

The words sounded odd, spoken in uneasy English rather than the Archbishop's familiar mother tongue, or the Latin of the Church, in which he had already asked the question in the liturgically correct form of words, not the corrupted version he had voiced in the only language understood by so many of those present in the great church.

Marija's mother – constantly dabbing tears of pride, angst, relief and probably disbelief at her surroundings – and father sat in the left hand pews of the nave, Marija's brother Joe in his best Sunday suite held his Mama's hand, beyond him Rosa Calleja, her dead brother Samuel's widow smiled and bit her lip, her estranged parents sitting to either side of the daughter they had disowned only weeks ago when she had most needed their loving support. Marija did not know how long the rapprochement between the daughter and parents would last. She had never liked the elder Borg-Canteras because they cultivated too many airs and graces and had been far too grand to welcome their daughter marrying into a 'Dockyard Family'.

Behind Marija's own family was her army of friends, Margo and the women from the hospital, her sisters in the Women of Malta movement, and the top men from both the Maltese Labour Party and the Nationalists, both surrounded by large entourages. The politicians sat apart from each other, Dom Mintoff the prickly supremo of the Labour Party surrounded with his gang of toughs and bruisers; the Nationalist, Giorgio Borg Olivier, a quieter, gentler more scholarly presence who tended to gather about him men of similar tastes and dispositions. Then there was the Marija's bewilderingly complicated – almost entirely on her Mama's, *Sicilian* side – family; the countless aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces, many of whom had spilled across onto the benches and chairs of the groom's party.

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland sat beside the proud father, the Commander-in-Chief, resplendent in his immaculate dress uniform. Other senior officers flanked the Prime Minister's companion, Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson and the ten-year-old twins, who both looked a little bored. Captain Nicholas Davey, Captain 'D' of the still mainly inactive – and under repair – ships of the 7th Destroyer Squadron had led what seemed like the entire company of HMS

Talavera into the Cathedral.

The congregation waited with baited breath.

"I do," she said clearly in English. In Maltese she added: "*Iva!*" *Yes!* There was a soft murmured of delight behind her.

Things got very confused after that.

However, the main thing was that Peter had been just as enthusiastic about the idea of marrying her as she was of marrying him.

The rings...

Fortunately, Lieutenant Miles Weiss, her beau's second-in-command and best man, had been a model of grace under pressure and the rings had appeared without fuss, bother or mishap.

The kiss.

Marija had been terrified she would be hopelessly self-conscious about that; but in the event she was completely, unashamedly *wanton*. And then the newlyweds were on the steps of the Cathedral and the crowd was cheering. There was confetti, she was afraid she was going to trip over her dress. Her Mama had been careful to tailor it so it never fell below her ankles because if the hem had been any lower she would have constantly been falling on her face and that would hardly have made a very good impression on the day...

Her Mama, her Papa, Joe, Margo, and Rosa hugged her, Admiral Christopher shook her hand politely, smiled and bowed his head; Mrs Thatcher had also shaken her hand and made a pleasant comment about her dress which Marija forgot the instant she stepped along the line. There was to be a reception at the Pembroke Hall, a deliberately less formal, family sort of affair where people did not have to dress in their starchy best outfits and to which the politicians were uninvited.

Family and friends only!

The Pembroke Hall had been built by Australian soldiers serving on Malta in the Great War. It was a long way from the dignified environs of the Citadel or Valletta, the traditional seats of power on the archipelago, a building renovated in recent years and the setting for film and stage shows and dances most nights of most weeks predominantly put on for servicemen and women.

Afterwards, the newlyweds had returned to Mdina.

Peter Christopher had not visited his new wife in her cell at the St Catherine's Hospital for Women until that night. The second-floor room was

Spartan. An additional single iron bedstead had been pushed against Marija's bed and a double mattress – more a lumpy *palliasse* – found. So many houses had been destroyed in the December bombing, and so many soldiers, sailors and airmen had arrived on the island in the months since, that accommodation on Malta was at a premium. Nonetheless, Admiral Christopher's suggestion that the couple spend their wedding night at the Verdala Palace had been turned down instantly; Peter was adamantly opposed to claiming any special privileges on account of his father being the Commander-in-Chief, and Marija, who had been working herself up to decline the offer rather more diplomatically had planted a kiss on her soon to be husband's cheek in proud approbation.

Margo Seiffert had said Peter could stay with Marija at the hospital until they 'sorted themselves out'.

Marija leaned against the door and it closed with a loud click.

After the excitement and the terrors of the day the lovers were finally alone.

Spying a hook by the door the man hung his cap on it.

"You look like a fairy princess," he observed, looking down into his wife's almond eyes.

"I feel like Cinderella after she found her prince, husband," she retorted, quirking a nervy smile.

The room was illuminated by a single bulb hanging on a chord from a grey Bakelite ceiling rose almost exactly above their heads. Strange shadows played on their faces as the light swung in the breeze filtering in through the open window.

"You didn't tell me that you lived like a Nun?"

"I was a Nun all my life until you came to Malta."

He buried a kiss in her hair, greedily sucked in the musky scent of *her*.

"Are you tired?" Marija asked, her cheek resting against his chest.

"A little. And you?"

She shrugged against him, sighed deeply and eased herself away to move around him and stand in front of the bed. Awkwardly, with fingers and thumbs that were clumsy, disobedient, she began to struggle with the buttons at the neck of her wedding gown. Her eyes lowered, as if in shame.

Glancing around the room the man dropped his jacket on the one, rickety chair beside a tiny scratched desk, and started to release the studs of his shirt.

His brand-new dress uniform – the old one had got scorched to ruination at the Battle of Cape Finisterre – was a close fit and at times he had found the pleasant warmth of the spring day oppressive. For a million reasons it was good to let the air get to his skin again.

"Let me help," he decided, seeing Marija struggling and fast growing hugely embarrassed. A dozen small buttons clasped in tightly sewn, stiff button holes had completely defeated his wife. "Turn around, my love," and he was behind her, easing the stubborn buttons free. An inch, then two, and another of Marija's back appeared as he patiently worked his way down to her waist until presently, the sublime curve of her spine was bare for him to trace with his finger tips.

She shivered, giggled, and his hands retraced their tingling progress.

He eased away the mane of darkly nut-brown hair and kissed the nape of her neck.

"That is so nice..."

He kissed her again, and again.

She stepped away, half-turned, her wedding gown threatening to fall off her slender shoulders.

"If you had been sent away before this day," she said, her eyes moist limpid pools, "I would not have let you go before a night like this." She sniffed, shook her head. "Even though I was afraid of..."

It was too much; he had to hold her and to protect her from all ills.

The breeze was picking up in the darkness outside as it swept across the highest point of the island, the hemp drapes billowed and flapped like sails before settling, stilling anew.

"We're both sensible people," Peter Christopher reminded Marija. "And we love each other to bits, so," he hesitated, "it seems to me that the thing to do is just take off our clothes and take it from there. I know that's not the way things happen in fairy tales or romantic novels, but we've got the rest of our lives to make up for that. Okay?"

Marija nodded tight-lipped and slipped the gown off her shoulders.

The man discarded his uniform without looking to her.

Peter Christopher had not known what to expect; but he had steeled himself not to betray his real feelings whatever he actually saw. But that was impossible.

Marija stuck out her jaw defiantly and slowly pirouetted, once, twice to

ensure that he saw *everything*.

Her abdomen and her left thigh looked like somebody had repeatedly hammered barbed wired into her naked flesh. The marks of the steel frames embedded, anchored though skin and muscle to lock her crushed and shattered leg and pelvis back together time and again as she grew and orthopaedic reconstructive techniques slowly improved, pitted her skin. She had described some of her torment in the letters, now at last he really understood what she had been through in order to become whole again and that the battle would never, ever be over.

“You poor, poor...”

Marija gave him a quizzical look, her discomfort and embarrassment morphing into curiosity as she studied her new husband’s naked body. He was tall, lean and athletic; whereas, she was crippled somewhat and always would be. She was disconcerted when the man she loved dropped onto his knees. His hands stroked the outside of her thighs, his fingers roaming the livid pink of several scars and the faded tan of others.

“Do they hurt?” He asked.

“Sometimes the skin stretches or tightens. But no, I don’t usually *hurt*. I ache...”

“And right now?”

“My bones are a little tired. My bones always talk to me when they are tired. It has been a long day.”

He kissed her belly and she instinctively pressed his face against herself.

She had not imagined that could be so nice...

“We should turn off the light,” she gasped.

In the darkness she lay on the bed and he kissed her again, except this time in a place where she had heard that men sometimes kissed a woman but never actually expected her husband to kiss *her*. It was very nearly unbearably stimulating and momentarily, she worried she might lose control of her bodily functions.

Presently, the man moved up in the bed and circled her in his arms.

They kissed, increasingly wetly, breathlessly.

Long before she rolled onto her back and he looked down on her beneath him she realised that *everything* was going to be all right after all...

Chapter 32

Monday 8th March 1964
TNS Yavuz, Anchored off Rhodes

In his five days as a guest of the Turkish Naval Forces – his hosts were very particular about being ‘Turkish’ not ‘Ruski’ - Nicolae Ceausescu and the other three survivors from the small, leaky fishing boat that the battlecruiser had run down in the night off Samothrace, had been treated with perplexing respect and courtesy. However, Ceausescu did not think that was going to go on for much longer.

“Get that woman out of here!” The thin, cold-eyed man in the uniform of a Second-Captain in the Soviet Navy growled, waving an angry hand at the plain middle-aged woman dressed in the fatigues of a Turkish naval rating who was at Nicolae Ceausescu’s side whenever he regained consciousness. In the last day or so he had started forcing a smile each time he awakened and discovered her sitting like a sentinel by his sick bay cot. Her expression was invariably impassive but sometimes he saw a flicker of acknowledgement in her green-brown eyes. Her name was Eleni and her ministrations had been the only thing that had kept him alive back on Samothrace.

Eleni viewed the newcomer blankly, unmoving in her chair.

“Get out!” The Russian barked.

Still she did not move.

“She doesn’t speak Russian, you idiot!” Nicolae Ceausescu croaked in what he hoped sounded like a Moskva accent. The other man wore the tabs of a Political Officer on his immaculate uniform lapels. “Who the fuck are you?”

For a moment he thought the man – whom he guessed to be in his thirties and had spoken with a clipped Leningrad twang, as if he was affecting airs and graces that did not come naturally to him – was going to hit him. So apparently, had the ship’s doctor and the young Turkish officer at his shoulder both of whom had stiffened with disgust and made half a step towards the Russian.

The crew of the TNS Yavuz did not like Russians. Whenever they were within earshot of a Russian, they fell silent.

“I am Second Captain Dmitry Kolokoltsev of the Political Directorate of the Red Navy,” the Russian said, struggling not to lose his temper.

Ceausescu was propped up on pillows in the narrow cot, his thoughts muddled by the regular doses of morphine the orderlies spooned into him to keep the pain from his butchered right leg at bay. He had no idea how long he had bobbed up and down on the upturned hull of the fishing boat; nor any notion of how he had come to be on it, or how he why he had not slipped off it and drowned in the sea. When the sun had come up the next morning he had been lashed to the waterlogged, wallowing wreck with Eleni, the Greek fisherman called Andris and the teenage boy called Miklos. The destroyer which had plucked the four sun-burned, dying survivors aboard like four lifeless fish the next day had looked vaguely *American*. Sometime that second night the destroyer had bumped alongside a much bigger ship, unloaded the survivors and a gang of other civilians and departed. Three days ago, he had blinked awake *clean*, he had been in pain but nothing like before and his surroundings had smelled of bleach and antiseptics. There were six cots in the sick bay; two of the others were occupied by Turkish seamen; one with some kind of head injury, the other with a leg in traction. The cots nearest to Ceausescu were empty.

“Stand up straight when you address a superior officer, Comrade Kolokoltsev,” Ceausescu snarled, his strength ebbing. Knowing that the big lie was always the hardest to unpick he stuck to the story he had rehearsed back in Bucharest as soon as he realised the mistake Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej had made – the mistake was *already* Gheorghe’s not his – in betraying the Soviet *Troika*. He gestured at the stump of his right thigh beneath the pristine white Turkish Navy sheets. “I only just got out of Thessalonika alive. I don’t have to take this shit from some jumped up little fucker like you!”

Second-Captain Kolokoltsev’s brow began to furrow.

“Your superiors,” Ceausescu went on, his words slurring from exhaustion, “will hear of your insolence...”

“Comrade, I...”

“I am Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov,” Ceausescu hissed, his strength gone. If Kolokoltsev had ever met the now – probably dead – Head of

Station of the KGB in Istanbul and Thessalonika, he was a dead man. He would have worried about it if he had not just wanted to sleep. Ceausescu knew he shared a physical resemblance the KGB man, and that they were of an age, give or take a year. It probably helped his subterfuge that the way he looked now his own mother would probably not recognise him. Nonetheless, if Kolokoltsev had ever actually met Major-General Nikolai Fyodorov what remained of Ceausescu's miserable life was likely to be very short and painful. "My name is Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov..."

He must have passed out because the Political Officer had gone when he awakened,

Eleni was gabbling something to him.

He did not understand a single word.

The Turkish seaman with his leg in traction coughed.

He spoke in faltering Hungarian; the World was full of surprises.

"She said that whatever you said to that shithead," the sailor, a man in his late twenties bit his tongue, knowing that it was the morphine talking and that this was dangerous, "frightened him," he concluded weakly, clearly not knowing if the man in the nearby cot had understood a single word he had said.

"You understand what she says?" Ceausescu asked – his Hungarian even more 'pigeon' than that of the man in the nearby cot - like an idiot before he too, remembered the perils of letting the morphine coursing through his veins do his talking for him.

"Only bits and pieces; she talks Greek very fast and sounds a bit *Turkish*."

"Tell her I am a very senior and very powerful Soviet KGB officer and that I will protect her."

This was laboriously translated.

Eleni looked mortally offended.

She whispered a string of urgent interrogatives towards the seaman.

"She wants to know what's happened to her cousin and to his son?"

Ceausescu's drug-addled mind slowly circumnavigated this question. He came to a decision.

"Call somebody."

There was a delay of some minutes.

Presently, the ship's surgeon, a lean man in his fifties with a bushy

moustache stood over Ceausescu's bed. The man spoke in scholarly, almost archaic Russian, which was a mercy.

"Doctor," Ceausescu asked, his voice a strangled whisper. "There were two men rescued with me and the woman. What happened to them?"

"They are quite well." The other man's face told the patient that he did not know why he would ask a thing like that. "They are," he searched for the right words, "paying their way," he frowned, "cleaning decks?"

"They are to be treated well," Ceausescu forced out.

"Of course!"

The seaman in traction translated for Eleni's benefit after the Yavuz's Surgeon had departed.

For the first time the woman smiled; her whole face, handsome and overly lined for a woman of her age, seemed to light up and to Nicolae Ceausescu's astonishment, she sniffed back a tear and leaned over him, planting not one, but two kisses on his brow. Thereafter, she took his left hand in her hands, and resumed her watching brief.

The sick bay lights were on when Ceausescu next slowly awakened.

Second-Captain Kolokoltsev and the Ship's Surgeon flanked a distinguished, dapper man in a uniform that was so heavily laden with gold braid and other adornments that it threatened to drag him to the deck. This latter man had hard eyes and lips that quirked with impatience.

He said something in Turkish.

Kolokoltsev translated: "Orders have been received that you and your party are to remain on the Yavuz until such time as you are fit to travel home, Comrade General Nikolai Vasilyevich."

The old battlecruiser's commanding officer spoke again.

Again, Kolokoltsev translated.

"The Comrade Surgeon Commander reports you will not be well enough to be transferred at sea for possibly many days, or perhaps, several weeks. The Captain apologises but it will be necessary for you and your party to stay onboard for your own safety, until this ship's mission in forthcoming operations against the British has been discharged."

"I must talk to my superiors," Ceausescu protested. The last thing he actually wanted to do was talk to anybody who might expose him but if he did not make the right noises sooner or later Kolokoltsev would start asking questions he could not answer.

Kolokoltsev spoke to the Yavuz's captain, who angrily shook his head.

"This may not be possible, Comrade General Nikolai Vasilyevich," the Political Officer apologised, wringing his hands, "The Yavuz will be operating under conditions of radio silence. For security reasons..."

It was all Nicolae Ceausescu could do not to burst out laughing at his outrageous good fortune.

Chapter 33

Monday 9th March 1964
Vickers Ltd Shipbuilding Yard, Barrow-in-Furness, England

Rear-Admiral Simon Collingwood stood on the dock and stared thoughtfully along the length of the three-quarters completed pressure hull of the United Kingdom's second nuclear-power hunter killer submarine. Beyond HMS Valiant on the adjoining slipway, the skeleton of her sister boat, HMS Warspite was taking shape. In the near distance men were constructing a third slipway for the construction of another, as yet unnamed vessel.

The Vickers's Shipbuilding Yard was much as he recollected it from his last visit, approximately eleven months ago. At that time, he had been taking HMS Dreadnought out to sea to conduct her proving trials and HMS Valiant had been little further advanced that Warspite was now. The surface ships on the slipways and in the fitting out basin at the time of the October War had departed, either scrapped on the slips, commissioned or towed to other facilities to be broken up or completed, according to need.

Unlike Dreadnought which had been equipped with a Westinghouse S5W water-cooled reactor and an American machinery set and layout; Valiant and Warspite would be *British* submarines. Re-started discussions were at a very early stage to utilise the latest US nuclear technology in forthcoming designs but for the moment, the Government had determined that the United Kingdom would go it alone. Expertise hard-won with the Dreadnought, including a wealth of priceless recent operational experience acquired in actual combat had convinced the Admiralty that building and operating nuclear submarines was one area in which the country might be self-sufficient. Given that there were precious few other defence-critical areas in which that could be said, it actually made a lot of sense. If Great Britain was to remain *great* at anything it needed to be selective; very, very selective in what it attempted to be *great* at. HMS Dreadnought's first two operational patrols had provided ample evidence that building and fighting such boats was something the United Kingdom could still be *great* at. Of course, wanting to do a thing was not the same as doing it. In between

entertaining the lofty ambition of going it alone in such a desperately complex and expensive game as building a nuclear undersea fleet and actually getting that fleet to sea, lay a mountainous challenge.

"I didn't realise Valiant was so far advanced, sir," Simon Collingwood remarked, turning to the older man at his elbow. Both he and the First Sea Lord, Sir David Luce were dressed in mufti. The Furness Peninsula was a secure zone guarded by a company of the Lancashire Fusiliers but beyond the high fences and the roadblocks, the surrounding countryside was notoriously lawless. The Morecombe Bay airburst on the night of the October War had wrecked the towns along the coast. Farther south the ruins along the south bank of the Mersey had spawned a world of warring gangs and prevented the re-opening of the Liverpool docks. A new road had been driven around the city and Manchester had become the administrative capital of the North-West; but outside of the Vickers's Yards it was unwise to walk around in uniform without bodyguards, and most supplies and personnel reached the fortified Furness Peninsula via sea or by air. Something drastic would have to be done about the regional security situation but that was for another day. The two men had arrived by helicopter an hour ago to begin their inspection of the new Director of the Bureau of Submarine Construction's fiefdom.

"If the local security situation wasn't so *difficult* at the moment we'd be even further ahead," the First Sea Lord replied flatly.

"When I talked with the Prime Minister," Simon Collingwood said, "she indicated that the Program here was to be the Navy's number one priority. What does that actually mean, sir?"

David Luce guffawed. There was something implacable in the younger man's quiet, respectfully voiced question. He was not the sort of man to stamp his foot or to stand on his rights, or to use the Angry Widow's name in vain but he had been given a job to do and he was going to do it come what may!

"The Royal Navy has only two priorities, Rear-Admiral," he retorted amiably, "to prepare for war, and to fight wars. The SSN program is an integral part of both."

Although he did not care for the ambiguous sophistry of this reply, Simon Collingwood said nothing while he continued to survey the yards.

Margaret Thatcher had been a revelation.

She had talked to him about how pleased she had been to finally get out

to Malta; and about how she admired the ‘spirit of the islanders’. And then she had got down to business. In low tones – they were cocooned in the forward part of the passenger cabin of the British Overseas Airways Corporation Boeing 707 within feet of a dozen flapping ears – she had started to tell him ‘what needed to be done’ for Britain to be ‘great again’. In no time at all he had wanted to wave a Union Jack!

The funny thing was she had made a huge point of telling him that she had obtained the permission of the C-in-C Mediterranean, Flag Officer Submarines, the First Sea Lord and of the Secretary of State for Defence, William Whitelaw, to ‘speak privately and confidentially to you about the future of the Royal Navy’. It seemed she had a horror of politicians going over the heads of her senior military advisors; possibly because without the support of those same men no government could function in the current ‘situation’.

‘Something will have to be done about the law and order situation in the Lake District,’ she had declared.

‘If we seriously plan to replicate what the US Navy is doing, Prime Minister,” he had explained, diffidently at first. ‘It might help if I explain to you how they go about their business.’ He had spent time in Groton, Connecticut in preparation for his role in project managing the building of the Dreadnought. While he had been in America he had taken the opportunity to tour several of the other facilities crucial to the American SSN program.

‘By all means.’

“The US Navy contracts the Electric Boat Company, and others, to build its nuclear boats at Groton, Connecticut and elsewhere in three or four dedicated sites but that’s only a part of the project. I’ll stick with the example of the Electric Boat Company because that’s probably the biggest contractor when it comes to building hunter killers like Dreadnought. The Electric Boat Company has major facilities at Quonset Point, Rhode Island where the boats are fitted out, and a huge design and engineering operation at New London, Connecticut. The US Navy is so deeply integrated into the activities of the Electric Boat Company, and the other major contractors, that a lot of the time you can’t tell the Navy from the Company; but, and it is a big but, the Electric Boat Company is responsible for the final design, engineering development, building and fitting out of *its* boats. The Electric Boat Company makes its shareholders rich; but the US Navy gets SSNs in the

water. Moreover, most of the time they get their boats in the water on time, if not always to budget. Most of the time but not always, because we are talking about applying state of the art, constantly evolving technology and that is always going to challenge timescales.'

'You're telling me that we need to nationalise Vickers?'

'No, Prime Minister. That would probably be the kiss of death to the whole project. If we want new SSNs in the water as soon as possible, and for our existing ones – well, just the one at present – refitted and modernised as required within timescales consistent with the Royal Navy's real world operational requirements, we can't afford to let contractors squabble, hoard secrets and technology, or refuse to share relevant experience with each other that we, as a nation, have already paid them, through the nose, to acquire.'

'I don't understand where this is going, Admiral Collingwood?'

'You are asking me to do the impossible, Prime Minister,' he had confessed. 'Worse than that, I suspect that you will probably ask me to do it *quickly*. That is not a problem. That's what the Navy does. It tries to do the impossible, with or without the resources, *quickly* because we work for the Queen and the Government of the day calls the tune. All I am asking for is, for once, for the cards to be stacked in my favour.'

'Specifically?'

'For example, if we are going to build our future undersea fleet at Barrow-in-Furness the Navy must *own* the whole peninsula. Whoever is running the show must be God. If you don't like the way *God* is running the show you can sack him at any time. But somebody *must* be in command of the *whole thing* and you *must* let that person get on with it. This thing has to be run like the Manhattan project was run in the forty-five war. All or nothing.'

'You want to be *God*?' Margaret Thatcher had smiled and amusement had flickered in her blue eyes.

'No, Prime Minister. Actually, I'd much prefer to be just another minor deity. Ideally, back at sea with my own command.'

Margaret Thatcher had quizzed him for over two hours on how he would go about building one to two nuclear submarines every year for the next ten years, preferably without bankrupting the country. At several junctures she had requested clarification of general technical engineering and shipbuilding issues. At one point he had reminded her that these were exactly the sort of

issues best left to professionals. Notwithstanding, she had gone on asking questions, as was her right.

The Angry Widow had been perturbed only once during their long discussions.

'It would be a mistake to mothball or abandon the programs which have resulted in the Oberon and Porpoise class conventionally powered hunter killer boats,' he had advised the Prime Minister. 'Those boats can't do everything Dreadnought can do but they can do most of the things Dreadnought can do, and some of the things Dreadnought can do they do better. A nuclear boat has unlimited range, faster sustainable speeds under water but is several times more expensive to build, slower to bring into commission, harder to maintain and with present technologies, noisier under water than any of the O and P class boats. More to the point, the Oberons and Porpoises are where most of our nuclear boat captains, officers and men are going to come from for the next ten to twenty years.'

'What if we cannot afford *both* nuclear and conventional programs?'

'With respect, for the foreseeable future I don't think you can have the one without the other, Prime Minister.'

He had spent over twenty minutes explaining the capabilities of the Navy's newest diesel-electric submarines, the quality of the training of their crews and the high pitch of efficiency the whole force – concentrated in the 1st Submarine Squadron at Devonport – had been maintained at since the October War.

'Up against two of the Oberons,' he had confided, 'Dreadnought was sunk in three of the four war exercises conducted in the Western Approaches last summer.'

Simon Collingwood had seen the lady's mind processing this information and the welter of questions and opportunities it prompted; it was as if he had suddenly opened her eyes to unsuspected possibilities.

'Thank you,' she had said as the Boeing 707 began to bleed off altitude over the Home Counties on the approach to RAF Brize Norton. 'You may be right about the need for a *God* at the heart of things. We shall see. Is there anything I can do to help you personally in the meantime?'

That was one of the oddest moments of Simon Collingwood's life.

He had not hesitated.

'Prior to leaving Malta I proposed marriage to a young lady who has

charge of two young children. Maya, Yelda and Yannis were among the refugees Dreadnought rescued off Cyprus. Maya and her sister, who presently has charge of a baby in arms, and the children lost everything in Turkey. Maya and I... Well, to cut a long story short... Maya was good enough to accept my offer of marriage. However, Maya and the children are stateless and there are certain administrative hurdles to be overcome before they can join me in England. Nothing that can't be sorted out but I have been warned that the red tape is...'

'They must join you in England as soon as possible!' The Prime Minister had cried enthusiastically. 'You have no idea how it cheers one up to hear such a happy story. It is so hard to remind oneself sometimes that despite everything, there is good in the World!'

Simon Collingwood had been horribly embarrassed, lost for words.

'I shall speak to the Home Secretary immediately we land!' The Angry Widow had declared triumphantly.

Was that only yesterday?

He stared at the Valiant's still open pressure hull.

Valiant and Warspite were twenty feet longer than Dreadnought, essentially slightly enlarged versions of the first Royal Navy nuclear boat in most respects other than their propulsion sets. In place of Dreadnought's Westinghouse S5W reactor, the new boats would have Rolls-Royce pressurized water reactors and an innovation that no US Navy SSN yet incorporated, two Paxman diesel-electric generators to enable genuinely silent running. In comparison with the latest 'noisy' American SSNs the Valiant class would be like ghosts.

"Did you really tell the Prime Minister you wanted to be God?" The First Sea Lord asked suddenly.

"Not exactly, sir," Simon Collingwood grimaced. "I just said that somebody ought to be. *God*, that is."

Chapter 34

Easter Monday 30th March 1964
Married Quarters, Kalkara, Malta

Rosa Calleja did not usually attempt to rise with or before the dawn to begin the still middlingly painful process of preparing herself to face the new day, even though she was beginning to feel a little bit guilty taking advantage of her sister and brother-in-law's seemingly inexhaustible good intentions.

When she had been discharged from the St Catherine's Hospital for Women she had been dreading the prospect of having to return to her parent's home Mosta. Her mother and father had made no bones about their conviction she had married beneath herself when she married Samuel Calleja. Worse, they were maliciously happy to carry on muttering darkly about the circumstances of his disappearance – Sam still had not been officially declared 'deceased', nor it seemed, could he be for at least a year – within the hearing of the immediate Borg-Cantera clan.

Her personal situation was further complicated by the fact that while she had been incapacitated in hospital the Admiralty Dockyards had transferred its entire housing stock to the Royal Navy. In the way of these bureaucratic exercises, there were always unintended winners and losers. Rosa had discovered that to her intense chagrin that she was a loser. Since she was no longer the wife of a Maltese citizen who was *actively engaged* on 'vital defence-related work', the Naval Housing Board had written to her advising her that as she had alternative accommodation – a letter from her father confirmed that she had the option of living in her parents' household in Mosta – it, the NHB, had no further obligation to house her and had consequently given her four week's notice to quit the property in which she had lived during the two–and-a-half unhappy years of her married life.

Among the perks enjoyed by established dockyard workers suddenly threatened because of the recent radical shake up of the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta, the most valued and most closely guarded had always been free or heavily subsidised housing. What the Royal Navy now regarded as disproportionate 'largesse' in this respect was the very thing which had

under-pinned the status of the dockyard workers of Malta as the blue-collar elite of the archipelago's work force. While the new regime was not intentionally Draconian – or at least it did not seem unduly so to independent observers – it tackled head on the sanctity of generations-old working practices and customary privileges, and signalled that in future, *nothing* was sacred. The fact that the wages of equivalent local trades had risen to match the generally higher rates paid to the new men flooding into the docks from England had done little to reduce tensions, and feelings were running high. The rapid and systematic re-allocation of the Admiralty Dockyard property estate primarily designed to help to address the problem of quartering and billeting the ever-growing number of officers and men permanently based on the archipelago, and to accommodate the influx new workers and their families was symptomatic of the unwelcome wind of change blowing through the islands. Inevitably, discontent among the still mainly *Maltese* skilled labour force in the Admiralty Dockyards was simmering, sparking regular spasms of industrial unrest. In some places the anti-British mutterings and protests of the years before the October War had begun to re-surface.

"I'll get that!" Rosa cried when there was a knock at the front door. She had heard the car in the road and had limped half-way from the kitchen to the door before the visitor had knocked.

Rosa had entertained unworthy mixed emotions when Marija had first suggested that she and Peter might apply to live in *her* house. Now she hated herself for having had those bad thoughts. Nothing that had happened to her was Marija's fault, and Peter Christopher and everybody she had met from his ship treated her like some little princess horribly and unjustly vilified in her hour of grief and loss. If HMS Talavera's crew had enthusiastically taken Marija to its heart, it had rowed to Rosa's defence no less energetically. An ill-advised disparaging remark about Rosa's officially 'missing' husband in the hearing of a *Talavera* was likely to result in fisticuffs, treated as if it was a heinous slur on the honour of *their* ship. The *Talaveras* – many of them veterans of the Battles of Cape Finisterre, Lampedusa and the 'saving of the Enterprise' – were aggressively proud of their ship, their dashing young captain and the two 'beautiful' young women who occasionally honoured them with their company. Among the *Talaveras* Marija and Rosa had very nearly become honorary members of the destroyer's crew.

Rosa had been afraid that her new friendship with her *sister* would be

swiftly eclipsed by her marriage and had been rendered briefly speechless when Marija had sat her down and explained, patiently and a little anxiously, that she would be much happier convalescing in surroundings that were familiar to her. It was likely, Marija had told her, that as soon as HMS Talavera was ready to go back to sea, Peter would be away for 'days and weeks on end'. Marija was not looking forward to this; although she could hardly pretend she had not known what to expect marrying a destroyer captain! In any event, she and Rosa would keep each other company and hopefully, cheer each other up from time to time. Rosa had wondered how the arrangement – by its nature temporary – would work in practice.

No newlyweds needed a chaperone!

However, having got used to the idea that every now and again it was inevitable that she would stumble, literally because of her still healing broken leg, upon the lovebirds with their hands all over each other unselfconsciously practicing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the last fortnight had been among the happiest of Rosa's life.

Perhaps, *the* happiest.

Not least because of the charming, entirely respectful and very proper occasional solicitations of a certain Lieutenant Alan Hannay.

The handsome, still boyish young officer whose broad smile greeted her when she opened the door had lost only a little of the svelte, perfectly groomed and always on show air of the man who, until a few weeks ago had been Admiral Sir Julian Christopher's Flag Lieutenant. Rosa still did not know the full story because Marija was very discreet about these things, but it seemed that Alan Hannay, knowing that HMS Talavera had vacancies in her Wardroom after the Battle of Lampedusa had persuaded Peter to put a word in for him, and like magic a few hours later he had become the destroyer's Purser and Supply Officer. Within days he and everybody else on the Talavera had distinguished themselves in the fight to save the USS Enterprise, and thereafter Alan Hannay had become one of Peter's loyal band of brothers.

"What a lovely surprise," the man exclaimed, his face brightening. "I confess I didn't expect to see you today. What with us having such an early start, what!"

There was the sound of movement upstairs.

"Morning, Alan!" Peter Christopher called down the stairs. "I'll be with

you in a jiffy! Come on in and have a cup of tea!"

"Aye, aye, skipper!" The visitor called back jovially and followed Rosa towards the kitchen. "I'm a bit earlier than I thought I'd be," he told her. "I didn't sleep a wink last night. It's jolly good that we're finally taking the old girl out to sea again today but I confess we're all a bit miffed we aren't heading off with the Fleet to Cyprus tomorrow."

"Everything has gone so quiet," Rosa replied, cautiously exploring the boundaries of her rapidly blooming friendship with the dashing young naval officer who had first entered her life after her husband's disappearance and the tragic death of Alan Hannay's friend, Lieutenant Jim Siddall. "Perhaps, the terrorists in Northern Cyprus will just surrender when the Fleet arrives?"

"I jolly well hope so!" The man chortled. "Can I help with anything?"

Rosa's look instantly put him in his place. She poured his tea into a mug. Peter and his officers, who seemed to be in and out of the house and this kitchen *all* the time, much preferred mugs of tea or cocoa, hardly any of them drank coffee from choice.

Peter Christopher made his entrance.

"I've lost my cap," he explained, stifling a yawn.

"It is on the small table in the front room," Rosa informed him. She poured a second mug of tea.

"I thought I heard you getting up," Marija announced, greeting her sister-in-law with a passing half-hug. "Hello, Alan," she beamed at her husband's Supply Officer. She was dressed in her pale blue nursing smock. "Rosa has an appointment at Bighi," she explained. "They are going to x-ray her ankle to see if the plaster can come off today."

"So soon?" The man asked, looking to Rosa Calleja.

"We shall see," the woman murmured, dropping her eyes.

"Good luck, anyway." Alan Hannay had heard that Margo Seiffert, the newly appointed Medical Director of the Malta Defence Force ran a civilian orthopaedic clinic two days a week at Royal Naval Hospital Bighi. "How will you get there?"

"It is not far. We will walk and limp and if that doesn't work out we'll get a bus!" Marija gently chided her guest. If she had learned anything from her own experiences, tough love aided recovery much better than molly coddling.

Alan Hannay laughed and shook his head.

Marija was positively glowing.

Rosa limped with him to the car; giving the newlyweds a chance to complete their lengthy and very tactile ‘farewell’ routine.

“Will you be gone for many days?” She asked shyly.

“A day or two. Maybe three. Trials, that sort of thing. We’ll shoot off a few rounds; and let the new chaps blaze away at an oil drum with the new anti-aircraft guns the yard welded onto our stern house and the Bofors guns amidships. Oh, and exercise with the new torpedo tubes, I suppose. That should be fun, lots of high speed runs and fast turns. The thing is to see if anything breaks,” he continued assuredly as if he was an old hand with twenty years experience under his belt. “That’s what Miles says, anyway.”

Rosa liked Miles Weiss, the destroyer’s youthful Executive Officer. He and Peter Christopher had been catapulted into their present, elevated positions by the death and wounding of friends and senior officers, and subsequently earned their confirmation in those roles by virtue of the decisive and courageous way in which they had responded to their new responsibilities.

Out of the corner of his eye Alan Hannay saw his commanding officer reluctantly disentangling himself from his wife’s embrace.

“Perhaps, you’d allow me to take you out when we get back?” He suggested to Rosa, his voice quavering with the tiniest hint of nerves. “You know, to celebrate being separated from the cast on your leg?”

“Yes,” Rosa whispered, almost inaudibly. “yes, that would be...lovely.”

Marija joined her and together they watched the battered old Austin that Alan Hannay, as HMS Talavera’s Supply officer, had requisitioned – nobody knew from whence, as ‘ship’s officer transportation’ soon after the destroyer was surrendered into dockyard hands – disappear up the hill.

The high overnight clouds were scudding into the northern sky, and overhead there was a carpet of perfect azure blue. It was going to be a warm day, a clear day; a good day for watching ships coming and going through the Grand Harbour breakwaters.

The two women set off a snail’s pace after an early breakfast of bread and a little cheese, a few olives and English milky tea. Rosa struggled a little with her crutches until she found a rhythm and Marija was in no hurry. The hospital was less than a mile from the house in Kalkara and it was a bright, optimistic morning.

“You are looking more like yourself, sister,” Marija observed after the women had been walking ten minutes.

Rosa thought about arguing. She was a little hot and bothered from the unusual exertions of the day thus far but she took comfort from knowing that Lieutenant Hannay had not seen her like this. Otherwise she could not deny that she was feeling much better in herself than she had for a long time. It was only now, comparing the friendless misery of the last year of her marriage with her current situation – suddenly surrounded by *real* friends - that she realised how desperately unhappy she had been with Samuel.

When she had first overhead the vicious gossip that Sam was a Soviet agent provocateur, possibly a member of Red Dawn, she had not been as surprised as she ought to have been; it was as if she had always known something was wrong, and that something had been badly awry in Sam’s life long before he had married her. Now she had an explanation for his moodiness and, well, coldness towards her. If he was a *terrorist* – the word made her inwardly shudder – things began to add up. Of course, it was all the perfect clarity of hindsight. Before HMS Torquay was sabotaged, before Sam had disappeared and the security police working for Colonel Rykov had rounded up the ‘real’ terrorists, she would never have believed a word of it. Not a single word of it.

“I look a mess,” Rosa said.

“Your hair has grown back to hide the bumps and most of the pink bits,” Marija retorted. Scars were just ‘pink bits’ to Marija and nobody was about to get into a fight with her, of all people, about it. “And as soon as that plaster cast is off you’ll be back to normal in no time.”

“I’m all skin and bones and I feel like I’m squinting at people with my bad eye!”

“Margo says even that will get better eventually, sister.” Marija stopped, having got a couple of paces ahead of her sister-in-law. She was unaccustomed to inadvertently walking faster than a companion; people usually had to moderate their pace to not leave her behind. “Besides, nobody can tell you are squinting.”

“Are you sure?”

“Lieutenant Hannay seems quite taken with you exactly the way you are, sister.”

Rosa coloured in an agony of embarrassment.

Marija remembered, belatedly, that her sister-in-law had wanted to keep her infatuation with the young naval officer private. Mortified by her insensitivity – her own happiness was blinding her to the preoccupations of others, which was inexcusable – she put on her contrite face and put an arm around the other woman.

"I'm sorry. Ever since Peter came to the Hospital that day after I fell over I've been walking on air. It is all I can do to remind myself I can't actually run. I keep catching myself about to break into a run. It is so silly, I know, but there it is. But things have been awful for you and all I do is flaunt my happiness in front of you. I am truly sorry, sister. Can you forgive me?"

Rosa felt salty moisture trickling down her face from her stinging eyes.

The women hugged.

"Lieutenant Hannay really does *like* me?" Rosa queried presently, as she, and Marija, both dried their tears.

"He seems to, sister."

"I shouldn't be so excited about it, I know. I'm still married. Nobody knows what really happened to Sam..."

The preparations for the re-taking of Cyprus had prevented operations getting under way to survey and eventually, raise the two sunken sections of HMS Torquay. The sunken frigate had had her magazines emptied and her bunkers pumped out before she was refloated and was therefore, deemed, as shipwrecks go, 'safe'. Thereafter, salvage operations had never had a high priority once it was clear that the wrecks posed no major hazard to navigation within the Grand Harbour.

Rosa had been warned by Margo Seiffert that even if human remains were eventually recovered from the wreck the likelihood of being able to categorically identify them as being the mortal remains of Samuel Calleja were remote. In time Rosa might be able to persuade a court to certify her husband as deceased, but until then she was in limbo.

The women trudged slowly towards the gates to the Royal Naval Hospital.

In asserting her new-found authority as Medical Director of the Malta Defence Force, Margo Seiffert had succeeded in re-opening each and every one of the old fissures in her relations with the medical establishment of the archipelago. Those wounds had been papered over and a large fund of goodwill built up by the contribution Margo and her cadre of *auxiliary nurses*

had made in dealing with the avalanche of casualties after the bombing in December. In a situation in which all of the existing hospitals had been damaged to some degree, and dozens of doctors, nurses and administrative staff killed and injured, Margo's organisational prowess and her direct line to the Commander-in-Chief had enabled her to circumvent many of the normal bottlenecks, and her fifty plus additional trained 'auxiliary' nurses had helped to make a bad situation both tolerable and eventually, manageable. However, now that the immediate emergency was over, true to form, Margo and the medical establishment of the archipelago were at loggerheads *again*.

It was for this reason that Marija had offered to organise the twice weekly orthopaedic clinics at Bighi. She had put it to Margo that things would run a lot more smoothly if she let her do all the talking to Surgeon Captain Hughes – to whom she was a little princess and Margo was a 'Meddling Yank' - the Chief Administrative Officer of RNH Bighi. Consequently, Marija had liaised with Captain Hughes and explained to Margo that all she had to do was turn up on time, do her 'doctoring' and depart, hopefully, without ever having to meet any of the people she had upset, or anybody who had by their 'smug, complacent, lethargic, lack of urgency' so upset her in the past.

Margo, who had been desperately worried she was about to lose Marija '*to domestic bliss and in no time at all, motherhood, I shouldn't wonder*', was so delighted that her protégé so obviously still wanted to be a part of her two decade-long project to makes nurses of the women who had previously been passed over by the old Maltese 'medical mafia', that she had instantly appointed Marija the '*Chief Administrative Officer of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Orthopaedic Clinic, Royal Naval Hospital Bighi*'. Privately, Marija thought this was a somewhat cumbersome title for somebody who was in effect, simply Margo's secretary and receptionist at Bighi.

The senior people at RNH Bighi had been as nice as pie, notwithstanding that they had tried to fob her off with premises in a Nissen hut in the grounds. She had insisted, politely, on having a waiting room and a consultation room in the main building on the grounds that from time to time 'Doctor Seiffert will want to seek the expert advice and opinions of fellow senior doctors and surgeons'. Surgeon Captain Hughes, a greying thoughtful man called out of retirement because of the October War, had given in to her

demands with good grace after minimal half-hearted obfuscation. Nobody was going to deny the daughter-in-law of the Commander-in-Chief anything, providing she asked for it nicely, it seemed.

Life was good. So good that something was bound to go wrong soon.

But Marija would worry about that another day.

Chapter 35

Easter Monday 30th March 1964
French Creek, Grand Harbour, Malta

The moment HMS Talavera cast off her the last two cables – bow and stern springs – the ship felt *different*. She was alive again for the first time in over six weeks; better than that, the endless mess and detritus, power lines and hoses snaking everywhere, and the civilians slouching about blocking every passageway, were instantly forgotten. The balance of the crew had transferred back onboard from the Cunard liner Sylvania moored across the Grand Harbour opposite the neck of French Creek; and the last three days had been a chaos of making good, cleaning, testing and drilling to ensure that the two dozen or so new men knew where to go, what to do, and who to follow if the alarms went off.

Life was good, decided Lieutenant-Commander Peter Christopher, as he leaned over the newly painted starboard bridge wing. He felt the ship vibrating softly under his feet and listened to the reassuring rushing of the blowers filling the air with a quiet roaring, thrumming like the sound of a storm of approaching insects. The acrid taint of boiler smoke hung in the still airs and slowly, very slowly the narrow ribbon of dark water between the side of the destroyer and the wharf began to widen.

"Wheel AMIDSHIPS!" He called.

The order was acknowledged crisply.

"Stop STARBOARD!"

The ship's slow inertia was drawing her out into the Creek.

A small red and black liveried Admiralty tug stood by ready to assist if called upon – her screws periodically churning at the blue waters in the main channel – but Peter Christopher had waved her off. He had made a judgement about where the wind, slight as it was, was coming from, studied the benevolent sea conditions within the anchorage and decided HMS Talavera would float out into the Grand Harbour of her own accord. Assuming, that was, he did not make a hash of casting off – which had gone well - or in his anxiety inadvertently issue the wrong rudder commands.

The Master at Arms, Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann was bullying the new men into position along the port fo'c'sle and main deck rails. Talavera looked so fine in her new paint and in her much-changed fighting trim that it would have been a pity not to give anybody watching on this fine Easter Monday morning from the heights around the Grand Harbour a show.

Marija had explained to him how much it cost the Maltese people to be 'robbed' of their Easter Monday; even if there was a war to be fought. She said *his* father had been wrong to decree that the day would be a 'normal working day' and promised that she would say as much to 'the great man's face' the next time she met him. Peter Christopher had wished his wife 'good luck', she had frowned and then she had giggled and thrown her arms, ecstatically, around his neck...

"Sea duty men are closed up, sir!" Lieutenant Miles Weiss reported, joining his friend at the bridge rail.

"Very good, Number One," Peter Christopher acknowledged, grinning at his friend. Neither of them could really believe that they were respectively the captain and executive officer of one of Her Majesty's destroyers. Too much had happened since that November day a little over four months ago when Talavera had cast off from her moorings in Fareham Creek, slipped through the narrow entrance to Portsmouth Harbour and raced out into the wintery English Channel to rendezvous with the Ark Royal Battle Group bringing home the first and biggest of the Operation Manna convoys. They might both be older and wiser, blooded by their battles and in their dreams, haunted now and then by the faces of the dead and the missing, but they were at heart, now more than ever, two young men living their dream.

Stripping so much of the damaged, wrecked and generally useless modernity out of HMS Talavera and restoring her to a quintessentially late-Second World War type of fleet destroyer, albeit one equipped with modern air search and gunnery control radars, had completely altered the silhouette but hopefully, not the sea-keeping characteristic of the ship. Gone was the peacetime light shade of battleship grey, replaced now with a darker, more menacing hue from the waterline to the base of her black, slowly spinning double bedstead four-ton Type 965 aerials high above the bridge on top of the great lattice foremast. Of the Fast Air Detection Escort that had left England in November, only Talavera's main battery on the fo'c'sle deck and that towering foremast remained unchanged. Practically everything aft of the

bridge had altered. An ungainly quadruple 21-inch torpedo mount now stood aft of the funnel where the deck house accommodating the ship's advanced Command Information Centre had previously stood. Further aft the old radar room was gone, replaced by a rugged steel platform for the torpedo director; and twin 40-millimtre Bofors mountings almost blocked the main deck to port and starboard of the new structure. The reconstructed stern house was festooned with four twin 20-millimetre Oerlikon mounts arranged around an ugly nest of ready use ammunition lockers. A twin 40-millimetre anti-aircraft mount had been welded onto the stern where the deck had been strengthened to absorb the recoil of the now absent Squid anti-submarine mortar.

Shortly before Talavera cast off a detachment of seventeen Royal Marines under the command of a fresh-faced Second Lieutenant had disgorged from the back of two Bedford lorries. Each man marching up the gangway with – so Second-Lieutenant Magnus Bell claimed – 'about a hundred pounds of personal kit and weaponry' on his back. The arrival of the Royal Marines underlined the fact that there was nothing remotely cosmetic about HMS Talavera's change of silhouette. Her new role was one of searching and destroying; not advanced Soviet missile cruisers and destroyers or submarines, but rogue merchantmen and for want of a better word, 'pirates'. The shores of Sicily, the narrow waters north of Cape Bon in Tunisia and large tracts of the North African coast of the Mediterranean were lawless and unpoliced. In the months to come Talavera's sisters, HMS Dunkirk – which had never been converted to the Air Detection role, and HMS Oudenarde were to be modified along similar lines. HMS Scorpion, which had suffered heavier and more structurally extensive damage in the fight to quench the fires burning in the USS Enterprise's stern, was likely to become another 'fast gunboat' in due course.

In the meantime the old 7th Destroyer Squadron had been disbanded, with Nicholas Davey, its former Captain 'D' taking command of the 23th Escort Group, a mixed bag of old and new ships including the weapon class destroyer HMS Broadsword, both HMS Dunkirk and HMS Oudenarde, HMS Leander, the repaired HMS Puma, and the frigate, HMS Plymouth, Talavera's saviour in the storm after the Battle of Cape Finisterre in what now seemed like another lifetime but was in fact a few days short of four months ago. The 23rd Escort Group was due to sail from its anchorage in Sliema Creek later that afternoon; there were no plans for Talavera to attempt

to rejoin Captain Nicholas Davey's command before its return from participating in Operation Grantham.

For the next few days Talavera was scheduled to run engineering trials and to exercise her gun and torpedo crews. When she returned to Malta the Fleet Engineering Officer, the Fleet Gunnery Officer, and the Fleet Torpedo Officer would decide if the ship was fit to be restored to 'active service'.

"Slow astern BOTH!" Peter Christopher commanded. Then: "Wheel AMIDSHIPS!"

HMS Talavera's twin screws began to drag her out into the open water of the Grand Harbour. Her commanding officer eyed the wreck buoy bobbing in the water a hundred feet off the rocks at the foot of Fort St Angelo beyond the nearby headland on the other side of Dockyard Creek. The stern section of HMS Torquay was no threat but the big ships crowding the bays and creeks were. As the destroyer's bow cleared the entrance to French Creek he turned.

"Stop BOTH!"

He heard the order repeated.

"Starboard TEN!"

HMS Talavera's bow began to drift around, slowly, slowly. The whole Fleet would be watching, eagerly waiting for the youngest destroyer captain in the Royal Navy to make a complete ass of himself. Peter Christopher grinned because that was *not* about to happen!

HMS Talavera's recently joined Navigation Officer; a Canadian reservist in his forties was quietly, competently taking bearings, checking angles. Lieutenant Dermot O'Reilly had been a sub-lieutenant on a Flower class corvette on the Atlantic run in the last year of the 1945 war, afterwards a mate on a factory ship in the South Atlantic whale fishery, and before the October War a carpenter and an odd job man in his native Montreal. He had never married and but for the war he might have carried on inexorably sliding towards lonely, failed middle age and the bottle. His father had drunk himself to death at fifty, bereft of purpose in his life. After the October War, O'Reilly had applied for service in his own Navy in Canada but his country had scrapped most of its Navy – or as good as – and subsequently sheltered behind American military power since 1945. Thwarted, he had gone to the British consulate, offered his 'extensive combat experience' to the Royal Navy. The people in Montreal had not known what to do with him and

referred him to the British Embassy in Ottawa. The 'call' had arrived six months ago, then he had had to wait two months to hitch a ride across the North Atlantic in one of the old Liberty ships the Canadian Government had loaned from the Americans – the Canadians had carried on sending grain, strategic metals and oil to the old country even though the British pound was worthless on a North American continent in which the dollar was king – and eventually fetched up at the Admiralty Reception Centre in Portsmouth. He had been shocked by practically everything he saw and discovered in England; but the Brits had converted his wavy one ring to two solid ones and after a couple of months cooling his heels teaching navigation to pale-faced kids, teenage sub-lieutenants straight out of school, he had boarded the RMS Sylvania. The rest, as they say, was history. He had reported on board Talavera a fortnight ago.

For the first time Peter Christopher had a clear view of all the shipping in the Grand Harbour. The Big Cats, HMS Lion and HMS Tiger were moored fore and aft to emergency destroyer buoys opposite Corradino heights, beneath which in deep bunkers and tunnels lay the primary naval arsenal of the Mediterranean Fleet. Beyond the cruisers the chimney of Marsa power station belched grey smoke. The P and O liner Canberra – her outline broken by her drab camouflage - was berthed under the ramparts of Floriana. The landing ships and many of the transports were anchored on the other side of Valletta in Marsamxett, cluttering Lazaretto and Msida Creeks. Two big fleet oilers lay deep in the water, filled to their load lines in Kalkara Bay, where as Talavera emerged into the waters under the bows of the Big Cats, the three aircraft carriers that were vital to the success of the forthcoming operations in the Eastern Mediterranean slowly came into view from the destroyer's bridge. The Commando carrier HMS Ocean was nearest – she would sail with the assault force – and behind her HMS Eagle's bulk hid most of the smaller HMS Hermes from sight.

The Eagle had been two-thirds of the way through a radical reconstruction at Portsmouth at the time of the October War. The rebuild had begun in 1959 and progress had been slow; however, in her new incarnation Eagle was a significantly more modern and capable weapon of war than her half-sister, HMS Ark Royal, the worn-out heroine of Operation Manna. Fully loaded, the Eagle displaced over fifty-four thousand tons – making her nearly twice the size of the Hermes – and carried an air group of over forty

aircraft. In the distance, HMS Sheffield still stood sentinel just inside the northern breakwater. The battered old cruiser had already surrendered over two hundred men to bolster the complement of HMS Belfast, the Flagship of Task Force Alpha. After the Fleet had sailed for the Eastern Mediterranean the Sheffield was to be sent home with a skeleton crew.

A thin tendril of smoke was rising from the Belfast's after funnel and a host of flags were flying from her halyards, both fore and aft. Inboard of the Flagship the tall masts of three US Navy ships were a veritable forest of aerials. Elements of Rear Admiral Detweiller's 'American Squadron' had departed the Grand Harbour in company with a convoy of US Navy stores, ammunition ships and tankers that outnumbered the handful of modern anti-aircraft and submarine missile destroyers and frigates at his disposal. The story was that the logistics ships were part of the USS Independence's task force. The American super carrier was still at Gibraltar by all accounts.

"Slow ahead PORT!"

Peter Christopher waited until her felt the deck under his feet responding.

"Slow astern STARBOARD!"

And then: "Helm AMIDSHIPS!"

HMS Talavera's bow swung towards the east.

"Stop BOTH!"

The Captain of the elderly Battle class destroyer had no intention of tiptoeing nervously out of harbour.

"Slow ahead BOTH!"

Lieutenant Dermot O'Reilly stepped up to his commanding officer's shoulder. He was a tall, bearded figure with weathered features of a similar stature to the younger man. He followed Peter Christopher's gaze up to the left where the Commander-in-Chief's flag flew above the Saluting Battery.

"Starboard TEN!"

The destroyer responded; Peter Christopher judged the delay before his next helm command too effect.

"Helm AMIDSHIPS!"

Dermot O'Reilly tried not to grin too broadly. The Admiral's son, Miles Weiss and the rest of the destroyer's wardroom had welcomed him onboard in a friendly, businesslike way that he had never been welcomed anywhere in his naval career to date. He had wondered if being the best part of twenty years his commanding officer's senior in age would be a problem – and

frankly, the relative youth of everybody in the wardroom except the Engineering Officer had somewhat disorientated him, albeit only for a day or so – but he need not have worried. Notwithstanding their youth his new Captain and his boyish band of brothers – hardened and tempered already in the heat of combat - knew exactly what they were about.

HMS Talavera was not going to leave harbour like a thief in the night, juggling revolutions on her two screws, or with a flurry of constantly adjusted helm orders. Her Captain had pointed her at the middle of the northern breakwater and was letting the ship pick up speed; two or three cables short of colliding with HMS Sheffield's starboard side Talavera would swing nimbly to the right and by then, with her turbines half-ahead, race out of port with the élan of a salmon leaping a waterfall.

The Fighting Admiral's son had *style*.

It was around noon when the destroyer surged through the wide gap between the lighthouses marking the ends of the northern and southern breakwaters of the Grand Harbour and, with a bone in her teeth, sprinted out to sea.

Doctor Margo Seiffert found Marija and Rosa sitting on the grass staring at the retreating destroyer. Stiffly, she joined them in the sunshine in the garden. She still felt a little guilty that she still had not got around to properly thanking Marija for smoothing over things with the senior people at the hospital.

"I made sure I stayed well away from Surgeon Captain Hughes's office," she assured her protégé quickly. In fact, she had walked most of the way *around* Royal Naval Hospital Bighi to make absolutely certain she did not encounter anybody she was likely to upset. "They've developed your x-ray, Rosa," she announced.

Both the younger women waited expectantly.

"Don't worry; we'll get you some cotton wool to put in your ears."

Rosa did not immediately understand what this had to do with the x-ray of her lower left leg and frowned.

Marija touched her arm.

"The electric saws are very loud," she said sympathetically, speaking from long experience.

"You shouldn't walk home," Margo went on. "Hopefully, we can find you a wheelchair. You won't want to put much weight on the leg for a few

days but it should be as right as rain this time next month."

The older woman gazed out to sea.

She loved coming back to Bighi where she had worked for so many years with Surgeon Captain Reginald Stephens. Marija gave her too much credit; Reggie had been the one whose infinitely patient, methodical, god-gifted surgeon's hands had eventually put her back together. After Reggie had died Margo had not returned to Bighi for over three years; she could not face it, instead she had buried herself in her all-consuming project in Mdina. The Women's Hospital had actually been Reggie's idea and it could never have got off the ground back in the late 1940s without his support. He had pulled strings, called in favours, wined and dined the people that mattered, and quietly championed the cause of the 'auxiliary nurses of Malta'. She hoped that the man who had been, belatedly, the love of her life approved of what she was doing now. Often, Margo was afraid she was spreading herself too thinly, wearing herself out but what else could she do? There was so much to be done and so little time. Today she had been at her desk in Mdina at dawn, worked for two hours, jumped in a car to come to Bighi, stopping off on the way to meet Dom Mintoff, the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party; ostensibly to stop his people intimidating the families of the men and women she was attempting to recruit into the Medical Directorate of the Malta Defence Force. The man was polite, charming in the insincere way of all born politicians. Mintoff had made the right noises and this morning, and for a change he had not surrounded himself with his obligatory coterie of heavies, so perhaps, that was progress. After that meeting she had walked straight into the orthopaedic clinic at Bighi; women and children before lunch and men in the afternoon. This evening she had a meeting scheduled with the Commander-in-Chief's 'logistics staff' about equipment and facilities for the MDF Medical Directorate, then she was hoping to catch up on whatever had happened or gone wrong in her day long absence from the St Catherine's Hospital for Women.

It did not help her cause that delegation had never been her strong suit. Delegation always felt like abdication...

Margo blinked.

In the distance the ululating banshee howl of air raid alarms was shrieking across the waters of the Grand Harbour and creeping ever closer, each siren picking up and re-broadcasting the dreadful clamouring of its

nearest neighbour as the dreadful sound surged around and between the great ships moored below the women like grey castles of steel floating on a sparkling azure carpet in Kalkara Bay.

Marija was already helping Rosa to her feet.

Chapter 36

Easter Monday 30th March 1964
Istanbul, Turkey

Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov was nothing if not an extraordinarily pragmatic man. He had spent his entire adult life fighting one or another war; he had survived purges and bullets alike, always treating his survival with the phlegmatic insouciance of a man to whom physical danger meant nothing. His recent experience in the dungeons of the Romanian Securitate had been no more than a curious adjunct to a life of violence. He was not a personally violent, or a vindictive man. To the contrary, he was a professional soldier who understood that taking things *personally* was almost always a bad mistake. Taking things personally blurred one's judgement and besides, revenge was a dish best served cold.

Southern Front General Order S/07/114/X ordering the rounding up and 'disposal' of all Romanian citizens and former members of the Romanian Armed Forces in the Istanbul Military District arose not from the anger – which Chuikov still harboured at his treatment in Bucharest, or on account of the indignities meted out to his comrades, First Deputy Prime Minister Kosygin and to Second Secretary of the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* Andropov – but because when one found a nest of vipers in the grounds of one's country dacha, a wise man stamped it out without stopping to ask each individual snake if they planned to bite one. The ongoing arrests and summary executions constituted no more than a sensible exercise in military good housekeeping.

"The *action* was necessary, Comrade Marshal," the man with the wrinkling, sly peasant's face agreed, "but those *Krasnaya Zarya* fanatics systematically wiped out the KGB in this part of the World before they remembered they were supposed to be launching Phase One of Operation *Chastise*. I am having to employ military police units and several battalions of regular troops on this work. A lot of the people we're after were in bed with *Krasnaya Zarya* and this city is rotten with deserters and traitors."

Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov was not

unsympathetic to his subordinate's problems. Command of the Soviet ground and air forces in the West was a poisoned chalice and only a good man – a man loyal to the very core of his being to the Party and the Revolution – would have accepted it in the first place.

Back in late October 1962 Turkey had ceased to be a country by the time the bombs had stopped going off. The Anatolian heartland of Asia Minor had fallen into tribal chaos in the days after the war and subsequently, the apparatus of the old Turkish state had survived only in Istanbul, where elements of the army and navy had briefly coalesced around the rump of the former regime. Elsewhere, ethnic and religious violence had swiftly destroyed the connective tissue of the nation. *Krasnaya Zarya* had eventually seized Istanbul as if it was a ripe, low hanging fruit and brought a brutal and merciless rule of law to its streets.

Senior Turkish military men had gladly allowed themselves to be incorporated into the conqueror's ranks; how else would they have survived? The remnants of Turkish army units had been incorporated into the *Krasnaya Zarya* horde, and officers from the Soviet Black Sea Fleet put in command of many of the obsolete and near obsolete ships and submarines – Western hand me downs - that had once been the guardians of the Hellespont.

Fifty-nine-year-old Colonel-General Petr Kirillovich Koshevoi had commanded a corps at Stalingrad. His troops had been among the liberators of Sevastopol, and later captured Konigsberg in *that* war. At the time of the Cuban Missiles War he had been the Commander of the Kiev Military District, buried in his command bunker outside the city for nearly a week after the attack. For Koshevoi no sacrifice was too high to avenge the suffering of the Mother Country.

"We cannot go forward with an enemy at our rear, Comrade Colonel-General," Chuikov said with blunt good humour. He looked to the third man in the room of the old palace overlooking the grey waters of the Golden Horn.

Sergei Georgiyevich Gorshkov had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy by Nikita Khrushchev as long ago as 1956. Nikita Sergeyevich had given the then forty-six-year-old Admiral one simple directive: to build a fleet not just to rival, but to equal and to better the combined fleets of the United States of America and its allies. It was Gorshkov who had ordered – on his own initiative - the dispersal of the

Soviet Fleet in the hours before the Cuban Missiles War. In the Arctic and the Baltic, the order had come too late, likewise in the Far East, where the majority of the surface units and submarines which had escaped the Yankee bombs and missiles had been ruthlessly hunted down by the American 7th Fleet in the following days. Only the Black Sea Fleet had survived as a coherent fighting entity. Several ships had been destroyed in dock, others had been too close to big strikes but two-thirds of the Fleet had sailed for partially wrecked Odessa in the Ukraine, and the intact ports of Constanta in Rumania and Varna in Bulgaria.

The western operations built into Phase Two of Operation *Chastise* risked the loss of the entire Combined Black Sea Fleet; consequently, unlike the other members of the Politburo in their snug bunkers and dachas in the East, Chuikov had never taken Admiral Gorshkov's acquiescence to the 'naval plan' within Operation *Nakazyvat* for granted. In exactly the same way Chuikov's power base would evaporate overnight if the 'Push to the South' failed or if his surviving armies were destroyed, Gorshkov might be finished if all his big ships were sunk. Problematically, *if* he went along with the current plan *all* his ships and submarines would almost certainly end up at the bottom of the Mediterranean anyway.

"What are your thoughts, Comrade Admiral?" Chuikov asked.

What was the point beating about the bush?

"Better is the enemy of *good enough*, Vasily Ivanovich," the greying man with the dark moustache replied. "The current plan is deficient in several respects with regard to naval operations."

"The Fleet must demonstrate," Chuikov retorted flatly.

"I don't tell you or Babadzhanian how to fight tank battles!" The other man's irritation flashed for a moment before the inscrutable mask fell back into place. "Nor do I presume to tell Petr Kirillovich," he glanced to Colonel General Koshevoi, "his business. Colonel-General Babadzhanian has confided to me that if all goes well in the West his job in Persian and Iraq is likely to be much easier. That is enough for me. The Soviet Navy will do its duty. However," he sighed and stepped nearer to the Red Army men, "I foresee no scenario in which recklessly throwing away the Fleet in a series of uncoordinated piecemeal actions furthers the goals of Babadzhanian's *push*."

Chuikov decided there was no harm hearing what Gorshkov had to say. The Commander of all Soviet Forces hunched his broad shoulders in what

might have been a shrug.

"What do you have in mind, Comrade Admiral?"

"A single nuclear-powered submarine, the British Dreadnought, completely destroyed the attempt to land forces on the eastern beaches of Cyprus. A single submarine in less than an afternoon, Comrades. It was because of that single action that the first wave failed to carry the island by storm."

Chuikov and Koshevoi raised eyebrows but said nothing. The failure to seize the whole of Cyprus to secure its use as a viable base for future operations, and as a bulwark against further British aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean basin had been the one strategic setback in Phase One. Other things had gone wrong but only the situation on Cyprus had caused real difficulties.

"Our people on Malta report that HMS Dreadnought has been sent back to the United Kingdom for repairs. However, it is believed that at least three American submarines with similar capabilities have now taken up position East of Malta. It is reasonable to assume that these vessels will be deployed to the seas around Cyprus or used to 'block' the Cyprus-Crete gap into the Eastern Mediterranean, or to remain in the vicinity of Malta. For example, if I was Admiral Christopher in Malta, I would ask the Yankees to place one submarine in a patrol box say, one hundred kilometres wide by fifty, mid-way between the western tip of Crete, and the Maltese Archipelago."

Gorshkov's eyes were cobalt hard.

"By concentrating all available air, surface and undersea units against one of the Yankee submarines," Gorshkov continued, "it might be possible to drive it away, or to minimise our losses. That would be 'good enough' to improve the value of a 'demonstration' to distract the attention of our enemies from the real danger. But, Comrades, I suggest that we do '*better*'."

"What did you have in mind?" Koshevoi asked, growing impatient. First the Politburo had ordered the recovery of all viable tactical nuclear warheads to the Naval Armoury at Odessa, then Chuikov had obliged him to waste time purging the bloody Romanians from his command area, and now Gorshkov wanted to re-write the whole fucking operations plan for Phase Two!

"Comrades," the Admiral prefaced, clasping his hands behind his back, "Only one thing might stop the British and the American's throwing us off

Cyprus."

"What would that be?" Chuikov asked, beginning to see where this was going. Gorshkov was thinking bigger than Koshevoi dared. The strategic objective of all operations in the West was to mount a giant 'demonstration' to keep the British and the Americans off balance while Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's two Tank Armies raced south from the Caucasus to seize the Persian and Iraqi oilfields at the head of the Persian Gulf. Once Babadzhanian's tanks were parked along the northern shores of the Gulf the whole Arabian Peninsula would be at the Soviet Union's mercy.

"We must seize back the whole of Cyprus," Gorshkov said flatly. "Without Cyprus, Crete will eventually fall and the enemy will have the option to 'island hop' north towards our exposed and weakly defended southern flank. If the enemy holds Cyprus the countries of the Levant and perhaps, even those of Arabia will still have hope. Babadzhanian's tanks can pick off countries one at a time but if he has to worry about his flanks he'll never get to the Arabian Gulf. So, we must take Cyprus and we must hurt the British and the Americans so badly, that they leave us with the spoils of our victory in the east. Even if they leave us undisturbed for a few weeks or months we will amass such strength on the ground that they will never drive us back."

Chuikov did not disagree with a word he said but Gorshkov was missing the point. Either they won this war quickly or they were completely *fucked*. If Babadzhanian's 'push to the south' stalled there were no new tank regiments to throw into the line. Likewise, once the cutting edge of mobile front-line units in Koshevoi's western sector were gone, that was it.

Operation *Chastise* was the Soviet Union's last throw of the dice.

"I will give you your 'demonstrations' against the Task Force the enemy is sending to Cyprus," Gorshkov promised grimly. "But nothing will prevent the loss of our strategic hold over the Anatolian flank of the Trans-Caucasus, and the exposure of the right flank of Colonel-General Babadzhanian's push to the south other than a direct attack on, and the seizure and destruction of the enemy's one vital strategic outpost in the Central Mediterranean."

Koshevoi spluttered with ire.

Chuikov sniffed, focused in that moment on the outrageous, positively Machiavellian logic of the argument rather than upon the crippling scarcity of the forces at his disposal.

“Babadzhanian will want your head on a stick if I give you any of his paratroopers, Comrade Sergei Georgiyevich,” he observed.

“I also want naval garrison troops from every port in the Black Sea,” Sergei Gorshkov told him. “Moreover, the harassing sorties into the Maltese Air Exclusion Zone must cease with immediate effect. Or if they must continue mount them at such times of day that the alarms sound in the middle of the night or when the first shifts are arriving at the dockyards.”

Koshevoi lost his temper.

“We have to gather electronic intelligence!”

“Why?” Gorshkov snapped. “Don’t you see, Comrade Colonel-General? Everybody talks about *Maskirovska* but sometimes I don’t think any of you know what it means. We must show the enemy the empty palm of one hand and let them study it with such concentration that they will be completely caught by surprise when we hit them with the clenched fist of the other. As we speak their ships will be leaving Malta to sail to Cyprus. Let them go. Remember the open hand, my friends. We force them to watch the open hand and then, when they are transfixed and we have drawn them into a battle in the East; we tear out their guts in the West!”

Chapter 37

Wednesday 1st April 1964
Eton College, Berkshire

The King of London was wearing an Eton top hat, and a threadbare grey pin-stripe suit and waistcoat. He had a black and white striped scarf around his neck and Army boots on his feet. Although he had shaved for the occasion his hair was tousled and he had the same lean, hungry look of the hundreds of his 'subjects' who had lined the route into the ancient school.

A detachment of the Prime Minister's Royal Marine bodyguard had moved into Eton College the day before. There had been harsh words but no violence, the *King* and his *courtiers* understood where the real power lay if it came to a shooting match.

Eton College had been a compromise meeting place; several locations closer to the centre of London had been mooted by the *King's* representative, a red-headed woman in her thirties with a sharp tongue and an even sharper mind. Her name was Miriam Prior, before the war she had been a primary school teacher in Islington and among her own people, she was treated like a latter-day saint. The Home Office had wanted to hold this first 'plenary session' – as Miriam Prior had styled it – in Oxford but the King of London had, through his red-headed, abrasive mouthpiece rejected this out of hand.

Two RAF Hawker Hunter jet fighters roared overhead as the Prime Minister's armoured Rolls-Royce rumbled past the overgrown Provost's Garden into the heart of the College complex.

"Oh dear," Roy Jenkins, the Home Secretary murmured. "All the windows seem to have gone from this side of the Chapel." He sighed. "And the roof appears to be open to the elements in places. I was hoping that this far out there might be a little less," he shrugged, "damage."

"Windsor Castle is still pretty much intact," Sir Richard Amyatt Hull pronounced cheerfully from his backwards facing seat. The Army Chief gave every impression of enjoying his outing. "My staff was astonished these people hadn't colonised the castle."

"Eton College is one of their outer 'contact' settlements, General," the

Home Secretary told him. "They've experienced a lot of trouble from people in the nearby areas which escaped the worst of the bombing."

"Windsor Castle is currently garrisoned by a company of the Middlesex Regiment," the Chief of the General Staff sighed, "and 'King Harold' and his people keep well away from the place. I think they've learned to be self-sufficient and to be wary of people they don't know."

The troops 'holding' Windsor Castle were one of a number of small 'forward units' that ringed the capital. Their brief was to observe and occasionally send out patrols but otherwise, simply to maintain 'a presence' in the no man's land on the outer edges of the devastated districts. Similar 'presences' had been routinely deployed around other bombed areas; although thus far their role had been almost entirely passive. The Castle had survived the October War with only superficial damage; the town in its shadow had fared less well and remained looted and uninhabitable sixteen months after the cataclysm. Immediately after the war the survivors of the outlying regions of the bombed zones had bled into the surrounding countryside, clogging the main roads. It had been some months before a systematic attempt was made to bury the dead who had fallen along the roadsides around London...

"My staffers tell me that the people just up the road from here still regard these people," General Hull waved at the crowds outside the car curiously looking in, "as unclean. As a bunch of scavengers, troublemakers, disease carriers, that sort of thing. It puts me in mind of some of the things I saw after the war in Europe ended in forty-five."

Margaret Thatcher had spoken little on the drive south from Oxford. One of the reasons she had invited the Chief of the General Staff of the Army to join the small delegation was to hear a detailed update on the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland. Over a hundred soldiers had been killed in the last seven days, so had a score of IRA – Irish Republican Army – men and at least fifty civilians, mostly caught in the crossfire or bombings. There had also been an incident in which British troops had inadvertently – Sir Richard was fairly certain it was 'inadvertently' – crossed into the territory of the Irish Republic and shots had been fired at Irish troops before anybody realised what had happened. In the last week several caches of weapons manufactured in American factories, some still bearing US Army stamps and registration codes, including M-16 assault rifles and World War II

‘pineapple’ type hand grenades, had been discovered in a series of raids in Belfast and Londonderry.

“You were in Italy and then Germany in 1945, General?”

“OC 1st Armoured Division in Italy in forty-four, then 5th Division in Germany. I suppose the thing I took from those days is that no matter how smashed a society is, and the Germans were in a pretty dreadful state at the end of the war and it was probably even worse for them in the Russian sector, sooner or later civilised people pull themselves together and start to rebuild. These people out here,” another wave at the crowd, “whatever they look like they’ve obviously got themselves organised and made a start at getting on with things. They’re probably ten times more motivated to start the rebuilding process than the people five miles up the road who got away more or less scot free on the night of the war, Prime Minister.”

“You may be right, General.”

Harold Strettle, the King of London stepped forward from a throng of hard-faced men and women.

It was then that Margaret Thatcher realised that she had seen no small children. Moreover, very few among the crowd which pressed against the cordon of heavily armed Royal Marines were older than forty, most were young adults and teenagers.

The Prime Minister sized up her host.

“Forgive me if I’m a little bit stuffy about it, Mister Strettle,” she said, quirking a smile. “But I recognise only one Monarch in this land.”

Miriam Prior had positioned herself by the right shoulder of *King Harold*. She was a riot of colour, her jacket a quilt of different fabrics and she seemed to be wearing *purple* mascara!

Margaret Thatcher guessed the man’s age to be mid-forties; it was hard to know these days.

“I didn’t vote for you Mrs Thatcher,” Harold Strettle declared. “I voted Labour. Pity a few more people didn’t. Maybe we wouldn’t be in such a mess if we’d had good old Hugh Gaitskell in Number Ten eighteen months ago. Not that Hugh was the real thing. Still, we can’t change the past, can we?”

Harold Strettle was about the Prime Minister’s height. His green eyes met her stare unblinking. The moment was pregnant with possibilities and Margaret Thatcher recognised the prickling, electric hostility in the air as a

physical, malevolent thing until by a simple gesture, the self-styled King of London stuck out his right hand in welcome and comprehensively punctured the expanding balloon of mistrust with a broad welcoming grin.

Shifting her handbag – a grey, somewhat battered specimen today – to the crook of her left arm she shook the man's hand. His grip was firm but in no way testing. His palm was dry, rough, calloused.

It was a sunny morning. The spring time of the year would soon be upon them. There had been no real summer last year, perhaps this year would be more *normal*.

Margaret Thatcher looked around.

"I plan to rebuild this country, Mr Strettle," she declaimed, loudly. "Will you join me in this great endeavour?"

To her surprise the King of London shrugged.

"Show me your plan and I'll show you mine."

Roy Jenkins, the Home Secretary got the joke and so did the Chief of the General Staff; all of King Harold's men and women also got the joke. Margaret Thatcher did not, her mind was too literal a strength and a flaw as yet unexplored in her short but eventful premiership.

The Home Secretary quickly stepped forward.

Sometimes in moments of stress he pronounced a 'w' in the wrong place, not quite a lisp or a speech impediment, more a mannerism.

"*Pewhaps*," he suggested anxiously, "we should *carwy* on this conversation in *pwivate*..."

This time everybody laughed, even the Prime Minister.

The Royal Marines struggled to stop the crowd pressing through the doors after the King and his visitors, to no avail because soon people were clambering into College Hall through open windows. Chairs were arranged haphazardly around a roughly oval area free of other furniture in the approximate centre of the floor.

"You should sit over there," Miriam Prior pointed to the least rickety of the chairs on the brighter side of College Hall.

Margaret Thatcher was pleasantly surprised to discover that the glass in the windows was intact and that the gloominess was because curtains or blinds had been drawn closed. In a moment bright lights switched on.

"We have generators," the red-headed woman said employing the tone of somebody who was making a very important point.

While the Angry Widow's Royal Marines packed the rows at her back and edged in around the sides of the Prime Minister's small delegation, the room filled with ragged, but surprisingly fit and healthy people. Some of the newcomers were cleaner than others but practically everybody stank of sweat, mud and dampness. Margaret Thatcher stared more than she knew she ought at the numerous members of 'the King's' retinue who might have been dressed for the occasion by a theatrical costumier. Most of the women wore trousers or leggings under dresses and skirts that seemed otherwise rather too short, well above the knee and in some cases, mid-thigh. Several men had long shoulder length hair, moustaches, but not all had beards. Others wore coats with golden epaulettes, or military badges or rings on their cuffs. As her eyes grew accustomed to the light she saw that there was a large CND – Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – banner nailed up on the end wall of the hall.

King Harold's followers seemed to her like a band of gypsies!

She would ask Pat Harding-Grayson to check her hair for unwanted *passengers* tonight. Although she doubted these people were any more or less *lousy* than the other crowds with which she mingled; one had to be constantly aware of one's personal hygiene to stay fit and free of parasites. The worst problem remained unavailability of safe drinking water if one was away from civilization, she knew several colleagues who had had worms. Things that one had taken for granted before the cataclysm could so easily lead to debilitating, often fatal infections and illnesses.

"I'm sorry, Prime Minister," Roy Jenkins muttered. "I had no idea things would develop in this fashion."

"Please don't concern yourself, Mr Jenkins." In so saying Margaret Thatcher placed her handbag on the floor by her chair, stood up and brushed down her skirt. "To whom should I address my remarks, Miss Prior?" She asked.

"To us all."

"Neither you or Mr Strettle speak for your, er, group?"

"That's not the way it works."

"Enlighten me, how does *it* work?"

Harold Strettle put a hand on Miriam Prior's shoulder. He had taken off his Eton top hat and dropped it on a chair, now he wiped the thinning hair across his balding pate.

“You wouldn’t be talking to me, to any of us, if you didn’t want something. We’ve got radios and people passing through tell us things. One way and another we know what’s happening *out* there,” he waved dismissively at thin air. “Half the Navy got sunk in the Mediterranean last month and Malta got bombed before Christmas. Blimey, the Russians tried to kill the Queen! First off, the Yanks were our best friends, and then they were our enemies, now they may be our friends again. As for what’s going on the other side of the Irish Sea!” The man spoke with a sanguine voice that belied the trouble in his eyes. “So, I’m guessing you want us to help you clear the main roads to the docks so big ships can come straight up the Thames. What with Liverpool getting hit in the war, not having a big port like London is a problem? Right?”

“It is,” she agreed. If the man did not look so ridiculous she would have had much more respect for him.

Is that his fault or mine?

The King of London shrugged as if he did not know the answer to her silent question.

“Once you’ve got roads cleared,” he went on, “you can send in the Army to dig up all the bank vaults. The way I see it, once you’ve done that you’ll forget all about us.”

Roy Jenkins was on his feet.

“That is not our intention!”

“Forgive me, sir,” Margaret Thatcher enunciated with chilling clarity, “what do you take us for?”

Harold Strettle returned her glare with dull eyes.

“The last time I trusted politicians and people like him” he nodded at General Sir Richard Hull, I ended up spending most of the next three-and-a-half years in a Japanese prison camp. After what happened a year or so back I don’t reckon an awful lot has changed since 1942.”

It was not lost on Margaret Thatcher that Miriam Prior had extended her arm around the man’s waist as he spoke.

“Singapore?” The Chief of the General Staff inquired flatly.

Harold Strettle nodded.

“Bad business,” Sir Richard Hull agreed. “The people in charge ought to have been shot. For what it is worth, Mr Strettle,” he added, dryly, “that sort of thing would never have happened if Mrs Thatcher had been in charge in

those days!"

The Prime Minister let this compliment – she was fairly certain it was a compliment – pass unremarked. She decided to try a different approach.

"Mr Strettle," she began, softening a little, "it is true that my Government has a vested interested in re-opening the Greater London area and restoring it as a national transportation and telecommunications hub. One look at the map tells one that all roads in the United Kingdom go to London. Less well known is that the national telephone system used to radiate out from Farringdon which lies in the centre of the devastated area. Yes, it is our objective to clear the roads and to open up the docks. And yes, at some point we intend to discover what remains of the telecommunications infrastructure beneath the streets of the capital. Yes, our plans will involve clearing key road routes and if possible, re-establishing railways and other communications, like a working telephone system if not in the capital, then passing through it. It is also true that it is in the national interest to 'mine', as you say, the vaults of banks and the basements of other public and commercial buildings for valuables, materials and documentary archives which may have survived the October War. However, the reason I am here today is to seek your co-operation in the first step of national reconstruction."

I am hectoring the man!

Stop it!

She shut her eyes for a moment.

"Today, my primary purpose is simply to meet with you to learn what I can about your people and to ascertain what assistance *we* may be able to offer you in the immediate future. Honestly and truly, if it was the Government's policy to brazenly reassert its control over the bombed areas of the England we would have just sent in Sir Richard's boys and had done with it!"

That had broken the ice and a slow, tentative thaw had ensued.

They had sat down and the Prime Minister had listened intently to everything King Harold and his 'Queen', Miriam, had had to say. It had been a chastening experience for all concerned.

Margaret Thatcher had much to think about on the journey back to Oxford.

It seemed that there was no single homogeneous 'community' in the capital. There were numerous 'gangs', mostly small and territorial, some

more aggressive and xenophobic than others. ‘King Harold’s’ domain stretched from the old north-west and western suburbs deep into the heart of the city around Westminster. The King had talked fancifully of creating an anarcho-syndicalist commune, a socialist collective; but what he had actually described was a loosely co-operative number of groups of survivors who traded across poorly defined boundaries and occasionally sent representatives to his ‘court’, which for the last couple of months had been at Eton. Life in the ruins of the city in the winter was harsh and his ‘tribe’ was not exclusively made up of the youngest and the fittest of the survivor ‘polity’.

Harold Strettle had been a Trades Union organiser working for the London Underground. On the night of the war he had been in a deep tube recovering a broken-down train with a gang of seven other men. Several days later they had emerged into a nightmare changed World.

‘Nobody ever got around to burying the dead,’ he had told the Prime Minister. Of the capital’s pre-war population of several millions he guessed that somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand might still live in the city. The population shifted from place to place, constantly drifting into and out of the undamaged lands beyond the wrecked inner suburbs,

“I apologise if today’s exercise was less than *productive*,” the Home Secretary said, interrupting Margaret Thatcher’s rumination. “But I think it was important for the Government to be seen to be talking to what, intelligence sources inform me, is the largest, most coherent and least violent of the survivor groupings. In the longer term I think today’s encounter will bear fruit, Prime Minister. Mr Strettle’s group is the only one that talks to most of the other ‘gangs’, who in turn tolerate it because it freely trades food and other supplies with them across its borders. Hopefully, the word will now spread that Her Majesty’s Government is not insensitive to their situation and is not planning an imminent military takeover of their domains.”

“It might yet come to that, Mr Jenkins.” Margaret Thatcher reminded him. The troubles in Northern Ireland, the bottomless pit of the campaign in the Mediterranean and the need to maintain troops on home soil to secure ports and power stations against the still very real terroristic, fifth column threat posed by Red Dawn and other dissident and criminal elements, meant there was no real scope for diverting scarce military assets to repossess the ruined capital; even had that been a thing that needed to be done *now*, which

it was not. If the nation's fate had hung on re-opening the docks and 'mining' the vaults and cellars of London she would have ordered the Army in without a qualm and it did no harm to remind her Home Secretary of the fact.

"The use of force against one's own people for political and economic ends, no matter how vital to the pursuance of the greater good of the general population," Roy Jenkins counselled firmly, "is to start down a very slippery slope, Prime Minister."

"I know," she conceded sadly. "I know."

Chapter 38

Wednesday 1st April 1964
USS Iowa, Straits of Gibraltar

With six of her eight Babcock and Wilcox M-Type boilers lit the battleship's four General Electric cross-compound steam turbines drove the leviathan through the night at over twenty-eight knots. Beneath an overcast night sky, the USS Iowa's escorting destroyers were invisible to the naked eye, and ten miles ahead, only the all-seeing green eyes of the AN/SPS-10 surface and AN/SPS-6 air-search radars *saw* the USS Independence and her escorts. The big carrier had slipped her moorings in Algeciras Bay and sailed out into the North Atlantic the previous day to rendezvous with the battleship beyond sight of land. Reversing course around dusk and working up to the Iowa's best speed, Task Force 21.1 was 'shooting' the eight-mile-wide channel between Spain and the Algerian coast.

Nobody onboard any of the ships actually believed their entry into the Western Mediterranean would go unnoticed or unremarked; the exercise was primarily designed to sharpen up and concentrate minds on the job in hand. This was no peacetime exercise, sometime in the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours British troops would be going ashore on Cyprus over two thousand miles to the east supported by US Navy SSNs – nuclear-powered hunter killer submarines – and half-a-dozen major USN surface units. The British were desperately short of carrier-born air cover; the fleet carrier Eagle and the smaller Hermes carried only sixty aircraft between them, against the eighty – including twenty-four McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantoms - of the Independence.

Every man of Task Force 21.1 understood that they were coming late to the party.

Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt felt that shared angst as much as anybody; however, his angst was balanced by a sense of immense achievement. To have succeeded in reactivating, shaking down and just getting to the Mediterranean in less than two months had been an achievement of truly Herculean proportions. The assignation of the

Presidential ‘Absolute Priority’ seal to the project had done no harm, nor had the Chief of Naval Operation’s masterstroke of calling up every old battleship man on the reserve list; even so, getting the ‘*The Big Stick*’ – Iowa’s nickname from the days of the Korean War – operational in such a short time very nearly beggared belief. And yet here she was, steering towards the sound of the guns.

From the darkened bridge wing Schmidt watched the lights of Gibraltar receding astern as he smoked his cigarette, a Lucky Stripe. He had given up the filthy habit when he retired from the Navy. A lesser man would have been driven to drink by the stresses and strains of recent weeks, and it was not as if he was getting any younger.

In a few days he would be sixty-two.

Eleven hundred miles to Malta, almost as far again to Cyprus and no telling if those sneaky Red Dawn bastards would attempt to nuke the Independence the way they had nuked the Enterprise, the Long Beach and that British carrier, HMS Victorious.

The more things change the more they remain the same. Those World War II British flat tops were tough nuts to crack. He had seen the Victorious’s sister ship, HMS Formidable, burning off Formosa in May 1945. The Kamikazes had not known they were wasting their time crashing into the armoured decks of the British flat tops; once the Brits had put out the fires and hammered the dents out of the flight deck they carried straight on launching and recovering their birds as if nothing had happened.

Two fleet oilers had sailed from Gibraltar three days ago. They would be positioned half-way between Lampedusa and Malta, waiting to top off the bunkers of every ship in the Task Force.

As he smoked his cigarette, the Captain of the USS Iowa inwardly digested the latest situation reports from Malta. Operation Grantham, the huge combined operation to eject Red Dawn from Cyprus and to secure the island as a base for ongoing operations had thus far gone without a hitch. Other than a handful of attempts to penetrate the fringes of the Malta Air Defence Zone by former Soviet Tupolev Tu-95 bombers – probably operating in a dedicated reconnaissance role – there had been no contact with the enemy. The intelligence community was still pedalling the line that ‘Red Dawn discipline and control has broken down in areas nominally under its control’; Eastern Turkey, Northern Greece and pockets of Yugoslavia,

Bulgaria and Romania. Supposedly, there was ‘minimal naval activity in the Aegean Basin’ at this time, although a footnote to the report conceded that ‘aerial surveillance of areas of Asia Minor, the Black Sea and the Dardanelles has been hampered by poor weather conditions in the last seven days’.

Schmidt remembered a conversation with an old friend who had become a CIA contractor when he retired after two decades in naval aviation, that ‘one day soon we’ll be able to spy on the surface of the whole planet from space’. Before the October War all things had seemed possible. Schmidt still did not know what to make of that crazy speech the President had made about putting an American on the Moon back in November, but whatever it was about it was not going to suddenly reverse the mothballing of the whole space program in the spring of last year. Whichever way one looked at it the ‘intelligence picture’ it was as *spotty* as Hell and the fact Operation Grantham was apparently proceeding with the smooth precision of an expensive Swiss watch, signified precisely diddly-squat in the humble opinion of Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt. Red Dawn fanatics had loosed off nukes, they had over run thousands of square miles of real estate and given the second-best navy in the World one Helluva bloody nose in February. He did not need the rumbling pain of his ulcers to tell him that those guys had not just *gone away* overnight. If recent history taught a man anything, the cynic in him said, it might simply be that the bastards had been planning something nasty all along and that far from *going away*, Red Dawn was simply bidding its time.

One last drag on his cigarette...

If he had had another month he could have actually got ‘The Big Stick’ into some kind of state to *really* go to war. Two days ago, he had allowed the turret crews to fire off most of the Iowa’s practice rounds. He had almost forgotten how good it felt in that moment the ship seemed to stop dead in the water for a split second when the big guns loosed off a broadside. The sound and fury of the main battery had briefly allowed him to forget that he still had over a hundred civilian contractors onboard, mostly working in the Fire Rooms, that there were seemingly intractable electrical problems in Number Two main battery turret, that the ship’s internal communications system was a mess and that the port side secondary dual-purpose five-inch battery was only operable in local control. Moreover, having so many old battlewagon hands on board was not turning out to be any kind of unmitigated blessing.

The old timers were infuriatingly set in their ways, constantly reminding their divisional officers of 'the way things were done' on the Missouri, or the New Jersey, or the Wisconsin, and a significant minority clearly viewed the Iowa as a pale shadow of their 'own' former ships.

It was fortunate that Captain Schmidt was a man who was convinced that his cup was always half-full, not half-empty. The one thing a Navy man could rely on was that things could always be worse.

"Surface contacts bearing zero-two-zero!"

Anderson Schmidt waited for more.

"Range forty plus miles. Contact keeps dropping out."

The hulls of the contacts were probably still below the horizon. They might be fifty, not forty miles out.

"Radar signature?" Schmidt asked coolly.

"Unidentified, sir."

The Independence would have had the contacts on her plot ever since Task Force 21.1 had 'shot' the straits. At any one time she always had one of the four brand new twin turboprop Northrop Grumman E-2 Hawkeye all-weather tactical early warning aircraft - flown out from the States a fortnight ago – in the air. The E-2s gave the carrier a bird's eye view of the surrounding sea and land out to one to two hundred miles in every direction. If anything happened to the Independence the air defence controller sitting in the 'duty' E-2 would automatically 'manage' the battlefield. It all seemed like something out of a Buck Rogers movie to Anderson Schmidt, which was one of the reasons he had known when the time had come to retire from the Navy. Several of the escorts had 'real time' communications links to the Independence and to the orbiting E-2 Hawkeye, constantly updating their tactical plots. The Iowa had none of that new kit. An early version of the electronics suite carried by some of the smaller escorts had been installed in the battleship in the mid-fifties; only to be removed during the mothballing refit in 1958.

"Have we got scrambled TBS with the Berkeley and the John King?" Anderson Schmidt asked in his sage, old-fashioned, no nonsense way. The two modern four thousand-ton Charles F. Adams class guided missile destroyers were pacing the Iowa, the Berkeley two miles to the north, the John King on station to the south.

"Affirmative, sir."

“Keep the connection to both ships live please.”

The Berkeley and the John King were armed with Tartar surface-to-air missiles, ASROC anti-submarine rockets and a five-inch main battery slaved to state of the art gunnery control radars. Schmidt did not know if they were presently connected in real time to the Independence’s E-2 Hawkeyes. Establishing ‘secure up links’, whatever the Hell that was in plain English was apparently a ‘fiddly business’ and there might not have been time to complete it prior to shooting the Straits of Gibraltar. It did not matter, both escorts had modern sensor and electronic warfare suites and the Iowa, did not. The Berkeley, patrolling on the battlewagon’s port flank would have detected the unidentified surface contacts long before the Iowa.

“Berkeley is on the horn, sir.”

Captain Schmidt took the handset.

“Iowa,” he acknowledged. The Captain of a United States Navy ship *was* that ship.

“CV-62’s Hawkeye is painting two bogeys at four-nine miles from your position, sir,” the commanding officer of the escorting destroyer drawled in a New England accent. “CV-62 requests Berkeley and John King spool up our Tartar systems and await further orders.”

Schmidt absorbed this.

“Affirmative. If the John King needs to clear the range she may independently manoeuvre ASTERN of Iowa at her own discretion.”

The last thing he wanted was some damned fool destroyer jockey trying to cross his bows to clear the range for his Tartar twin missile-launcher. He handed back the handset to the middle-aged bridge talker.

“Independence is launching birds, sir,” the bridge talker called, relaying the message from the radar room.

The British had warned their allies that the Spanish had a habit of tracking foreign warships entering the Mediterranean. From the intelligence digests he had read Anderson Schmidt doubted these two contacts were Spanish ships. The Brits had sunk or disabled half the Spanish Navy in December’s battles and most of the surviving surface units had hunkered down in Cadiz and Barcelona ever since.

The surface contacts were already starting to fall astern.

Anderson Schmidt signalled the bridge talker to approach him.

“Put me on the ship-wide circuit,” he ordered, picking up a handset from

beside the tactical plot.

He waited for the circuit to open.

"This is the Captain," he said, hearing and *feeling* his amplified voice booming around the great ship, "this ship has now entered a war zone. A few minutes ago, unidentified surface contacts were detected at the extreme range of our radar systems. As a precaution our escorting destroyers have been authorised to manoeuvre freely so as to clear the ranges for their missiles. We are presently drawing ahead of the surface contacts which remain under surveillance by the Independence's aircraft. From this point on we can expect to be targeted and attacked by enemy submarines, surface units and aircraft. Because of the risk of attack with atomic, bacteriological and or chemical weapons no crew member may go on deck other than with the express permission of a senior officer." He paused. "The ship will now close up to battle stations."

Turning to the Officer of the Deck, Anderson Schmidt smiled thinly.

"Sound Action Stations!"

The klaxons blared and the USS Iowa was consumed by rushing bodies, semi-organised disorder and outright, shambolic chaos. The minutes dragged by, reports came in. The lights on the readiness board began to change from amber to green. Everybody donned flak jackets and steel helmets; officers strapped on their 45-calibre Brownings, or if they were old-school like their commanding officer, pattern 1911 Navy Colts.

Number Two turret's lights gleamed bright red long after the rest of the battleship had closed up to battle stations.

"Number Two main battery turret reports many electrical failures, sir!" Then: "Turret captain reports turret ready for action under local control, sir!"

Schmidt's expression was glacial.

At least the Turret Captain had worked out his options eventually!

Many of the smaller anti-aircraft weapons in the superstructure were in exposed open mountings. In battle, Schmidt would be stationed in the conning tower, protected by up to seventeen inches of armour.

Who said life had to be fair?

Chapter 39

Thursday 2nd April 1964
Married Quarters, Kalkara, Malta

It was almost midnight before Peter Christopher crept through the front door like a thief in the night. He carefully placed his bag on the floor, hung his cap on the hook on the wall at the foot of the stairs and, without even thinking of putting on the light, started to creep upstairs.

The Grand Harbour had been empty, a dark and lonely place when he had finally conned HMS Talavera through the breakwaters. Even HMS Sheffield had gone, having presumably set off on her long slow cruise back to England and a likely appointment with the breakers yard. Anchoring fore and aft to the emergency destroyer buoys on the Corradino heights side of the anchorage he had sent two thirds of the crew to their billets on the Cunard liner Sylvania, left his ship in the capable hands of his Executive Officer, Miles Weiss and taken a taxi back to Kalkara. He had to return to his ship in a few hours but the way things were shaping up, he might not see Marija again for days or weeks once Talavera had taken on a full ammunition load and topped off her fuel bunkers. The prospect of *not* seeing Marija again before Talavera received her sailing orders was, *unthinkable*...

The second step creaked loudly under his foot.

He froze.

A minor steam leak and miscellaneous easily fixed, but nonetheless vexing generator and electrical faults apart, Talavera's sea trials had gone well. Actually, they had gone better than *well*. Under full power the destroyer had touched thirty-five knots, and her new torpedo division had drilled relentlessly. The ship still felt 'light' in any kind of sea and 'stiffer' than she had been in her prime as a Fast Air Detection Escort with a mass of sophisticated equipment installed high above her centre of gravity. Even at flank speed Talavera's bow was reluctant to dig deep into big waves, her stern settling down, burying her screws deeper and deeper in the water as the increasing power was transmitted into her propeller shafts. He wondered how fast Talavera might have steamed if he had ordered engineering to open

all the valves. He had been tempted, sorely tempted, but resisted the urge, not wanting to risk breaking his rebuilt ship on her very first excursion out of dockyard hands.

The hall light came on.

“Peter!”

Marija flew down the stairs into her husband’s arms with such alacrity and abandon that she literally fell into his embrace. For a moment he thought they were both going to tumble backwards. Fortunately, he had braced himself specifically against this mischance - Marija tended to fly into his arms more often than not when he came home after a day at the dockyard, let alone when she had not seen him for several days - and was, therefore just able to catch and safely arrest his wife’s headlong flight.

“I did not want to wake you or Rosa,” he whispered before he realised that if Rosa had not been rudely awakened by Marija’s screech of delight she would have had to have been struck stone deaf in the days he had been away.

The returning hero would have said more.

Marija forestalled this by kissing him wetly and carrying on kissing him as he struggled to carry her up to the landing.

“You missed me then?” He gasped when his wife came up for air.

She giggled.

The bedroom door shut with a soft click at his back.

When some hours later, the returning hero slowly awakened in the half-light of pre-dawn, he was unable, initially to move a muscle. He did not worry about it overly for some minutes as he unhurriedly collected his wits. It was warm and fragrant, and Marija’s hair was tickling his nose...

Eventually, he worked out that his wife’s darkly nutmeg musky-scented hair was the key clue to why he could not move; he was lying face down on the bed and Marija was lying, blissfully supine on top of him.

Peter Christopher would have groaned in complacent pleasure if he had had sufficient air in his lungs.

Eventually, he began to consider exactly how he was going to dislodge Marija without waking her, or risking dropping her onto the floor. She stirred, sighed contentedly.

“I don’t want to ever move again,” she murmured in his left ear.

He could refuse her nothing so he remained where he was a while longer.

Presently, with a moan his wife rolled off him and the lovers looked into

each other's eyes.

"Do you really have to go straight back to the ship?" She inquired sleepily, her left hand tentatively exploring his naked lower torso, knowing exactly what was likely to happen next.

In the night they had made love with a strange, consuming hunger; in the morning light they coupled slowly, lazily, belatedly, guiltily mindful to avoid the voluble excitement of before to save Rosa's blushes in the bedroom below. Eventually, the man could hold back no longer and they had clung together, swapping kisses and catching their breath.

It was fully light when Peter Christopher rolled off his wife.

Her finger tips touched his chest.

"I must wash and shave before I go," he apologised. A car would be coming for him in less than thirty minutes. Not usually a man moved to state the patently obvious he said to his wife: "You are completely beautiful..."

By the time he had shaved, nicking his chin twice in his rush, spruced himself up somewhat and donned a fresh uniform Marija had prepared a mug of tea and carved doorsteps off a crusty loaf of brown bread. There was butter, cheese and a small bowl of green olives on the table.

"Eat, drink, husband," she directed, employing the tone she reserved for adults and children who foolishly refused to take their medicine as per prescribed. "You are far too thin!"

It was thing Peter had noticed ever since he arrived on Malta, albeit a thing that had not immediately sunk in, that the Maltese had a particular love affair with their food. He had asked an old Malta hand about it once.

'The people on the islands nearly starved during the siege in forty-one to forty-two – ever since then families drum it into their kids that they must eat when there is food, feed themselves up against the day when the famine returns...'

"And you, wife," he retorted, "are..."

"Beautiful," Marija pre-empted him. "You said. I don't forget these things. Stop talking and eat, drink."

He slurped his tea and munched his bread.

As she slipped past him Peter pulled his wife close, gently mauled her with greedy fondness, kissing her lingeringly and fled the house, tossing his travelling bag ahead of him into the waiting car.

HMS Talavera was to be moved to the ammunition pier to take on her

full war load: nearly a thousand 4.5-inch fixed rounds, half ‘common; and half ‘armour piecing’ fixed rounds; several thousand rounds of 20 and 40-millimetre shells; and four 21-inch torpedoes. Further, the ship was ordered to provision for fourteen days at sea and scheduled later that afternoon to take on over six hundred tons of heavy bunker oil. This latter would necessitate moving the ship round into Marsamxett where the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Brambleleaf was moored opposite the entrance to Lazaretto Creek. Thirteen additional Royal Marines were also to be accommodated, bringing the ship’s contingent up to thirty men. After the thirteen extra troopers reported aboard, HMS Talavera’s complement would number twenty-one officers and two hundred and thirty-eight other rates. Once ammunitioning, provisioning and oiling was complete HMS Talavera was to anchor on Destroyer Buoy Number Two in Sliema Creek, maintaining one boiler ‘lit’, at two hours notice to leave harbour. It seemed that Talavera, and the Type-12 frigate HMS Yarmouth, were to stay at Malta as ‘guard ships’ while the rest of the Mediterranean Fleet ‘had all the fun’. The Yarmouth was currently at sea; when she returned to port Talavera would depart to patrol the waters around the Maltese Archipelago out to a distance of thirty miles. Much as the Battle class destroyer’s young commanding officer was upset not to be participating in Operation Grantham, he could not deny that the coming weeks would be a marvellous opportunity to work Talavera up to the highest possible pitch of efficiency.

It seemed that Talavera’s increased compliment - according to ‘the book’ – was rather too many men for a mere Lieutenant-Commander to ‘command’. Thus, appended to HMS Talavera’s orders had been the notice of two ‘acting’ promotions: Miles Weiss was, with immediate effect, promoted ‘acting’ Lieutenant-Commander, and Peter was, with similar immediate effect, promoted ‘acting’ Commander.

Peter was guilty he had not told Marija the good news; but what with one thing and he simply had not got around to it. The news would wait for another, better time although, on reflection, it was hard to imagine a ‘better time’ than he had enjoyed with his new wife last night.

“How are we today, Lieutenant-Commander Weiss?” He inquired with a broad smile as he and his Executive Officer fell into step on the way to Peter’s day cabin to review the day’s program.

“Top hole, sir. And you?”

"Never better, Number One!"

Peter Christopher had worried – not overly, but he had worried – how he and Miles Weiss would settle into their respectively 'inherited' roles on the destroyer. Miles was Peter's best friend; likewise, he was his new Executive Officer's best friend and it had never occurred to Peter to ask any other man than Miles Weiss to be his *best man*. They had always enjoyed each other's company when they were relatively junior members of the wardroom in those grim days back in Fareham Creek after the October War, once or twice they had even got blind drunk together on runs ashore. Neither man had a plethora of close friends and valued their friendship; except friendship between a commander of one of Her Majesty's ships and the man who was directly responsible to him for the condition and the combat readiness of *his* ship was a potentially very tricky thing. Thus far the two friends had managed the situation by simply getting on with things. How though would their friendship fare in the coming months?

"I think our Supply Officer is a little *distracted*," Miles Weiss chuckled.

"Um," Peter rejoined in a similar tone, "I think the poor fellow is somewhat taken with a certain young lady of our mutual acquaintance."

The two men chortled sympathetically. Alan Hannay was smitten with Rosa Calleja, which was odd because he was not the sort of fellow most of those who knew him would have guessed was very easily *smitten*.

Marija had confidentially mentioned to her husband that her *sister* was also somewhat *taken* with Alan. When he had diplomatically tried to explain that he was HMS Talavera's Captain, not a 'marriage broker', this had not gone down well and his wife had brushed his objections aside as if he was putty in her hands. Which, actually he was, of course...

Tied up alongside the gun wharf beneath Corradino heights Peter Christopher spied a familiar face among the dockyard workers on the shore. He went straight down and greeted Joe Calleja.

"What are you doing over here?" He asked his brother-in-law with unforced affability. Joe was a qualified electrician and there was little skilled work for a man like him in the arsenal bunkers beneath the heights.

"I got sacked," the other man shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "But they're so short of workers that they gave me a three-month contract down here. Somebody has to maintain the hoists and service the motors of the trucks."

Railway tracks were sunk into the concrete of the wharf and low cars and dollies rolled out of the open blast doors of the shell rooms heavily laden with munitions.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry." Peter had found himself instinctively liking Marija's younger brother and it rankled to discover that Joe had obviously been made an example of by the new regime in charge of the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta.

Joe Calleja was studying HMS Talavera's radically altered lines.

"No missiles? No whip aerials? No fancy electronics?"

"No," Peter chuckled. "Maybe on my next command but who knows?"

A foreman bellowed across the dock at the younger man before he realised that Joe was in convivial conversation with HMS Talavera's commanding officer. The man looked shamefaced, Peter cheerfully waved for him to carry on and when he looked around his brother-in-law had gone.

The work went on at a steady pace all morning. By noon the destroyer had half-filled her magazines and trucks had started unloading fresh vegetables, sacks of potatoes, and boxes containing tins of foods of all descriptions across the quay onto the warship's deck via snaking lines of Maltese workers and crew members.

"There's an urgent call for you, sir!" A fresh-faced, heavily perspiring seventeen-year-old boy seaman from off the Sylvannia reported nervously, saluting raggedly.

Peter Christopher raised an eyebrow.

"Er, on the bridge, sir."

"Very good." A telephone line had been strung across the dock shortly after HMS Talavera had berthed that morning. It made for easier communication between the ship and the dockyard superintendent's office.

An urgent call.

That was never good news, so he walked briskly forward to the bridge and trotted up the ladder.

"Talavera," he announced, taking the proffered handset. "Commander Christopher speaking."

"One moment, sir."

Peter Christopher waited patiently; keen to appear wholly relaxed and untroubled for the benefit of any man watching him.

"Peter," Admiral Sir Julian Christopher said brusquely to his son. "How

far advanced are you with your ammunitioning?"

"I've got about a hundred-and-fifty rounds, mixed common and AP per barrel onboard for the main battery. We're loading the last torpedo as we speak. Most of the smaller calibre ammunition is pretty much onboard and stowed, sir." He had not been asked but he automatically answered what he guessed would be his father's next question. "I've got one boiler lit at the moment, sir."

"Good. That's good. Flash up your Number Two boiler and get out to sea *soonest*."

"Soonest, sir?"

"Yes." There was a moment of silence. "*Cut your lines and go, Peter!*"

"Sir..."

"*Get out to sea and await further orders!*"

"Yes, sir!"

It was all Peter could do not to drop the handset and run to the bridge rail. Instead, he sighed nonchalantly, jammed the handset in place and turned to the bridge talker.

"Sound Air Defence Stations Condition One!"

Instantly the alarms blared throughout the ship.

Peter Christopher slid down the ladder to the main deck, almost colliding with Peter Weiss running the other way.

"There's a flap on. I don't know the details," he explained. "Get our people back onboard. Clear the decks." Leaving his Executive Officer bawling orders through a megaphone, Talavera's commanding officer hurried back up to the bridge. The ship's Master at Arms, Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann had materialised as if by magic at his shoulder. "Single up the lines, Mister McCann. We're casting off in," he glanced at his watch, "in thirty seconds regardless whether all our people are back onboard or if we've still got civilians on deck!"

The diminutive little man scurried away.

Petty Officer Jack Griffin appeared.

"Find the Engineering Officer. I need him to flash up Number Two boiler like his life depends on it!"

Because it probably does depend on it!

Peter was already doing rough calculations. Talavera had the thin-end of seventy tons of oil in her bunkers. At full speed she would burn that off in

two or three hours. There was nothing he could do about that; he would worry about that later. He glanced at the wharf, 4.5-inched fixed reloads were laying on the concrete everywhere, boxes of Spam and tinned fruit had been discarded in a line between the supply lorries and the ship, and men were sprinting to get back aboard from every direction.

"Sound the horn three times!"

The sound of the ship's horn – strictly speaking an air horn – rumbled so deeply that the sound seemed to be reverberating inside Peter Christopher's chest as he went to the port bridge rail.

"Raise the gangways!"

His father had told him to *cut his lines and go!*

"Cast off! CAST OFF!"

He did not wait to see if his orders were being obeyed.

"Are the engine room telegraphs answering?"

"Yes, sir."

"FULL left rudder!" A moment to catch his breath. "SLOW ahead STARBOARD!" Then. "Slow ASTERN port!"

This was one of those rare occasions, he decided, when he could probably risk swiping the dockside with Talavera's transom and get away with it. The destroyer began to move forward and away from the quayside. Two men leapt across the gap as it widened. Others shuddered to a halt, knowing intuitively that the gap was already too wide. Perhaps, a dozen men collected on the edge of the dock, staring wide-eyed as their crewmates moved across the decks and their ship left them stranded ashore. Civilians stared in astonishment.

What was going on?

"Stop PORT! Rudder AMIDSHIPS!"

Peter Christopher heard the distant rending, shrieking sound high overhead but ignored it.

"Full ahead BOTH!"

There was a heart-stopping delay and then both Talavera's propellers began to spin, faster and faster. Like a sprinter settling into her starting blocks she seemed to dig her stern into the azure blue water of the Grand Harbour, and her bow rise slightly before she began to drive, inexorably forward.

Suddenly the air was filled with an unearthly tearing, roaring as if the

heavens were being torn asunder. The noise was like an express train racing downhill at a thousand miles an hour with its brakes squealing in an agony of sparks. Ashore air raid sirens began to howl and the rumbling thunder of very large explosions rolled across the island from the east.

And with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach Peter Christopher understood exactly why his father had told him to cut his lines and to get out to sea.

Chapter 40

12:08 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
TNS Yavuz, standing out to sea off Dragut Point, Malta

When the big guns fired the whole ship seemed to lurch sideways in the water with a gut churning kick. Dust exploded from seams between wood and steel, pain flaked and drizzled to the deck and the noise, well, the noise was like Lucifer striking the side of the ship with a giant hammer.

The old dreadnought from a bygone age had closed up at battle stations two hours ago. While the passageways became shouting, crowded bedlams the occupants of the sick bay had been carried and guided deep into the battlecruiser. Over their heads great armoured hatches had clanged shut, and suddenly the sound of the Yavuz's engines had become louder, and the vibration of massive machinery more exaggerated.

'The sick bay is in a lightly protected part of the stern of the vessel,' the elderly ship's surgeon explained matter of factly. 'Down here,' he patted the cold steel of the nearest bulkhead, 'we are safe behind several inches of Krupp cemented plate in every direction.' He reconsidered for a moment. 'Well, except under our feet, of course. But nobody is going to shoot at us from below.'

Nicolae Ceausescu, who with Eleni's help had managed to hop down the relatively steep gangways, and to negotiated the passageways with the aid of his crutches, had been struggling to catch his breath as the surgeon had delivered his meaningless homily to the excellent work of a generation of long dead German naval architects and the shipbuilding prowess of the Blohm and Voss yards of pre-Great War Hamburg.

'What is going on?' He asked flatly.

'I don't know,' the Turkish doctor had confessed.

'Find somebody who does know!'

Second-Captain Dmitry Kolokoltsev had presented himself a few minutes later. The man looked like he was convinced that somebody was jumping up and down on his grave.

Nicolae Ceausescu had expected to be exposed for whom, and for what he was at any time in the last three weeks. The worst days were while the Yavuz had sat off Rhodes for nearly a fortnight. Other ships had come and gone; the battlecruiser had sat inactive until one morning he had awakened to the sound of shovels, and hundreds of feet stomping on the deck over his head, shouts, and the rattle of cranes, old coughing steam motors and the occasional grinding of another ship's hull against the dreadnought's fenders. The Yavuz was 'coaling', a filthy, back-breaking task for her crew. During that day and the following night two thousand tons of coal had been muscled from the hold of the steamer alongside and evenly distributed in the great ship's dusty bunkers.

Ceausescu did not know how a Political Officer, a Commissar no less, like Dmitry Kolokoltsev had failed to work out that not only was he *not* Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov, the former Head of the KGB in Greece and Turkey but that he could not possibly be him. The only credible explanation that he could think of was that the man must have been dropped on his head when he was a baby. Had the idiot not talked to Eleni, or her cousin or his son? The moment Kolokoltsev heard about the helicopter, or the dead Securitate bodyguards Ceausescu would be at his mercy.

'The ship is approaching the Maltese Archipelago, Comrade Director,' the *dolt* reported. Kolokoltsev had kept as far away from the one-legged alleged KGB man as he could in the last few weeks; he ought to have been getting as close as possible. Because that was what you did when you knew that one day your superiors would ask for proof that the man who had claimed to be Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov really was the missing KGB Head of Station.

Ceausescu had asked to remain in the battlecruiser's sick bay after the Yavuz's surgeon had said he was sufficiently recovered to be moved into a cabin – presumably, vacated by one of the ship's officers – where he and *Madam Eleni* might enjoy more privacy. The last thing Ceausescu wanted was to be seen by other members of the crew; or any of the other Soviet stooges like Kolokoltsev idly roaming around the vessel. There would be a whole slew of Soviet minders on the battlecruiser, getting in the way, lording over the Turks. Any one of the bored, inquisitive Soviet personnel onboard the ship – few of whom would have any meaningful duties other than to spy on their hosts – might recognise him. He did not want to risk that. The sick

bay was the safest place. What he had not anticipated – and could not have planned for anyway – was what might happen if the ship actually got into a battle.

Now he knew.

It seemed like his luck had finally run out.

'What do you mean? Approaching the Maltese Archipelago?'

Second-Captain Kolokoltsev had looked at him as if he was mad.

'I'm sorry. I thought you knew, Comrade Director?'

They had changed the plan for Operation Chastise!

'When the fuck did attacking Malta get to be included in Phase Two?' Ceausescu had demanded, hoping he had recovered his previous error. 'Fuck! I only knew what was going on up until the Thessalonika bomb!'

'The High Command must have changed the plan after that,' agreed the Russian.

It was only after the Political Officer had departed that Ceausescu's attention was drawn to the curved wall of the compartment into which he, Eleni and the other occupants of the sick bay had been transferred. The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up on end.

The curve in the wall could only be the armoured barbette of one of the battlecruiser's amidships 11-inch main battery turrets. That meant that the turret's magazine must be almost directly beneath his feet!

There were mattresses on the deck.

Eleni patted one and he carefully eased himself down beside her.

On the second day he had been aboard the Yavuz the ship's surgeon had operated on his stump; cleaning out bad tissue and tidying up the mess the bungling Securitates had made of amputating his gangrenous lower right leg. The last time he had dared to look the stump was pink, healing. The pain had mostly ceased although it was hard to tell because every few hours he swallowed more morphine. However, he had started feeling better in the last few days and his appetite had returned despite the slop they fed him. He could hardly believe that any navy in the world could still feed its men salted meat, hardtack and some kind of spicy gruel that made him want to gag if he forgot to ignore the stench.

Eleni touched his arm and opened her mouth to speak.

She had learned a few words of Russian, each of which she pronounced like she had a mouth full of marbles. She hesitated, her face contorted as she

struggled to think of the word...

The battlecruiser lurched to a momentary halt.

The whole ship rang like a dulled bell.

Ceausescu's heart missed a beat and he almost bit his tongue.

Another salvo...

He knew it was only a four-gun salvo because when the Yavuz fired a full eight-gun broadside it was like the whole World was about to cave in around him.

"We safe?" Eleni asked calmly in the horrible quietness after the salvo.

Nicolae Ceausescu's ears were ringing, the Greek woman's voice sounded as if she was shouting into a cushion. His ears cleared suddenly.

"We safe?" She asked again.

The peculiar thing was that what he really wanted to say was 'yes'. The woman had been his constant companion and nurse for over a month. But for her ministrations he surely would have died back on Samothrace. Later he would surely have drowned had she not clung to him on the upturned hull of the fishing boat. Since they had been aboard the Yavuz she could have betrayed him at any time. Yet she had not; and here she was asking *him* for comfort.

"We are inside a big metal box," he tried to explain, speaking very slowly and illustrated his words with hand gestures. "Very thick metal," he went on. "Nothing can get through it. All of the ship gets blown up but we still all right..."

He could tell she did not understand what he was saying.

Nonetheless, Eleni nodded.

She clasped his hand and leaned against him, genuflecting repeatedly with her free hand until the crash of the next outgoing salvo thundered so deafeningly everybody in the compartment thought for a moment that the ship had just blown up.

Chapter 41

12:12 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina, Malta

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations saw the dust and smoke shrouding RAF Luqa and knew, that whatever happened in the next few minutes and hours his career was destined to end in ignominy.

"Sir," he was being told, "you need to get under cover. The Citadel is an obvious target..."

Julian Christopher was not listening.

Now that he had realised what was going on the full extent of *his* negligence and *his* multiple failures of judgement was writ plain for all to see. However, that did not change the fact that he remained the only man with the authority to do something about the unfolding disaster.

He scanned distant Valletta, now partially lost in the mid-day haze and the drifting cloud of smoke and dust from what had been, only minutes before, the most strategically important Royal Air Force base in the World. He imagined he saw the falling waterspouts of shells bursting in the waters of the Grand Harbour and explosions splashing across the packed streets of the Maltese capital. New smoke and dust was rising from beyond Valletta, perhaps from Birgu and Senglea. He saw the flash of the impacts as he swung his glasses into the south; and another salvo of huge shells plunged into the heart of RAF Luqa.

The first radar station had dropped off the grid at about two that morning; some kind of electrical fire. A few minutes later the secure lines to the air defence station on Gozo had been cut, and other stations were automatically tasked to provide coverage of the northern sector of the Air Defence Zone.

At around the same time the conventional, diesel-electric submarine, HMS Artful, operating west of Syracuse in the Ionian Sea as the northernmost picket of the 2nd Submarine Squadron's tripwire picket line guarding the eastern approaches to Malta, had encountered two small tramp

steamers and at three that morning, the leading vessels of a force of slow moving ships moving in convoy towards the Maltese Archipelago. Presumably, this ‘convoy’ had slipped around the western tip of Crete under the cover of the recent storms and cloudy conditions which had hamstrung the Canberra reconnaissance missions flown daily from Luqa. The possible ‘invasion force’ had come as a nasty surprise but he had immediately requested that the recently arrived nuclear hunter killer submarine, USS Permit, acting as a goalkeeper behind the line of ‘A’ class boats, should be despatched to investigate and if necessary, engage the possible ‘invaders’.

So far, so good; two radar stations down but the radar dead zones in the three hundred-and-sixty-degree coverage of the ocean surrounding Malta had – in theory, and indeed according to the best intelligence he had to hand - been swiftly ‘patched’. The preparations for the pre-planned conventional strikes by the three serviceable V-bombers at Luqa on enemy positions on Cyprus had continued, while the RAF, US Air Force and the much-depleted Royal Fleet Air Arm strike force held back at Luqa was re-tasked to intercept the ‘invasion’ convoy if it was confirmed as such at first light. In the event that confirmation had not come until after nine that morning by which time aircraft which had been sitting at dispersals crewed and bombed up for several hours had had to be stood down, fuel tanks topped off, and revised operational orders and objectives promulgated.

Julian Christopher’s deputy on the Maltese Archipelago, Air Vice-Marshall Daniel French ran a tight ship and the last of the twenty-three available strike aircraft, and the three pre-tasked Vulcan V-bombers had all been airborne by 11:27 hours.

At that stage the situation had been under control; there had been no apparent cause for undue alarm.

For a further fourteen minutes there had been no significant developments and the local ‘threat board’ had remained *empty*.

Everything had started going wrong at 11:41 hours.

At 11:41 a formation of approaching aircraft had been detected by the Type-12 frigate HMS Yarmouth, but *not* by either of the radar stations on Gozo or by the long-range air search installations at Dingli on the west coast, or at Fort Rinella east of Kalkara overlooking the approaches to the Grand Harbour.

Once the Air Defence Controller at Luqa had got over his understandable

shock to be suddenly confronted by possible ‘hostiles’ travelling at over four hundred knots less than a hundred miles north-east of the archipelago, two quick reaction alert – QRA – Hawker Hunters had been despatched to intercept the strangers, while other fighters were hastily rolled out. At 11:47 the ‘bogeys’ had turned away, dropping huge clouds of chaff and jamming all standard channels.

Then at 11:49 HMS Yarmouth had transited the South Comino Channel between Malta and Gozo, the two largest islands of the Maltese Archipelago. Within seconds, her gunnery control radar had detected several unidentified surface contacts *impossibly* close to the islands.

Manoeuvring to investigate at 11:53 HMS Yarmouth had come under fire.

The Commander-in-Chief had watched the situation developing on the plots in the basement of his Mdina Headquarters. He had not actually believed it was possible for the entire air defence system to *fail*. Such a *failure* was inconceivable unless the archipelago’s defences had been sabotaged *in detail*. But that was *impossible*. The system was too complex, too multi-layered. True, a lot of good men had sailed with the two Operation Grantham Task Forces; most of his best staff officers had pleaded to be allowed to sail with the Fleet. And yes, the whole system was still being reconstructed after electro-magnetic pulse damage from the ICBM near misses in February had brought down the whole air defence net.

But even so, a complete failure...

Worse still, a significant part of the US Air Force and the US Navy contingent on Malta – which was not and never had been under his direct command - had decamped in the last seventy-two hours to join the expedition to Cyprus. At the time he had welcomed the whole-hearted commitment of his allies to Operation Grantham. Even when the last remaining USN Squadron – Rear Admiral Detweiller’s four modern destroyers – had departed the Grand Harbour yesterday afternoon to exercise west of the archipelago no alarm bells had rung. The home base had seemed secure and every available aircraft, ship and man was desperately needed, if the expedition to liberate Cyprus and to open a new front on Red Dawn’s southern flank was to succeed. Even without the American ships Malta was protected by batteries of anti-aircraft guns, advanced British and American long-range surface-to-air missiles and a squadron of RAF Hawker Hunters

fighters.

He had – very deliberately - committed everything he had to ensure the success of Operation Grantham. Only a week ago he had agonised over holding back a mechanised battalion of the Welsh Guards after generator trouble had denied him the services of one of his Tank Landing Ships. A mechanised unit was useless without all its equipment, so the Guardsmen had parked their armour at the Cambridge Barracks on Tigne Point and hit the bars of Sliema and Gzira to drown their collective sorrows.

The fact that a single angry, dispirited and somewhat hung-over battalion of Welsh Guards was the only mobile armoured force at his disposal with which to defend the main island now served to magnify the scale of his catastrophic negligence...

His first duty had been to protect the home base.

Self-evidently, he had failed.

HMS Yarmouth had ducked back into the South Comino Channel where the surrounding high ground had initially blinded her search radars but offered her sanctuary from the enemy's fire.

The first salvo of heavy calibre shells had crashed into and around RAF Luqa at 12:06. A lucky – or unlucky – hit had cratered the main runway at 12:09. At 12:10 Julian Christopher's Headquarters had lost contact with the Command-Information-Centre at Luqa.

Thus, the career of Admiral Sir Julian Christopher Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations *ended*.

He turned and faced his self-evidently unnerved Headquarters Staff.

A bystander who did not know what was going on and was unaware of the scale of the rapidly unfolding military catastrophe, might have described the Commander-in-Chief's demeanour as being 'as cool as a cucumber' as he calmly started to dictate orders.

"If the Welsh Guards aren't already on the move order them to disperse around Tigne Point and into the back streets of Sliema. Whatever they do they are to hold their armour back until I call for it!"

Julian Christopher steeled himself; this was going to be...*very bloody*.

There was at least one ship standing off shore shooting with very big guns, he decided. And another with a large number of *smaller* guns that were *larger* than anything he possessed capable of shooting back at either ship.

The big guns were only firing every two to three minutes, four round salvoes. The ship with the smaller guns was shooting broadsides approximately every thirty seconds.

He wondered if this was some kind of demented bad dream and was sorely tempted to pinch himself.

Her turned back to view the battlefield.

The sky seemed as if it was being torn in half.

Four huge geysers of dirt, vegetation and masonry erupted across the far side of Ta'Qali airfield, which lay in the valley beneath the ramparts of the ancient Citadel of Mdina.

Julian Christopher clenched his fists so hard on his binoculars that a spasm of red hot pricking agony stabbed in his right forearm. The cramp briefly paralysed his hand and he almost dropped the glasses.

There was only one ship in the Mediterranean that could throw shells that big. No matter how ridiculous or how militarily implausible it seemed to that rational part of his mind that was not numbed with shock; Malta was under bombardment by one of Kaiser Wilhelm II's dreadnoughts. Old Kaiser Bill had built a whole fleet of battleships and battlecruisers before the Great War in an attempt to break the grip of the Royal Navy and to humble the British Empire; it seemed, over twenty years after his death and fifty years after *Seiner Majestät Schiff* - His Majesty's Ship – *Goeben* was chased into Turkish service by the Mediterranean Fleet, the old tyrant's dearest wish was about to come true.

That a dinosaur from a previous age should have been able to steam so close to the archipelago undetected boggled belief and spoke to a monstrous treason and betrayal.

Maskirovska.

Smoke and mirrors; *dym i zerkala*.

None of this added up: the convoy the USS Permit, HMS Artful and every available strike aircraft had gone to attack represented fifty to sixty percent of all the enemy – well, former Soviet - naval assets detected in the theatre and therefore, probably in the whole World. Those assets were being fed into a meat grinder and once they were gone, they were gone forever and the Allied forces massed in the Eastern Mediterranean would be free to dominate those seas. What sane commander sacrificed the bulk of his navy just to sneak two obsolete big gun ships into a position where they could

bombard Malta? It only made sense if the naval assets the Allies had identified were either, only a small part of the enemy's strength, or, the enemy did not care about losing those ships because that was *the* critical element of his deception...

Oh God...

What if?

No, that was impossible!

That was insane!

What if Cyprus was no more than the low fruit hanging invitingly in the distance that the enemy had known the Allies could not resist plucking?

What if the target all along had been Malta?

No, without real naval power nobody could hold Malta overlong but perhaps, that wasn't the objective either...

But seize Malta – even for a few days or hours - and the whole Allied war effort must inevitably shift a thousand miles west from Cyprus. Seize Malta and the Allies would have no choice but to abandon the Eastern Mediterranean, indefinitely at first, but perhaps for years thereafter.

He still did not understand what was wrong about that line of thinking.

And then he had a nightmare insight into the mind of his enemy: he had been so carried away with the enemy's application of the principles of *Maskirovska* that he had accepted the overarching strategic assumption of the recent months; that Red Dawn was *everything*, and *all* that remained of the Soviet State.

What if Red Dawn itself that was nothing more than smoke and mirrors?

What if what he was actually dealing with was the nascent Soviet State, or at least that segment of its military-industrial complex which had survived the cataclysm?

If that was the case what possible strategic imperative did attacking, let alone seizing Malta – which he was now convinced was the logical corollary to the naval bombardment – serve the greater good of whatever remained of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?

None!

None whatsoever!

His mind turned back to his original analysis.

His mindset was wrong...

If Malta was being attacked to force the abandonment of Operation

Grantham; the real question was why did Cyprus matter so much to the enemy?

The sudden stark clarity of his thoughts gave him no satisfaction.

His was the generation of leaders who had sleep-walked towards Armageddon in October 1962. It was apparent that he had learned nothing from the tragedy of recent history. He had been obsessed with the idea he was confronting zealots and maniacs, berserkers; when in fact all along he had been opposed by patient men to whom revenge was a dish best savoured ice cold, cold like the wintery steppes of the Mother Country. Those same men had nearly succeeded in fomenting war between America and the United Kingdom, men to whom the sacrifice of thousands, or millions was grist to the mill if it facilitated the onward march of their perverted Marxist-Leninist ambitions.

The next salvo of four six hundred and sixty-six pound eleven-inch high explosive shells fired from the antique battlecruiser Yavuz screamed down in a two-hundred-yard-long line diagonally across Ta'Qali airfield.

Julian Christopher rested his hands on the parapet high on the sheer walls of the Citadel and tried very hard to think of a good reason why he should not throw himself over the precipice.

"Sir!"

The Commander-in-Chief heard the voice from afar.

Committing suicide was not the act of an honourable man; not at the height of a crisis. He would revisit the option later, if he was still alive *later*.

"Yes, what is it?" He inquired with a crisp businesslike authority that belied the black despair gripping his soul. A man only showed his true mettle in his darkest hour.

"HMS Yarmouth is reporting sixty plus bandits approaching the archipelago from the north-west, sir."

"Do we have voice communications with Yarmouth?"

"Sporadically, sir. There's pretty fierce jamming..."

Julian Christopher determined that he had brooded long enough for one day. He swept off the ramparts like a leopard with his eyes fixed on his next meal. It did not matter how the *Soviets* had done it, he would leave that discussion to the historians who would pore over his blunders in the years to come. What was important was that very soon now hundreds, possibly thousands of Soviet paratroopers were going to be spilling from the bellies of

the incoming ‘bandits’.

Chapter 42

12:13 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Kalkara, Malta

Nobody on the Maltese Archipelago with memories of the siege of the islands in the Second World War hesitated when they heard the shriek of the battlecruiser's opening broadside rend the heavens.

Marija Christopher and her sister-in-law Rosa Calleja had been in the small kitchen of the married quarters above Kalkara Creek when they recognised the dreadful harbinger. They had been gossiping, giggling. One moment Rosa had been gently teasing her sister about how much she very, very obviously *loved* married life, the next moment they were huddling together under the table. Their minds worked with a no-nonsense pragmatism that would have been familiar to a survivor of the London Blitz, but utterly inexplicable to somebody with no experience or family memory of having been under sustained bombardment.

Firstly, hearing the sound of falling bombs or of shellfire – initially it does not matter who is shooting or dropping the bombs – one finds the nearest cover.

Secondly, once under cover – any cover will do – one asks how close the bombs or shells are falling? And: *Do I have time to get to a proper bomb shelter?*

Thirdly, one gets to the nearest shelter.

Marija and Rosa clung to each other under the kitchen table.

"They must be attacking the docks or Luqa?" Rosa speculated. It did not matter *who* exactly 'they' were; less still *why* it was happening.

"Yes, over that way," Marija agreed.

The two young women were afraid but calm, their thoughts turning hurriedly as they worked through the possibilities and decided what to do next.

"The nearest shelter is just around the corner but it was locked up years ago," Rosa explained. Her local knowledge of these things was ten times

better than her sister's. Marija had been brought up in Sliema; Rosa had lived in Kalkara for over two years.

"Aren't there caves on the ridge where the old anti-aircraft guns used to be?" Marija suggested, wondering if her memory was playing tricks on her.

"Yes." Rosa hesitated. "We'd have to go past the sheds where..."

The first big explosions were followed by a gap of at least two minutes.

And then the insane runaway express train screeching rushed overhead again and there was an avalanche of distant detonations. Down on the floor the women felt the earth flinch with the impacts. Crockery rattled faintly in the cupboards.

"We go to the old caves!" Marija declared.

Since Marija could not run, and Rosa was still hobbling with the aid of a stick; the young women found themselves moving slowly while men, women and children scurried around them. More shells were roaring overhead but mercifully none landed in the village. Nobody was panicking, people walked fast, heads down, but nobody actually ran. Marija and Rosa kept moving up hill. They were a little breathless as they reached the level ground behind the married quarters where the three old Nissen Huts had stood before Lieutenant Jim Siddall's death. Without a word they paused to take one last look around before they disappeared into the deep caves in the limestone ridge that rose in front of them. They stood under the lip of the cave roof and looked back down the slope towards the waters of Kalkara Bay and the Grand Harbour breakwaters.

They gasped and then they stared, raptly fascinated and terrified.

Great waterspouts erupted in Kalkara Bay below them, the closest among the small fishing boats moored inshore, the farthest almost beside the lighthouse at the end of the southern Grand Harbour breakwater.

But that was not seized their instant attention.

In the midst of the maelstrom of collapsing columns of frothing white water the long dark grey deadly silhouette of HMS Talavera was racing for the safety of the open sea. Her funnel was smoking grey-black and she was steaming faster than either woman had ever seen *any* ship in the enclosed waters of the Grand Harbour.

The destroyer – nearly four hundred feet long – disappeared in a forest of watery explosions, each of which sent spumes of water as high as her slowly rotating four-ton Type 965 double bedstead radar aerials.

The women sucked in their breaths in horror; and breathed again as the destroyer charged out of the maelstrom apparently untouched.

The two sisters were not the only onlookers.

Practically everybody around them had halted and was staring down into the harbour.

Her battle flags were running up HMS Talavera's main mast halyards and at her stern, a big White Ensign had been broken out. The flags streamed in the quickening wind of her passing, as faster and faster she charged ahead throwing up an ever-rising bow wave.

There was a lump in Marija's throat and a heavy weight on her chest.

Somewhere out to sea there were big ships, at least two, maybe more, and HMS Talavera was alone. One brave little destroyer dashing towards its fate could not possibly be a match for what awaited her out at sea. Nevertheless, it never crossed her mind that Peter Julian Christopher, her husband of less than a month and the man whom she had loved half her life, would not hesitate to throw himself and his ship at his enemies.

How else could he protect all that he held dear, and everything and everybody in the World that he loved?

As another air-rending salvo rocketed over her head on the way to RAF Luqa, Marija watched HMS Talavera heel into a racing turn that took her perilously close to the northern breakwater as another forest of giant shell splashes tore up the grey, shot churned waters of the outer Grand Harbour.

HMS Talavera crashed into the seas beyond the breakwater, already half-lost in the gathering haze of the spring day.

Marija wondered silently if she would ever see the man she loved alive again in this World.

Rosa tugged at her arm.

"Sister!" She cried urgently. "We cannot stay here!"

Shells were screaming down into Dockyard Creek, Senglea, and French Creek and beyond. There was dust rising in the air, and for the first time the acrid taint of gun cotton wrinkled her nose. Marija had grown up with that bitter stench in her face and the gritty taste of pulverized limestone and sandstone in her mouth. Nothing lingered like the corruption of fire.

Marija could not make herself move.

Across the other side of the Grand Harbour a battery of three 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns in emplacements below the ruins of Fort St Elmo belched

fire. For a moment she did not understand why their barrels were only inclined a few degrees above the horizontal.

The guns were not firing at enemy aircraft. Those small guns were all the defenders had to shoot back at the big ships out at sea.

HMS Talavera was shrouded in the mist, moving like a wraith, her indistinct port silhouette lengthening as she swung around to the north.

The north...

Towards the sound of the guns...

"We cannot stay here!" Rosa pleaded.

The women turned and stumbled deeper in to cave.

The British had used the caves above Kalkara to store shells for the Second World War anti-aircraft batteries which had once been emplaced all along the ridge. Twenty years ago, the caves had been both bomb shelters and homes to local civilians and the gunners alike. The entrance to the biggest cave had been shut off with a grill several years ago but somebody had cut off the padlock and local children used the murky, dank subterranean warren of caverns and tunnels as their playground. Those who had experienced the bombing of the Second World War always knew where the nearest 'safe' shelter was to be found.

Two decades ago only the fact that the Maltese Archipelago was riddled with deep granite and limestone caves had saved the Maltese population from a decimation of biblical proportions.

As a girl Marija had been taught and compelled to relive the nightmare. Such was the inheritance of her generation of Maltese children, to have lived through the storm and to be required – as if by law - to know its dimensions, lest future generations dared to forget their past.

Then as now the greater part of the three hundred thousand people who inhabited the islands of the Maltese Archipelago lived on the southern half of the main island, Malta itself, mainly in the 'cities' and towns clustered around the Grand Harbour, and the airfield at Luqa.

The 1945 war had left two-thirds of all the buildings on the archipelago destroyed or so badly damaged as to be uninhabitable. Of the major populated areas Sliema-Gzira had suffered least, with some 40 percent of its houses surviving either lightly damaged, or undamaged. Either side of RAF Luqa 70 percent of the houses were gone; in Kalkara 70 percent, in Birgu where Marija had been crushed in a collapsed basement, 65 percent, in

Senglea and Cospicua abutting French Creek 80 percent, while in Floriana on the landward side of Valletta hardly one stone was left standing above another, and in Valletta itself, notwithstanding its great bastion walls and ramparts, three-quarters of the city was wrecked. However, what Maltese teachers taught their children in schools was about more than the cost in bricks and stones, or the wanton desecration of their proud island heritage; because a people was infinitely greater than the sum of the houses it lived in and the historical monuments that adorned its communities. The miracle of the *second great siege* – the first had been in 1565 - was that so *few* Maltese had actually died. Malta had been the most heavily bombed place on Earth in 1941 and 1942 but *only* 1540 civilians had died; 703 men, 433 women and 404 children.

Malta had survived that trial by fire.

Marija and Rosa held hands in the gloomy, crowded cave. They heard and felt the shells crashing down to earth and the barking of the distant anti-aircraft guns like small dogs yapping in a thunder storm. They listened to the distant whoosh of missiles launching and the roar of RAF and American jets. In between the crack of guns and the fall of shot, the air was eerily quiet.

Everybody in the cave had recognised Marija.

The Heroine of Vittoriosa-Birgu was among them so everything would be well.

“We should pray,” Marija said.

The murmur of approbation filled the cavern.

Marija bowed her head.

Chapter 43

12:21 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
One mile west of the King George V Breakwater, Malta

Joe Calleja's ears were still ringing and blood was trickling into his eyes from somewhere on his scalp. A big shell had exploded in the water alongside the bridge and he had been blown across the deck. His flight had only been halted when he crashed into the destroyer's quadruple 21-inch torpedo mount, or more accurately, the rear end of the torpedo stuck half in and half out of tube Number Four. From the way his chest hurt he guessed he had cracked several ribs.

However, he did not waste time worrying about that.

The deck around him was littered with the bodies of the men who had been attempting to load and secure that final torpedo into the mount on the open deck behind the destroyer's single stack.

The young officer who had been supervising the operation was white-faced on the deck, twitching in a spreading pool of his own blood. Joe pulled off his jacket and jammed it into the fist-sized hole in the man's right leg, knowing that if somebody did not put a tourniquet on the man's upper thigh he was going to bleed to death sooner rather than later.

There was a pat on his right shoulder.

Initially, he could not hear what the man standing over him was saying.

A Royal Marine crouched beside him, shouted in his face: "Good man! You'll have to lift his leg for a second so I can tie him off!"

HMS Talavera was heeling into a violent turn to port and had Joe not been already leaning against the side of the quadruple torpedo launcher mount he would have fallen over. There were more explosions, and the air was filled with the angry whistling of small, razor-sharp objects parting lines and pinging off metalwork like a swarm of enraged killer bees. The ship juddered momentarily...

Her main battery fired.

"Now! Now! Now!" The Marine bellowed.

In a daze Joe raised the wounded man's leg, desperately attempting to maintain pressure on his gory wound.

"Down! Down!" The Marine screamed above the bedlam all around them on the main deck. He had looped what looked like a length of insulated two-core electrical wiring around the young officer's thigh and was tightening the improvised tourniquet using a small monkey wrench, turning it smoothly, oblivious to the chaos.

Joe was lifted unceremoniously to his feet; another Royal Marine tossed away his bloody jacket and pressed a thick white dressing over the wounded officer's blood-soaked thigh. A strong hand took the dockyard electrician's elbow as he started to retch uncontrollably. It had all happened too quickly...

He could have sprinted for cover beneath Corradino heights, instead, some contrary impulse had made him step onboard the destroyer. It was like a dream; the shells throwing up massive columns of water that fell back onto the ship drenching everything and everybody, bowling men over literally like skittles. He had blacked out after he hit the torpedo tube mount, albeit briefly. He had seen the officer bleeding on the deck, reacted spontaneously, without thinking, ignored the shells bracketing the ship as she dug her stern into the waters of the Grand Harbour and dashed for the open sea.

The main battery fired again.

"Don't I know you?" Demanded the grinning, red-headed and bearded man in a blood-spattered Petty Officer's uniform who was peering into Joe's face. The bearded man was holding Joe upright with thick, teak-like arms that vaguely reminded the young Maltese dockyard electrician of something he remembered from *Popeye the Sailor* cartoons...

Joe's head cleared, his ears unclogged.

"Joseph Calleja," he blurted guiltily.

"Jesus!" The other man exclaimed, his grin freezing on his lips. "The Skipper's frigging brother-in-law! This just gets worse!"

Actually, even as he said it, Petty Officer Jack Griffin knew full well that he was guilty of a gross exaggeration. Any fool could see that there was precious little scope remaining for the current situation to get 'worse'. Beneath his feet there were men struggling to light off Talavera's second boiler and out to sea – a lot closer than was remotely healthy – were several big ships with very big guns trying very hard to kill him.

"Damn it!" Said the youthful figure who emerged out of the spray at the

troubled Petty Officer's side.

"The civilian is the Captain's brother-in-law, sir," Jack Griffin reported to Lieutenant-Commander Miles Weiss, HMS Talavera's Executive Officer.

The newcomer frowned at Griffin.

He quirked a welcoming grin at Joe Calleja.

"I know that!" He grunted. "More to the point," he frowned again, watching two Royal Marines and a medical orderly gently carrying the stricken officer whom Joe had been tending below. "Now that the Torpedo Officer is *incapacitated* is there anybody onboard who knows how to fire these bloody things?" He demanded, gesturing with disgust at the quadruple torpedo tube mount. "And we have to do something about this bloody fish sticking out of Tube Number Four!"

"Er," Jack Griffin began uncertainly. "I, er..."

Joe Calleja coughed.

"I trained on these mounts as an apprentice, Mr Weiss," he confessed diffidently. A little more confidently he added: "Once the torpedo is in the tube it is simply a matter of pointing the tubes over the side, starting the motors, that's done on the circuit board over there," he pointed at the side of the tubes where the mount's operator sat. "By connecting up the impellor charge ignition, and," he shrugged, "there's a small bang, compressed air is injected into the tube and the torpedo goes out of the other end."

Miles Weiss did not think it could possibly be that straightforward. However, given that the torpedo officer was badly wounded and most of the other men in his 'Torpedo Division' were dead, on their way to the sick bay or wandering around in a state of near catatonic shock, he was going to have to take Joe Calleja's word for it.

"What do we do about Number Four?" He asked, pointing at the torpedo half in and half out of its tube.

"Two or three guys ought to be able to push it in," the shorter man explained, "there are rollers and springs in the tube. Just don't try to do it too fast. On the tubes I trained on it always made a loud clicking noise when it was in."

"You didn't train on exactly this model?"

"No, but the theory is the same on all these old Second World War mountings. They all work the same way. The internal tubes they put on some of the newer ships are more complicated and the electronics aren't so,

well, *basic*."

Miles Weiss was a man in a crashing hurry.

However, he paused long enough to ask one final question: "Do you know how to set the 'angles' on these things?" Everything he had ever learned about torpedoes had included reams of theory about the best 'spread' or the best 'deflection' tactics. He had not paid that much attention because he was a gunnery man and torpedoes were for people who lacked the intellectual wherewithal and the moral fibre to properly understand and appreciate guns.

Joe Calleja returned a blank look.

"I know how the electrics work, Mr Weiss. As for the rest," he shrugged apologetically.

HMS Talavera's Executive Officer had acquired a certain practiced sangfroid in the last few months and now it came to his rescue.

"Never mind, I'll warn the Captain that we'll need to get up close and personal and aim for the enemy's forward funnel!"

Joe Calleja started smiling; and then realised that the young officer was being deadly serious. His smile faded.

"Right," Miles Weiss decided. "I'll leave you in charge of things, Mr Calleja. Griffin," he turned to the red-haired and bearded Petty Officer who could not quite hide the nameless horror bubbling beneath his bluff expression. "Do whatever Mr Calleja tells you must to be done to get this mount into operation. Report to the bridge as soon as we're ready to launch all four fish!"

"Aye, aye, sir," Jack Griffin muttered. The Executive Officer was already gone. The Petty Officer gave Joe Calleja a mildly disenchanted glare.

Marija's little brother was as dumbfounded as the Navy man.

"Did he really just order me to get the mount ready for action?"

Jack Griffin nodded.

"He did and he'll have our guts for garters if we let him down!"

Chapter 44

12:24 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Situation Room, HQ of the C-in-C, Mediterranean, Mdina

"Do we have any way of communicating with HMS Talavera?" Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations asked as he strode into the bunker.

"Negative, sir. She probably took damage to her aerials and rigging from a couple of near misses as she exited the Grand Harbour."

"Keep trying." Julian Christopher ordered. The tactical plot showed the USS Permit ninety-five miles east of Malta racing to intercept the suspected 'invasion convoy'. An 'invasion convoy' that ought to have already been savagely mauled by the strike force despatched from RAF Luqa shortly before the base was shelled. Given that there was nowhere for the returning aircraft to land on Malta, or anywhere else within range before their fuel was exhausted, the men in the surviving strike aircraft would have to eject over the island. There was no way to warn them; apart from a few land lines the island-wide telephone network was down and both VHF and short-wave communications were being heavily jammed.

The jamming was so bad it was as if it was coming from right next door.

"We've got HMS Yarmouth back on line, sir."

Julian Christopher grabbed the handset.

"This is the C-in-C."

The Type-12 frigate's Captain sounded positively insouciant but the older man knew this was an act for the benefit of his bridge team. Julian Christopher's path had crossed that of Commander John Pope more than once over the years. Very distantly related on his father's side to the C-in-C's predecessor on Malta, Hugh Staveley-Pope, John Pope was a thoroughly sound forty-one-year-old career naval officer who had commanded Yarmouth with distinction while attached to the Hermes's Battle Group in the closing stages of Operation Manna. Yarmouth had remained in Maltese waters in the

capacity of a ‘guard ship’ when the rest of the Fleet had departed. The intention had been for her to be supported in that role by at least two US Navy Coontz class missile destroyers but at the last-minute Rear-Admiral Detweiller had decided to send the ‘picket’ destroyers back towards Gibraltar to supplement the screening forces of the USS Independence and the USS Iowa.

Yarmouth had, therefore, been left to plough a lonely furrow, to be reinforced by HMS Talavera when she returned from sea trials.

The Americans had been infuriatingly coy about when the USS Independence – allegedly fully operational again – and the USS Iowa could be expected in the Central Mediterranean. Julian Christopher understood the need for secrecy as well as any man and was aware that the Americans viewed his Headquarters as the leakiest of sieves when it came to keeping secrets. He even understood why the Americans were reluctant to allow him to factor in or integrate the two capital ships into the planning for Operation Grantham. But *understanding* did not actually help anybody; one of the reasons he had been prepared to tolerate leaving Malta so exposed was that he had assumed – and previously received tacit assurances that - Rear-Admiral Detweiller would leave significant elements of his squadron at Malta awaiting arrival of the Independence and the Iowa.

The Yarmouth’s captain wasted no time making his report.

“I think what we’re dealing with is a Sverdlov class cruiser in company with that bloody battlecruiser the Kaiser gave the Turks all those years ago, sir. They’ve got several escorts in tow and I had a radar ‘sniff’ of another biggish ship, perhaps, another cruiser over the horizon about twenty miles behind the lead group. Presently, I’m playing hide and seek with a couple of Krupny class destroyers in the South Comino Channel. One of the beggars fired a missile at me but we didn’t see where it went. I tried keeping them at arm’s length with the main battery but...”

Some genius at the Admiralty had decided not to install torpedo tubes into the later ‘modified’ Type-12 Rothesay class frigates. Yarmouth was the end ship of the class and was pitiful equipped for any kind of surface action. Her single twin 4.5-inch turret was a good piece of kit but her entire close-range anti-aircraft armament consisted of a single double 40-millimetre cannon. Before the October War there had been discussions about stripping out the 40-millimetre guns and installing a quadruple GWS 21 Sea Cat

launcher but nothing had come of it. Designated as ‘anti-submarine’ frigates, the Rothesays were never intended to go toe to toe with an enemy in a surface action.

“I understand completely,” Julian Christopher assured the younger man. “For your information Talavera has cleared the Grand Harbour.”

There was a short, hissing silence.

Having just taken possession of his death warrant, the Yarmouth’s Captain was not the man to cry over spilt milk.

“Right you are, sir,” drawled Commander Pope. “In that case I shall endeavour to make a nuisance of myself.”

“Good luck, Captain.”

Julian Christopher put down the handset and gazed at the plot.

First things first; worst case scenarios.

The USS Independence had departed Gibraltar over forty-eight hours ago. The big carrier had delayed sailing because she was awaiting the arrival of the USS Iowa. It was reasonable to assume that both ships and their fast, modern escorting vessels would be in the central Mediterranean sometime in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Meanwhile, if and when she could be contacted, the USS Permit was within three to four hours steaming time of the Maltese Archipelago. If recalled, fighters and strike aircraft from HMS Eagle’s and HMS Hermes’s air groups might be over the island in strength within forty-eight hours. Moreover, it was not too late to recall the assault force from Cyprus, its troops might be storming ashore on Malta in five to six days time under cover of a withering bombardment from HMS Belfast and the two Big Cats, HMS Tiger and HMS Lion...

He kept staring at the tactical plot despite a loud altercation outside the Situation Room. He leaned forward, resting the palms of his hands on the edge of the table. Deep beneath the medieval Citadel the impact of each of the Yavuz’s four shell salvos was transmitted through the ground rock, the floor, and absorbed by the wooden table.

Presently, he stood tall.

He sighed.

“Confirm that the Welsh Guards are dispersing into the streets of Sliema and Gzira. They should be ready to defend and hold that area and if possible extend their left flank as far towards Msida Creek as possible.”

The Guards were in the wrong place.

But there was nothing he could do about that.

“OC Welsh Guards is to co-operate as he thinks fit with other local defence forces. That is all.”

Julian Christopher ran his eye around the room.

“Everybody should arm themselves. Soviet paratroopers will be landing on the archipelago in the next few minutes. Their objective will be not to seize or to hold the island but to spread terror by killing as many people as possible.” He steeled himself. “My orders are that all enemy combatants are to be attacked and killed on sight. No prisoners. No quarter. No surrender! Yield no ground! Please transmit that order to all units in the clear by any means possible.”

There was still a shouting match going on outside in the corridor.

“Oh, and would somebody please tell those idiots outside to stop shouting the house down!”

Chapter 45

12:26 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Mdina

Margo Seiffert had begun transferring patients from the first floor down to the cloistered garden in the middle of the hospital immediately she heard the ululating wail of the air raid alarms travelling like a tsunami across the island. The more seriously ill patients, or those confined to bed were carried straight down into the cellars of the old houses that comprised the modern hospital. The staff at the St Catherine's Hospital for Women had practiced this drill regularly since the air raid in early December, and today everything went so smoothly that Margo was able to return to her office to attempt to make some calls. It never hurt to find out what was actually going on. She felt the distant explosions through the soles of her feet; but had shown no hint of alarm as the hospital went into its well practiced air raid drill. She was unsurprised to discover that the telephone lines in her office and in the Reception Room were dead.

Clara Pullman stuck her head around the door.

"The lines are down," Margo announced, phlegmatically.

"I went up to the battlements," the other woman said, still a little breathless. She was flushed and her fair hair was awry. Her pale blue auxiliary nurse uniform smock did not flatter her mature figure the way it inevitably did some of the younger women. However, Margo doubted that her newest, very able and very worldly recruit, was preoccupied with such things right now. "Soldiers and Redcaps are ordering everybody inside," she reported calmly, collectedly. "I think Luqa and Hal Far were hit first. Now they are hitting Ta'Qali. You can't see much over towards Valletta, there's too much dust and smoke. Once your eyes get used to the haze you can see the flash of the big guns out to sea."

Another salvo plunged into the nearby airfield, the windows rattled, the ground seemed to recoil in pain and the sounds of the explosions rumbled through the narrow streets of the Citadel like great iron wheels. Margo

looked down into St Paul's Square as a squad of British infantrymen doubled towards the main gates.

More guns were firing.

Margo scowled her frustration and hurried through the lobby onto the cobbled piazza outside the hospital. Clara followed her, unsure whether she should attempt to restrain the older woman.

The sky was criss-crossed with grey tracers and black spots, hundreds, no thousands of them were crawling like insects between the sporadic shell bursts and shot-torn air.

"Get inside!" A man yelled at the two women as he sprinted past. When they did not move he skidded to a halt, holding his steel hat on his head. "Get off the street, ladies! This place will be raining shrapnel and bloody paratroopers in a minute!"

Margo did not move a muscle.

Clara snatched her arm, refusing to be shaken off.

"Margo, you're the last person we need becoming an unnecessary patient!"

The older woman saw the logic of it but hated showing weakness. Unhurriedly, she followed Clara back inside grumping and complaining almost but not quite under her breath. She had got so used to having Marija pull her up short when she was being too awkward, or stubborn about something that now that her protégé was rarely around she was enjoying her new freedom to be as awkward and as stubborn as she pleased. Clara apart, few of her other women had the nerve to stand up to her. Suddenly seeing a lot less of Marija – in most of the ways that counted the daughter she had never had – heightened Margo's awareness of her advancing age and had given her an uncomfortable glimpse of an aching loneliness in the years to come. She had led a lonely life until she had come to Malta after the 1945 war. She had been married but that had been a loveless experience; it was in Malta that she had fallen in love, befriended Marija as a child and grown with her over the years, sharing the young girl's every minor and major triumph, spill, setback and step along the road to womanhood as any mother would. She knew she had not really 'lost' Marija any more than Marija's own mother had 'lost' her. But everything had changed. Her little princess was in love and glowing with the joy of exploring the first days of what seemed likely to be a blissfully happy marriage. All being well Marija would soon be

producing her own bambinos and bambinas...

The staccato ripping of automatic gunfire from very nearby stopped both women in their tracks.

“Everybody, get down into the shelter!” Margo snapped. The dreamy mental picture of her holding Marija’s first born in her arms evaporated. Except that for the rest of her life she remembered that Marija’s first born was a beautiful, perfectly formed, healthy baby girl...

There was a continual racket, savage to the ear. Outside. It was all around the hospital. In the piazza, in the surrounding streets and from *above*. Most of the shooting seemed to be coming from above, short, odd sounding burps. Metallic detritus was tinkling onto the cobbles, ringing as it struck iron gutters and pipes, and making a cracking, rolling noise on the tiles of sloping roofs.

At the door down to the cellar the women involuntarily flattened themselves against the wall, covered their heads.

In the enclosed inner courtyard glass shattered, the old tree that had grown in its centre for fifty years shuddered, branches creaked and gave way and with a sickening, bone-breaking thud a man crashed head first into the stone floor in front of the benches, where over the years nurses and patients alike had come to reflect, to be quiet, and to reconcile their lives in the sanctuary of the St Catherine’s Hospital for Women.

The man on the ground was dressed in military camouflage fatigues, weighed down with a huge bulging backpack and black webbing festooned with grenades and ammunition pouches. His gun, a Kalashnikov with a polished wooden stock lay between the door to the courtyard and the soldier’s unmoving, prostrate body.

Before Clara could stop her Margo had instinctively rushed out into the open to find out if the man was still alive.

Clara turned just as the never-ending burst of automatic gunfire defiled the courtyard with sound, fury and the pitter-patter ringing of falling cartridge cases hitting the iron hard, centuries old granite flagstones.

Chapter 46

13:33 Hours (Local)
Friday 3rd April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford, England

The Secretary of Defence, William Whitelaw, looked peeved and untypically worried when he accompanied the Foreign Secretary, Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson into the Prime Minister's Private Office. The bright spring sunshine pouring into the room fell across Margaret Thatcher's desk, its colour tinted sepia by the ancient imperfections of the sixteenth century glass in the windows. She put down her pen and looked up as a third man entered the room and quietly shut the door at his back.

No trace of the unease he was feeling at that moment found its way into Sir Henry Tomlinson's demeanour. The greying éminence grise of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom, by the grace of God and her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, Secretary to the Cabinet and head of the Home Civil Service, had witnessed many dark days in the last eighteen months. The one facing the Government and the country today might, he fervently hoped, seem like a storm in a tea cup in a few days. The problem was that in his heart he did not actually believe it. Still, a visible manifestation of existential angst in public was not going to help anybody.

Tom Harding-Grayson spoke first.

He was angry, very angry which was not at all like him.

"The bloody Argentine has invaded the bloody Falkland Islands, Margaret!" He blurted the instant normal civilities had been completed.

"It is a bad show," William Whitelaw concurred. His own outrage was somewhat muted by another, apparently inconsequential coincidental note which had been flashed to his chief of staff as he was getting ready to join the Foreign Secretary for the short walk to their leader's lair. "A very bad show, but there's something else..."

"Oh, that!" Tom Harding-Grayson sighed.

"It is probably nothing," the Defence Secretary went on, unconvincingly. "But we haven't been able to make contact with Malta for

over three hours."

"Is that unusual?" The Prime Minister inquired, waving her colleagues to hard chairs around a pitted and warped oaken table of significant antiquity and unknown provenance which had already been in the room when she moved in five weeks ago.

"Yes," said the hang-dog faced man whom in their short partnership in Government Margaret Thatcher had come to trust implicitly. "And no. But three hours is a long time."

Sir Henry Tomlinson quietly cleared his throat.

"Routine checks are made every twenty to thirty minutes, Prime Minister, by the *Command Communications Post* at Cheltenham. If there is a problem Cheltenham notifies the Signals Corps at the Joint Command Centre at Chilmark. Chilmark has not received the mid-day SITREP, er, Situation Report, today. It concerns me that communications appear to have broken down only hours before our troops are scheduled to go ashore on Cyprus."

The Foreign Secretary did not still think that a 'technical' problem trumped his *outrage*.

"A lot of the communications equipment in the Med has been untrustworthy since Red Dawn set off those damned airbursts a couple of months ago!" Tom Harding-Grayson observed waspishly.

"Actually," the Defence Secretary objected mildly, "after those attacks Admiral Christopher allocated a very high priority to replacing faulty or damaged equipment and the maintaining of secure, reliable links both within theatre and with the home base, Tom."

"I'm sure we'll find out what's broken soon enough, Willie." The Foreign Secretary found it impossible to be acerbic with the amiably capable Member of Parliament for Penrith and the Border. The man was a perfect, gentle gentleman and a bastion of restraint and reason in the Angry Widow's increasingly boisterous Cabinet. "What are we going to do about the bloody Falklands?"

Margaret Thatcher was a little perplexed.

She was picking up completely different signals from her Cabinet Secretary and Willie Whitelaw on the one hand, and her Foreign Secretary on the other. Since she implicitly trusted the judgement of all three men, this was of itself deeply worrying. The other thing that worried her was that, off the top of her head she was not entirely sure she knew where the Falkland

Islands were; somewhere in the Atlantic?

"The Falkland Islands, Tom?" She asked, seeking clarity at least of the geographical, if not the geopolitical variety.

"The Argentine calls them *Las Malvinas.* The Argentineans claim they settled the islands in 1831 and we stole them in 1833. Most of the people on the island; who call themselves 'Kelpers' are of Welsh and Scottish stock, or the descendents of whalers or of British sailors down the ages."

"How many people are we talking about?"

"Oh, around a couple of thousand."

"Oh, I see." Plainly, the Prime Minister *did not see* and this infuriated her friend.

"The Argentineans were deeply offended when we used the islands as an oiling stop for many of the ships of the Australasian Operation Manna convoys," the Foreign Secretary explained. "At the time Mr Heath was rightly somewhat derisive about their objections."

Margaret Thatcher's immediate concerns had eased when she realised Tom Harding-Grayson was getting excited about the fate of *only* two thousand British subjects. She was constantly focused on the wellbeing of tens of millions of British subjects, and besides, she still could not – with any confidence, let alone certitude - place the Falkland Islands on the map.

"Did we know the Argentinians were going to invade?"

"They've been making noises," the Defence Secretary told her. "Overflying the islands and interfering with the South Atlantic Whale Fishery, although that industry is in decline anyway. The, er, guard ship, HMS Protector is currently investigating reports of an unauthorised landing by Argentine Marines from an Argentinean warship on South Georgia at the whaling station owned by Christian Salvesen Ltd, at Port Leith. She is currently a day's steaming away from that place..."

"We simply *cannot* let this go unchallenged!" Tom Harding-Grayson complained.

"No, of course not," Margaret Thatcher agreed emolliently. "But first things first, Tom. All available resources must be made available to Admiral Christopher in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is the key theatre of operations."

Falkland Islands – Argentina?

South Atlantic – whale hunting?

That sounded like the opposite end of the World?

"We must be pragmatic. *After* Operation Grantham has achieved *all* its objectives and we have established the true extent, dependability and durability of our re-found alliance with the United States, we will have plenty of time to look at the desirability and or the practicalities of remedying the 'situation' in the South Atlantic. We'll talk about it again once things have resolved themselves in the Mediterranean." She looked to her Defence Secretary. "I can tell that you are worried about this breakdown in communications with Malta, Willie?"

"Yes," he replied flatly.

"Have we talked to the Americans?"

"They just think we're keeping them in the dark, Prime Minister," Tom Harding-Grayson complained. "I spoke to the Ambassador before I came over. Walter Brenckmann promised to get straight on the hot line to Philadelphia. I think he was as worried as Willie about this break down in communications."

There was a heavy knock at the door.

A huge Royal Marine stomped into the room and came to attention.

"The American Ambassador is outside, Ma'am!"

Margaret Thatcher rolled her eyes.

How many times do I have to tell the AWPs that I am to be addressed either as 'Mrs Thatcher' or as 'Prime Minister'? I am not a member of the Royal Family!

"Please show Captain Brenckmann in without delay."

There was more stamping of booted feet.

And loud voices in the corridor.

Captain Walter Brenckmann, USNR, came in. Dapper, greying and trim in his civilian weeds he was calm in that way a policeman is coolly collected when he knocks on a door to deliver very bad news.

He looked around the room, nodding acknowledgements.

He came straight to the point.

"Malta is under attack from the sea and the air."

Chapter 47

12:34 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, Off Dragut Point, Sliema, Malta

It had not taken Commander Peter Christopher very long to work out that if he manoeuvred close enough to the coast, the World War II vintage range-finding radars of the big ships standing several miles out to sea lost Talavera in the background returns from the shore. Or at least that was his theory. His initial instinct had been to get as far out to sea as possible but then he had realised the big ships had not actually been shooting at Talavera during her escape from the Grand Harbour, and once the destroyer was free to manoeuvre in the open sea beyond the imprisoning breakwaters he had had a chance to reassess matters. Things were clearer now that the radar plot had given him his first glimpse of the true 'tactical situation', as his instructors at Dartmouth would have described it only a handful of years ago in a very different and infinitely less cruel World.

He had swung Talavera to the north, crossed the entrance to Marsamxett Anchorage and followed the coast, reducing speed to twelve knots and after a few minutes, reversed his course. The enemy had stopped shooting at him – well, if one discounted an occasional two-gun ranging salvo from the battlecruiser's five point nine-inch secondary battery – and he had forced himself to think through his next actions.

Miles Weiss trotted onto the bridge.

"Do I have torpedoes yet, Number One?"

"Ten to fifteen minutes, sir. Mr Calleja is working on the mount with PO Griffin."

Peter Christopher blinked at his Executive Officer.

"Joe's onboard?"

"Yes, sir." Miles Weiss moved on. "There's a lot of splinter damage from those near misses, I'm afraid. The radio room is a mess but we're re-running cables to the aerial array which looks undamaged. We're also putting up a couple of whip aerials. Hopefully, we should be able to raise the

Citadel or the Yarmouth fairly soon."

"Do we have a casualty count?"

"The Master at Arms says we lost a couple of men overboard. Otherwise we've got three dead and fourteen wounded but only four of them seriously. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Quinn and most of the torpedo division were hit when that near miss went off in the water alongside and the poor fellows on the stern deckhouse gun platform also caught a packet. Alan Hannay is re-organising the twenty-millimetre gun crews." Sub-Lieutenant Rory Quinn, the Torpedo Officer, had only come aboard a week ago. "Otherwise, we got away lightly." He glanced overhead as the shrapnel-severed wires flapped in the wind high on the great lattice foremast. The four-ton double bedstead aerials of the Type 965 long-range air search radar still rotated but the bridge repeater was dead. "The next job is getting some chaps up the mast to reconnect the 'bedsteads'," he grinned.

"God alone knows how the Type 293 is still working," Peter chuckled. Just because things weren't looking very good there was no need to get down hearted about it. He might have lost his air search radar but at least he still had his range-finding gunnery aerial on line.

"What's the plan, sir?" Miles Weiss asked. The two friends had no need to beat about the bush with each other.

"Number Two boiler is lit," his commanding officer told him. "We'll have sixty to seventy percent steam on that in ten to fifteen minutes. Assuming we've got torpedoes we can fire by then we'll do this thing the old-fashioned way."

It was not as if there were that many good 'tactical options' available to them. Basically, they could run and hide; or they could fight. Running and hiding was the sort of thing *other* navies did, and if they were going to fight then there was absolutely no point *mucking about*.

"We've got two big ships slowly steaming up and down the coast at about eight or nine knots approximately nine-miles east of Fort St Elmo," Peter explained. The big ships have three or four smaller units in company but presently they're two or three miles farther out to sea, presumably screening the gun line from submarine attack. An additional fly in the ointment is that there appears to be another group of ships coming down from the north-east. One big contact and at least three smaller ones. Another cruiser and her escorts, I shouldn't wonder. That group is making about

twenty knots. I've got no idea what they're up to, but it doesn't really matter. We'll worry about them when we've done something about those blighters lobbing shells onto the island."

Miles Weiss's grin broadened.

"Full speed ahead, all guns blazing and a sharp turn for a broadside torpedo salvo it is then, sir!" He guffawed as if the two young men were discussing sporting tactics. "I'll tell Jack Griffin and your brother-in-law to shoot a few hundred feet in front of the target!"

"That's the ticket." Peter Christopher's grin became a positively wolfish smile.

"Do I have your permission to resume my post as Gunnery Officer for the duration of the attack run, sir?"

"Granted. Request Mr McCann to stand to the auxiliary steering post in your absence, Miles."

The two friends knew that there was much to be done and very little time.

The met each other's eye, sobered a little.

They both knew they would probably not live through this day.

"We're being signalled!"

Both men turned.

"FOXTROT-ONE-OH-ONE!"

The signal lamp winked through the haze.

"Yarmouth!"

"Acknowledge by pendent number."

In a moment the yeoman standing at the Aldis Lamp on the destroyer's port bridge rail was clattering Talavera's own number.

"On acknowledgement send the following signal in the clear," Peter Christopher ordered, in that moment his voice becoming a hard-edged weapon. The Yarmouth was a post World War II ship not built for this sort of fight, her two 4.5-inch quick firing Mark VI naval rifles were no more capable of scratching the antique ex-German battlecruiser currently raining death on Malta than Talavera's Mark Vs. However, unlike the rebuilt Talavera, Yarmouth had no torpedo tubes. The two ships' 4.5-inch shells might inconvenience the Yavuz's consorts but that was not the primary object of the exercise. Putting as many of Talavera's 21-inch torpedoes as possible into the side of the Yavuz was.

The twenty-seven-year-old commanding officer of HMS Talavera did not hesitate. This was like that night off Lampedusa all over again except this time he was a little older, wiser and he understood that what he was about to do could only end badly.

“IN ONE FIVE MINUTES I WILL MAKE A TORPEDO RUN AT ENEMY HEAVIES STOP REQUEST YOU APPROACH ENEMY AT SPEED TO DIVIDE HIS FIRE MESSAGE ENDS”

It did not need to be any more complicated than that.

Although, to the best of his recollection Peter had never met the Captain of HMS Yarmouth; his brother officer would know his duty.

No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy...

Chapter 48

12:35 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Mdina

Clara Pullman stared into the gloom of the cellar in a shocked daze. The events of the last few minutes had registered on the surface of her mind yet seemed strangely disconnected from her actual experience. Replaying the violence of those last few minutes was like watching a movie, almost as if she had stolen somebody else's memories except that every time she re-ran the movie she was the one left holding the smoking Kalashnikov.

She saw the paratrooper lying crumpled and broken on the flagstones of the inner courtyard. The silken cords and the flapping grey canvass of his parachute torn and shredded in the branches of the tree high above.

Margo Seiffert had instinctively rushed to the aide of the man on the ground, stepping over his discarded gun.

When the *other* soldier had opened fire Margo's slight, bird-like frame had been dashed headlong to the flagstones.

Clara's mind replayed the nightmare again and again, faster and faster.

Most of the bullets went straight through Margo, sparking on the instantly bloody stones onto which, a moment later, she sprawled. The Medical Director of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women was virtually cut in half by the magazine-emptying burst of fire, her atomised life blood hanging in suspension in a fine mist over her lifeless body for several seconds after she fell.

Clara had screamed a dreadful, keening scream.

She had been so traumatised in that instant that she had not known who was screaming as she stumbled out into the courtyard and with dull, unknowing eyes looked up at the man who just butchered the most remarkable woman she had ever known.

The man's parachute had snagged on the ridge tiles of the house next to the hospital, he had slung his gun around his neck and he was half-climbing up the cords of his parachute, half-kicking away the remaining glass in the

first-floor window of the room below him. He was trapped between the urge to climb up or to attempt to break into the building, all the while he was terrified that his parachute might suddenly tear free above him and hurl him to the ground. His discarded back pack and webbing thumped heavily down onto the granite stones close to where Clara stood.

In that instant a murderous coldness had fallen on her. She had been prepared to hide with the others, defend them if it came to it but hide, fade into the background if she could. She had maintained her cover for nearly a year-and-a-half; and she had actually begun to like the person she had lately become. She and Clara Pullman had come to an accommodation; Clara was a good person and something deep within in her did not want to let that woman die.

Everything had slowed down.

Beyond the courtyard there was gunfire, shouting, and the ear-hurting bark of grenades bursting, windows shattering, men and women screaming, bedlam.

In the courtyard and inside Clara's head there had been only *quietness*.

Margo was dead.

The trooper who had fallen through the branches of the tree was dead.

Unhurriedly, Clara had bent down and picked up the dead Russian's AK-47 Kalashnikov. Her left hand hefted the wooden barrel grip, her right hand closed around the trigger guard.

Very slowly, she looked up at Margo Seiffert's executioner.

'*Niet! Niet!'* The man had pleaded, struggling desperately to free himself from his parachute harness.

Words came unbidden from her lips.

'Vy ubiystve ublyudok!'

'Niet! Niet!'

She had emptied the magazine into the twisting, twitching, convulsing body of the *murdering bastard*; and afterwards, she had gone back to the dead soldier on the ground next to Margo, retrieved a fresh magazine from his webbing, clicked it home and stood up, pausing to survey the carnage. Just in case there was somebody else she *needed* to kill.

Arkady Pavlovich Rykov and all the others had taught her well.

The body of the trooper she had executed fell – his parachute belatedly coming free of the unseen snags somewhere on the roof. She slung her

Kalashnikov over her shoulder and took the killer's AK-47 from around his neck. She found another fresh magazine, snapped it home.

She had given the second gun to the first woman to fearfully poke her head around the door.

'Margo is dead. The bastards murdered her,' Clara had explained flatly, her voice the voice of a stranger. 'Keep your hands away from the trigger unless you need to shoot somebody. Get back to the cellar.'

That seemed like an hour ago, it was probably only a minute or two.

The sound of explosions and small arms fire was muted beneath ground.

All the other nurses and patients were looking at her with wide, frightened eyes and it was this which finally broke her trance. She suspected the numbness would take longer to go. A part of her had died out in the courtyard and for the first time she understood what had made Arkady Rykov, the man she still loved and could not stop loving and loathing, a monster.

Clara refreshed her hold of the Kalashnikov.

"Everybody, stay here. Whatever happens, everybody must stay here. When I go upstairs lock and bolt the door behind me."

There were protests.

Clara was already on her feet and suddenly, the others were noticing how comfortably she hefted the assault rifle in her hands.

Oh, yes.

You and all the others trained me well Arkady Pavlovich...

Chapter 49

12:39 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Battery Caves, Kalkara, Malta

"What is it?" Rosa Calleja whispered.

Marija could not stop shivering. One moment she had been fine – or as fine as a woman can be cowering in a cave while two big warships bombarded one's home – and the next she had felt an awful, crushing sense of absolute and hopeless loss descend upon her, enveloping her like a suffocating miasma. She had felt this way when her father had broken the news about her brother, Samuel's disappearance and probable death, except this was many times worse as if some unimaginably dark blight had fallen upon the World. What had happened to Peter? What had happened to her Mama and Papa? What had happened to her little brother, Joe?

Margo...

Rosa was panicking.

"Sister, what is it?" She had hugged the slighter woman to her.

Marija was wracked with the shivering. It was as if her body was in the throes of a fierce fever.

People around them were looking on anxiously.

Fires were burning in Kalkara now.

The burning time had come.

Chapter 50

12:44 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
USS Iowa, 23 miles SW of Malta

The battleship and its two escorting guided missile destroyers had parted company with the USS Independence and the rest of Task Force 21.1 at midnight, when the big carrier and her screening force had headed north into the Tyrrhenian Sea and rounded the coast of Sicily. Since Operation Grantham was proceeding without apparent let or hindrance the Task Force Commander, Vice-Admiral Bernard A. Clarey, had determined to make a 'show of strength' off Palermo at dawn and to intensively exercise the Independence's air group in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea, putting on a crushing display of maritime air power for the benefit of the air forces and navies of the Fascisti presently in nominal control of Italy and Sicily. Thereafter, the Independence and her escorts would make an unannounced passage south to Malta via the Straits of Messina, just in case the Fascisti on the mainland had failed to get the message that the US Navy was back and it planned to stay.

Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt had raised no objections to the change of plan. The Independence's air group was rusty after so long in port and heck, when was he going to get another chance to command his own little fleet again?

With the sudden change of plan the two oilers loitering north of Lampedusa had been bypassed. Iowa and her two screening destroyers would enter the Grand Harbour in a morale boosting show of strength and the two tankers could catch up with the warships later.

The Iowa's escorts, the Charles F. Adams class destroyers Berkeley (DDG-15) and John King (DDG-3) had run their bunkers low steaming at twenty–eight knots for the best part of three days, so the Iowa had slowed to twenty-two knots once Schmidt's newly designated Task Force 21.2 headed through the narrows between Sicily and the Tunisian coast.

Shortly afterwards, the garbled reports of 'invasion' forces and radar

breakdowns had started trickling into the battleship's communications centre. Schmidt's operations orders required Iowa to listen and log but not to respond to intercepted traffic. While the old sea dog had disliked a lot of what he was hearing, he had assumed Vice-Admiral Clarey would have a better, clearer picture of what was going on onboard the Independence. The big carrier had a state of the art communications and sensor suite, airborne early warning aircraft, and the capacity to maintain a continually updated 'big' picture of the three-dimensional air, surface and undersea battlefield out to ranges of over two hundred miles in every direction. All he had was a radio and a mess of ten-year-old radars that barely reached to the visible horizon.

"Independence is on the horn for Iowa, sir!"

Captain Schmidt ran a hand through his thinning grey hair and took the handset.

He had been impressed by the Task Force Commander, fifty-one-year-old Iowan born Bernard Clarey. Clarey had made his reputation commanding submarines in the Pacific in the forty-five war and thereafter his advancement had been seamless and rapid. People were already speaking of him as a future Chief of Naval Operations.

The scrambled link hissed and clicked.

"The shit has hit the fan at Malta," Bernard Clarey said without preamble. I've redirected two Hawkeyes and an airborne tanker to give me a heads up on what's actually going on but it is clear from what we already know that Malta is under bombardment from the sea and that paratroopers are attacking key installations all over the Maltese Archipelago."

Anderson Schmidt knew he should not ask it, but he asked it anyway: "What's happened to Rear-Admiral Detweiller's squadron, sir."

"Detweiller sent *both* designated guard ships and *all* his other units to rendezvous with Independence. Task Force 21.2 and his squadron probably passed each other in the night going in opposite directions."

The Task Force Commander sounded like he had only just found out about it and he was not a happy man.

Oh fuck!

Anderson Farragut Schmidt bit his tongue.

This would be one of those scenarios that General Curtis LeMay would describe, in his inimitable way, as a FUBAR. *Fucked Up Beyond All Repair*.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had disarmed, astonished and largely won over the old Washington press corps, now removed to Philadelphia, with his loquacity and forthrightness since the Battle of Washington. Anderson Schmidt wondered how he planned to swat away the barbs which were about to come his way for the Navy's latest FUBAR.

Schmidt's understanding had been that elements of Rear-Admiral Detweiller's Task Force 20.1 would remain at Malta or exercising within three hours steaming of the Grand Harbour until it was subsumed – on its arrival at Malta - into Admiral Clarey's Task Force 21.1, which, at that time would be re-designated United States Sixth (Mediterranean) Fleet. It was the continued presence of Detweiller's modern ships at Malta which had enabled the British to send everything they had to the Eastern Mediterranean, safe in the knowledge that their home base was secure...

"That's going to be a problem, sir," the Captain of the USS Iowa said, demonstrating a mastery of the subtle art of grimly stoic understatement.

"Yes, it is!"

"What are your orders, sir?"

"Communications with Malta are spotty. There's a lot of jamming going on. The Hawkeyes ought to be able to do something about that when they arrive on station. I'll send you whatever tactical updates become available. Otherwise, do what you have to do, Captain Schmidt!"

The one thing a man could count on in the Navy was that he never knew what was going to happen next.

"Yes, sir!"

Schmidt straightened, half-smiled.

"SOUND ACTION STATIONS!"

Chapter 51

12:44 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

A Kalashnikov-wielding nurse was such an unlikely sight that both British and Russian soldiers gawped at Clara Pullman for a moment before they reacted. Her pale blue nursing auxiliary's uniform was spattered with Margo Seiffert's and her killer's blood, her hair was wild and, in her eyes, there was nothing but murder.

She screamed: "I'm on your side!" At British soldiers and any civilians who crossed her path. And she screamed: "*Ya na vashey storone*!" with a manic intensity at Soviet paratroopers.

The former she allowed to go about their business.

The latter she gunned down without compunction as if they were *rabid wild dogs*.

Two Royal Military Policemen armed with only Webley service revolvers hiding in a cul-de-sac saw Clara step out into the street and empty her AK-47's thirty-round magazine in three unhurried bursts, and then calmly go to the nearest body and retrieve a new magazine. She slapped it home, cleared the breech, and glanced at the two Redcaps.

"If you want to live come with me!"

Chapter 52

13:45 Hours (Local)
Friday 3rd April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford, England

Captain Walter Brenckmann, the Ambassador of the United States of America to the Court of Blenheim Palace, held the telephone handset to his head and listened to his Naval Attaché's terse report with studious impassivity.

The Prime Minister's Personal Private Office was silent; Margaret Thatcher, her Foreign and Defence Ministers, and the Cabinet Secretary waited politely, patiently for him to be told the worst.

"Keep this line open," the Ambassador ordered, employing the same emphatic tone he had used a thousand times in his sea-going days. He had been on convoy escorts in the Battle of the Atlantic and had commanded a Fletcher class fleet destroyer in the Korean War; he understood from cruel experience that in war things go wrong and that people die. But knowing that this was the natural, inevitable way of things did not help make it any easier to bear.

The American looked up.

"The USS Independence is north of Sicily; the USS Iowa is approximately one to two hours sailing time south west of Malta. It appears that Rear-Admiral Detweiller departed Malta with *all* his major surface units without first clearing his movements with Admiral Clarey. This was contrary to Admiral Christopher's wishes but, as you know, American commanders in the field are not obliged to obey the orders of local, albeit senior, allied commanders. Presumably, Admiral Christopher elected not to turn what probably seemed at the time like a minor professional disagreement, into a full blown diplomatic incident. Until this morning all available intelligence summaries gave no reason to think that Malta was in any way threatened. The USS Independence reports intercepting signals from the Malta strike force that attacked an 'invasion convoy' east of the archipelago indicating that this convoy has been badly damaged and scattered. Aircraft returning

from that strike are reporting that large areas of Malta are shrouded by smoke, and report shooting down numerous Soviet twin-engine Antonov and other transport-type aircraft over Malta engaged in dropping a large number of paratroopers. The returning aircraft are engaging 'hostiles' until their fuel runs out, at which time their crews are ejecting over land. The Independence has established communication with the frigate HMS Yarmouth, which, in company with HMS Talavera is planning to attack the major enemy surface units bombarding Malta with torpedoes."

Margaret Thatcher was impressed by the conciseness of the report.

"How many torpedoes do those two ships have?"

"Four," the American replied flatly. "Yarmouth has none. The Talavera was recently converted to mount a single quadruple launcher. Yarmouth will attempt to draw the enemy's fire when Talavera attacks."

The Prime Minister absorbed this with a sick feeling in her stomach.

"When will the Independence be in a position to intervene?" She asked.

"The Independence was recovering her air group when the emergency became know. Aircraft will need to be refuelled and weapon loads re-calibrated. Given the range and flight times involved in mounting a co-ordinated strike operation against the enemy naval units off Malta," he shrugged, "two to three hours, Prime Minister."

Chapter 53

12:49 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Two miles off Dragut Point, Malta

Joe Calleja scowled at the stocky red-headed and bearded man sitting in the bucket control chair attached to the torpedo mount.

“I don’t have time to show you how everything works, Petty Officer Griffin!”

“If I don’t work the fucking panel who the fuck will?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing! I’m surprised you haven’t launched a torpedo into the funnel the way you’ve been following the lights around the board!”

The two men glared at each other.

“Steady on!” Lieutenant-Commander Miles Weiss shouted. “Are we ship shape down here?”

“Yes, sir,” the two men chorused uncertainly.

HMS Talavera’s Executive Office could see with his own eyes that this was not the case.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’ll get the hang of this thing, sir!” Jack Griffin protested, waving his muscular arms at the control board.

HMS Talavera’s Executive Officer’s temper was on a short leash.

His stared bored into Joe Calleja’s face.

“Do you know how to work this mount?”

The civilian nodded.

“Right, you’re in the hot seat.” He switched his attention to Jack Griffin. “We’ll be approaching the target at speed and turning to starboard to launch all four fish in one attack. I’m reliably informed that the mount needs to be pointed forty-five degrees forward of the beam at the moment of launching.” He gave each man a hard look. “You will need to lead the target by about ten degrees. Any questions?”

There were no questions.

However, Joe Calleja suspected there was something HMS Talavera's second-in-command was neither aware or, nor could possibly have taken into account in issuing his orders.

"Er, sorry," he apologised. "Mr Weiss," he stuttered.

"What is it?"

"The Mark VIIIs in Tubes One and Four are early 'M' modifications."

Miles Weiss gave him a blank look.

"All four torpedoes are late wartime or immediate post 1945 variants. The ones they gave you to load in Tubes Two and Three are standard contact-detonated mods without any fancy electronics. But the 'fish'," he was uneasy using the Royal Navy term for reasons he did not begin to understand, "in Tubes One and Four are fitted with early model 'magnetic' detonators. If we fire those into the side of a ship it might dent the plates but it probably won't blow up."

"Oh, I see." The destroyer's Executive Officer thought for a moment. "Right, well spotted that man! Set fish One and Four to run at thirty feet. The others can run at twelve feet."

"Commander," Joe groaned. "The early 'M' mods were *all* duds. Or that was what I heard..."

"What, all of them?"

"Well, most of them. Yes."

Miles Weiss shrugged; this was exactly why he had always wanted to be a big gun man. A fellow knew exactly where he stood and what he was doing with good old fashioned naval rifles!

"I'll tell the Captain. For your sake I hope they go off, otherwise we'll have to ram the blighters!" He sniffed the air, feeling the motion of the ship change as power fed into her racing propellers. "Carry on!"

Less than a minute later the Tannoy blared.

"This is the Captain." HMS Talavera was picking up speed, attempting to bury her stern in the blue Mediterranean waters as she proscribed a mile-wide racing swerve. "We will shortly be attacking two large surface targets currently engaged in bombarding the island of Malta. As soon as HMS Yarmouth is in position we're going to attack the two big ships with torpedoes. During the attack every gun that will bear on the enemy may fire at will. Stand to your duty, gentlemen. WHILE THIS SHIP FLOATS I WILL NOT LET THOSE BASTARDS PAST!"

Joe Calleja realised he was the only man gathered around or standing on top of the torpedo mount who was not laughing and cheering hysterically. His brother-in-law, his sister's beloved husband whose death would break her heart forever, had just told his men that he would rather die than surrender. And yet the men around him were jumping up and down as if their favourite football team had scored a last-minute match-winning goal!

The English were mad.

All of them were mad!

Chapter 54

12:50 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

Most of the shooting was coming from the quarter around the Headquarters buildings on the eastern flank of the Citadel.

Clara Pullman and her pair of frightened Redcaps almost ran into the two Soviet paratroopers. One was an older man, an NCO, the other a squat, brutish trooper with a gashed head. The Russians wasted a fraction of a second trying to work out what a nurse was doing with an AK-47 and that was the death of them.

Clara was a little surprised when the shorter man's torso and head literally exploded in a spray of blood and bone fragments. After she had killed the trooper's NCO she checked her Kalashnikov's magazine.

There was a dab of red paint on the end of it.

"Dum Dum bullets," she explained to the horrified Redcaps. The rounds in the red-dotted magazines were doctored or hollow-pointed to expand, explode, or fragment on impact. "Take their Kalashnikovs and replace the mags with ones that are marked red like this one." She showed the two Royal Military Policemen her weapon. "And give me another full red-dotted mag. Get a move on!" She shouted, eying the two narrow passageways leading to right and left.

She took the magazine she was handed and dropped it into the voluminous folds of the front pouch of her increasingly bloody pale blue nursing auxiliary's smock. She sized up her two companions.

"You kill anybody in a Soviet uniform or carrying one of these," she flicked her gaze onto the Kalashnikov in her arms. "Don't think about it just do it! Understand?"

She did not actually think either of her companions *understood*. Normal, decent men were often incapable of adapting to the reality of killing or being killed. Her misgivings were quickly confirmed.

"Where are we going?" The senior of the Redcaps asked. He was a

lance-corporal with a deep tan that spoke of long service on the island.

"To the Headquarters. They will kill all the senior officers before they liquidate the civilian population of the Citadel."

"You don't know that..."

Clara brought up her AK-47.

No, she did not know that was what the paratroopers would do; just that it would be consistent with the standard operating procedures of airborne Spetsnaz – Special Forces – troops like the ones she had been killing for the last few minutes.

There was obviously some part of 'come with me if you want to live' that the Redcap had not *understood*. She was tempted to kill him but was momentarily distracted by a volley of automatic gunfire from high over her head. Empty cartridge cases started clattering around her. The British were on the roofs shooting at the next wave of parachutists. Good, somebody was getting organised at last!

"You will die if you stay here," she said, turning on her heel.

Chapter 55

12:52 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera

A blast of foul-smelling cordite whipped back across HMS Talavera's open flying bridge as both main battery turrets fired. The destroyer's bow cleaved a furrow in the three to four feet high swell offshore as she arrowed towards her distant quarry.

"Yarmouth has opened fire, sir!"

"Very good!" Commander Peter Christopher acknowledged.

Some small part of the back of his brain told him that what he was doing was *insane*. His father had told him – strictly speaking he had *ordered* him to 'get out to sea' – and if he had taken Talavera out of range of the big guns and lurked in the haze, he could later have claimed under oath, with complete honesty, that he was obeying orders. Except that was not the way things were done in the Royal Navy; in the Royal Navy an order to 'get out to sea' was no more or less than an unambiguous incitement to immediately join battle with the Queen's enemies. His father had not specifically ordered him to do his duty because he had not needed to; such things were so implicitly *understood* within the brotherhood of the Service that no commanding officer worth his salt actually needed to explicitly order anybody to actually 'steam towards the sound of the guns'. In olden times no captain could do better than lay his ship alongside his foe; in modern times that was neither practical nor militarily sensible, so Peter Christopher he was about to do the next best thing.

Excluding the second group of enemy ships coming down from the north-east Talavera and Yarmouth were outnumbered five or six-to-one. In terms of firepower they were probably out-gunned by twenty or thirty-to one. Worse, both Royal Navy ships were 'trapped' between the Maltese Archipelago and the greatly superior enemy 'fleet', and therefore had little or no room for manoeuvre, and even had they been looking for it, *nowhere to run*.

All of which Peter Christopher knew and accepted; the ‘tactical situation’ was what it was and there was nothing he could do about it. It was not as if he had any kind of death wish. He had married the love of his life less than a month ago, he had been given command of a fleet destroyer at a ludicrously young age, and even contrived an unlikely rapprochement with the father with whom he had been estranged since his mother’s death in the late 1950s; he had *everything* to live for. And yet it never occurred to him to walk away from this self-evidently hopeless fight.

Not that he actually believed that any fight was intrinsically ‘hopeless’.

Without duty a man was nothing.

He saw the flash of the First World War German battlecruiser’s broadside in the distance, not knowing if the big ship was shooting at Talavera *yet*. The former SMS Goeben was belching black smoke in a passable impression of a forest fire at sea. The smoke and the haze made it hard to pick out the shapes of the two big ships until they fired their main batteries. The dinosaur battlecruiser was half-a-mile-astern of the Sverdlov class cruiser; the Russian ship was probably using her range-finding radar to signal fall of shot corrections to the *Yavuz*. If so, that was a horribly cumbersome way to fight any kind of action, let alone the sort of fast moving *Boy’s Own* sort of battle Peter Christopher had in mind.

Talavera’s main battery fired again.

“Range to target?”

“Sixteen thousand five hundred yards!”

That was approximately nine-and-a-third 1760-yard *land* miles, a tad over eight-and-a-quarter 2000-yard *sea* miles. Talavera had worked up to revolutions for thirty-one knots – over thirty-five miles per hour in land-lubber money – so the arithmetic was straightforward; Talavera and her chosen target, the old German battlecruiser with her eleven-inch naval rifles, would collide in about fifteen minutes. Not that a collision was exactly what Peter Christopher contemplated. His battle plan envisaged approaching to within about five hundred yards of his quarry, throwing the helm over and loosing off all four of his torpedoes at point blank range. It was good plan, good not brilliant, but like most *good* plans it had the singular merit of having very few moving parts. All that needed to be done for it to have a chance of success was for him to place Talavera into position to fire her torpedoes without getting sunk first.

The main battery fired.

At this range the Yavuz's shells would take over a minute to reach the destroyer. In that time Talavera would have fired between ten and fifteen four-gun broadsides at the two big ships. 'A' Turret was shooting at the leading ship, the Sverdlov class cruiser armed with a dozen 6-inch guns; 'B' turret was shooting at the Yavuz. Oddly, the battlecruiser's 11-inch – strictly speaking 11.1-inch, or 28-centimetre Krupp model SK L/50 – guns only out-ranged Talavera's 4.5-inch main battery by a few hundred yards and both ships were already well over four thousand yards within their maximum engagement ranges. Back in the days that the Yavuz had been in the service of the Kaiser her crew might have fired off two to three broadsides in a two-minute window; thus far today she had managed only a single four-gun salvo every two minutes, give or take. Having switched to eight-gun broadsides her rate of fire had become even more funereal.

Talavera's next broadside barked.

A single hit from one of the Yavuz's 666-pound high explosive rounds would probably cripple or sink Talavera. This being the case there was not much point wasting time contemplating that particular eventuality.

Pragmatically, Peter Christopher was more worried about the Sverdlov class cruiser. Once she realised what Talavera and Yarmouth were up to she could shoot half-a-dozen, perhaps more, twelve gun broadsides a minute at the approaching ships. The rate of fire of the Yavuz's 5.9-inch calibre secondary casemate-mounted armament was unlikely to be as fast, but nevertheless, she would soon be adding an additional six-gun broadside to the Sverdlov's twelve. At ranges within ten thousand yards the cruiser's 4-inch calibre quick-firing secondary guns would, if properly handled, lay down a withering wall of fire. If the big ships guessed that the torpedo-less Yarmouth was no real threat to them and concentrated their combined fire on the Talavera, this was going to end very quickly in a maelstrom of shot and shell.

However, if Peter Christopher had learned anything in the last few months it was that that sometimes, when all else failed, a man had to have a little faith.

Either the Gods of war were on a chap's side or they were not.

A line of tall water spouts reared up half-a-mile ahead of the racing destroyer.

And then the seas *all* around HMS Talavera seemed to erupt in a paroxysm of mountainous geysers of dirty grey water and her hull rang like a cracked bell as countless shards of spent shrapnel crashed and clattered inboard. The ship staggered, and then drove on, her screws threshing the wine dark Mediterranean with a new and terrible purpose.

Chapter 56

12:57 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Battery Caves, Kalkara, Malta

The rolling thunder of naval gunfire filtered into the bomb shelter but the ground was still, no shells had exploded on land for several minutes and the sound of nearby small arms fire outside the cave entrance had ceased.

Three dusty, sweating British soldiers had rushed in and squatted on their haunches, anxiously looking out, their FN L1A1 Self-Loading Rifles at the ready, guarding the forty or so mainly women and children who had sought sanctuary in the old shell store.

Marija had stopped shaking and regained a little of her normal composure; the coldness in her heart was now a dull ache, the feeling of loss like a dark spirit whose tendrils reached into every part of her waking mind.

“What is going on?” Rosa Calleja asked of the soldiers.

“The big ships have stopped shelling us,” one man grunted.

“There don’t seem to be any more parachutists coming down over on this side of the island. They’re all dropping the other side of Valletta,” the oldest of the three, a man with corporal’s stripes on his arm added. “I think the Navy is getting stuck into the bastards offshore!”

This last comment was uttered with a genuine, if grudging respect. Whatever the Army thought about the Royal Navy, the Navy never ran away from a fight.

“Parachutists?” Marija asked, breaking out of her darkling thoughts for a moment.

“Only a couple of dozen came down over this side of the Grand Harbour,” the corporal explained, glancing back to her before resuming his watch. “I think they tried to get into the Hospital at Bighi, there was lots of shooting. Something’s burning in the Hospital grounds so maybe we didn’t get all of the bastards. We were shooting them as they came down. Bastards!”

Marija rose stiffly to her feet, balanced herself by resting a hand on the

rough-hewn wall of the cave.

“You can’t go out there, miss,” the corporal hissed.

“I must see what is happening.”

“It isn’t safe. We don’t know if we got all those bastards. They were shooting at everybody.”

Rosa also had risen to her feet.

The soldiers shook their heads as the two young women walked to the entrance of the shelter.

Marija and Rosa stared out at the surreal, sickening scene of a familiar vista transformed into something snatched from a fever-induced nightmare.

From where they stood they could see little to the west and nothing to the south, the higher ground obstructed those views. In front of them Valletta was burning, and great roiling blankets of grey-black smoke drifted across the Grand Harbour. Beyond the sandstone ramparts more pillars of smoke rose from the direction of distant Gzira and Sliema, and the air was tainted with the vile stench of burning bunker oil. Shells had taken huge lumps out of the previously immaculate curve of the northern – King George V - breakwater.

Far out at sea sudden flashes of white fire glittered through the smoke and haze. It was like a panorama out of Dante’s Inferno. Near to the epicentre of the faraway sea battle a huge, ominously black rain squall tracked across the sea, threatening to engulf the ships now fighting for their lives. A fork of lightning branched in an instant, stabbed down, discharging; and then another, its super-charged trident spearing imperiously into the midst of the battle.

Rosa grabbed her arm, pointed inland towards where the twin city of Mdina-Rabat must lie, hidden in the seething fog of war. A downward curving finger of livid red flame told of the death of an aircraft.

The Corporal had joined the women in the entrance, standing a little in front and ahead of them, his rifle ready, his eyes scanning constantly.

He chuckled grimly.

“I bet those jammy buggers who came out her on the Sylvania don’t think Malta’s such a cushy billet now!”

Chapter 57

12:57 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

Clara Pullman's two tame Royal Military Policemen thought she had taken leave of her senses when she ordered them to break into a boarded up disused bakery in a cul-de-sac enclosed by the outer bastion wall of the Citadel. While she had said they were going to the Headquarters building; she had actually led them through streets heading away into the southern quarter. They would have said something had not the sound of gunfire become more muffled, reassuringly distant as they walked and trotted down streets strewn with bloody bodies. Death seemed to have made little distinction between men, or women, or those in and those out of uniform. Clara had paused momentarily over the corpse of an eight or nine-year-old girl who had been shot in the face at point black range; otherwise she maintained a measured, cat-like watchful pace.

"Get on with it!" She snapped, quartering the entrance to the death trap into which she had, without a qualm, entered seconds earlier. "Break down the door!"

The two men began kicking and shouldering the door.

The ancient, dry, cracking wood was tougher than it looked.

A booted foot smashing a small hole low down. More kicks broadened the hole until it was just big enough for Clara and perhaps the smaller of the two Redcaps to crawl through. She did not hesitate. Pushing the Kalashnikov inside she squirmed into the darkness. Once inside she ignored the Redcaps kicking to enlarge the hole, alternatively opening her eyes wide, and squeezing them shut, willing them to adjust to the lower light faster than was humanly possible. Another body rolled through the doors as Clara began to move a table over to the back of the dusty, dank room.

Outside in the street there was shooting.

There was an explosion, a grenade.

The boarded-up windows splintered but held.

“Help me up!” She yelled at the surviving Redcap as she clambered onto the table and reached up for the two-foot square hatch directly above her head. The hatch would not move. The man was beside her, the table creaking and groaning under their combined weight as finally, the hatch lifted, dust and cobwebs falling into Clara’s hair.

She hated spiders...

Clara had slung her AK-47 over her shoulder.

Her hands sought purchase on the rough wood frame of the trap door.

“Push me up!”

The Redcap was so scared that in forming his hands into a stirrup into which she could put her right foot he very nearly propelled her straight up into the ceiling. As it was Clara’s head bumped sickeningly against the frame of the hatch. She rolled clear of the opening as the Redcap threw his Kalashnikov ahead of him and began to scrabble for a handhold.

Clara, a little dazed flinched.

She had seen AK-47s spontaneously empty a magazine when they were dropped.

She grabbed the man’s arm.

The Redcap was half-way through the hatch...

Clara’s befuddled brain could make little sense of what had just happened for several seconds. The loft was full of dust and smoke, she was coughing, desperately trying to suck air into her lungs. A few inches from her face splinters spat from new holes in the wooden floor boards.

She heard a string of vile Russian curses in the room below and out in the street.

“*Prekratit' strel'bu!*” She choked. *Stop shooting*! “*Prekratit' strel'bu!*” She did not think it would help, nonetheless she added: “*Ya s vami, tovarishchi*!” *I am with you, comrades*!

If they fell for that one the idiots did not deserve to go on living!

“*Tovarishch?*”

“*Da tovarishchi*!”

The dead Redcap’s Kalashnikov was by the hatch.

“The pigs chased me up here!” She wailed, hoping she sounded like ‘the pigs’ had also despoiled her. “*Svin'i presledovali menya zdes!*”

The average Soviet private soldier never got to do a lot of thinking for himself and so, when faced by a dilemma, he either panicked, shooting first

and asking questions later, or he tried to get one of his comrades to make his decision for him. Luckily for Clara, these comedians obviously did not have an NCO or an officer with them.

Clara rolled to the open hatch, sweeping up the AK-47.

By the time she had emptied the red-tipped magazine into the press of troopers in the room below very little that was recognisably human remained scattered across the floor and walls of the abandoned bakery.

Her hair was sticky with blood.

"Shit!" She muttered, staggering to the narrow, padlocked door to the next building along the top of the old ramparts. In the half-light she smashed the lock with the stock of the Kalashnikov. She threw the gun on the ground, unslung her own, fully-loaded AK-47 and stumbled through the door.

Clara Pullman, whoever you are, not even Arkady Pavlovich Rykov could have turned you into this monster...

She had liked being Clara Pullman.

For a while she had actually believed she was capable of being a normal, living breathing woman and in her hubris, she had made the mistake of believing that the World would let her be Clara forever.

Stumbling through the labyrinth of forgotten lofts and attic storerooms, haltingly tracing the eastern line of the great wall of the Citadel, with every step carrying her closer to the upper levels of Admiral Christopher's Headquarters, her right hand closed ever more tightly on the trigger guard of her Kalashnikov.

Chapter 58

13:01 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
USS Iowa, 14 miles SW of Malta

Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt paced the bridge of the battleship as it thundered north west on a course that, if unaltered, would run the great ship aground off Delimara Point, one of the most southern promontories of the island of Malta. He was cursing the fact that there had been no time to reactivate two of the USS Iowa's eight fire rooms. He was two boilers light when he needed them most!

Notwithstanding that their bunkers were running low; he had ordered the Iowa's two screening Charles F. Adams class guided missile destroyers ahead at flank speed. He had authorised the captains of the USS Berkeley and the USS John King to 'run their bunkers dry' if they had to if that's what it took to get in range 'to engage the enemy'. The two destroyers had creamed off into the distance at better than thirty-three knots, leaving the Iowa wallowing in their wakes as the old battlewagon gradually worked up to her best speed on six boilers of about twenty-eight or nine knots.

"The Berkeley has cleared the coast sufficiently to open the range for her sensors and main battery, sir!"

The destroyers had Tartar surface-to-air missiles, useless against surface targets; and two automatic Mark 42 five-inch 54-calibre turret-mounted – fore and aft – guns capable of firing up to forty radar-ranged and predicted rounds per minute.

The 5-inch rapid-firing guns would be a problem for the Sverdlov class ship but the Yavuz was a dreadnought built around a virtually impenetrable armoured raft. The old ship had ten to twelve inches of cemented Krupp armour around her sides, even thicker armour protecting her turret barbettes and conning tower. Her decks were more lightly protected; even so no 5-inch round was going to penetrate to her vitals. Only Iowa's main battery could actually puncture the dinosaur's steely carapace.

"The Berkeley has commenced firing, sir!"

Chapter 59

13:01 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 6 miles west of Sliema Point

The two big enemy ships had reversed course and, in the process, the clumsier, coal-burning Yavuz had taken station as lead ship. For almost three minutes the cannonade bracketing and drenching HMS Talavera had relented but not before near misses had killed and wounded a dozen men and punctured the thin side plates of the destroyer in scores of places. Something had penetrated the port boiler room, nicking a steam line and briefly cut seven knots off Talavera's speed.

"Nine thousand yards!"

The whole side of the Yavuz seemed to disappear in a series of unimaginably violent crimson explosions, and for at least a dozen seconds the ship was invisible behind billowing clouds of white cordite smoke. Because of the way the old ship's two amidships main battery turrets were sited – at an angle one from the other on opposite sides of the battlecruiser's centre line and therefore capable of firing only on one beam – only eight of her ten 11-inch guns could be fired in broadside. However, to an unarmoured ship at a range of only nine thousand yards, virtually point-blank range for guns of that calibre – the missing twenty percent of the Yavuz's main battery was by and large, academic.

Peter Christopher knew there was nothing he could do except to present the smallest possible target to the enemy. That meant driving straight at the Yavuz. If he flinched and ordered the tiniest course change he would expose the length of his command's paper-thin hull to those great onrushing projectiles.

Waiting for the broadside to arrive he involuntarily did what any sensible man would do.

He shut his eyes.

"Short! Somebody screamed.

Peter Christopher opened his eyes.

Half-a-mile ahead the sea was an impenetrable wall of giant shell splashes.

He thought he was dreaming but an object travelling so fast that all he saw was a blur of phantom blackness seemed to be coming straight at him. He stood transfixed, the *thing* that was coming towards him so impossibly fast seemed as though it was going to hit him in the middle of his forehead.

It did not, of course.

The 11-inch shell actually crashed into and through the lattice foremast about three feet below the Type 293 ranging aerial. There was no explosion; it must have been an armour piecing round but the top twenty feet of the mast, and incidentally, the top of the gun director tower simply ceased to exist. Debris blasted back down the length of the vessel and into the surging waters through which she charged.

Peter Christopher stared stupidly at the stump of the great lattice foremast.

The main battery was still firing.

Damage control reports started coming in as he stepped to the back of the bridge and surveyed the wreckage of his recently repaired and re-modelled command. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that the mainmast still standing.

A destroyer captain tended to feel a tad naked in the absence of something to fly a big flag from...

“Somebody find the battle flag that was streaming from the foremast halyards!” He shouted. “Run it up the mainmast jack stay!”

On a day like this a ship was simply not properly dressed without her battle flag flying!

“What’s going on with the Yarmouth?”

The Type-12 frigate had come roaring out of the South Comino Channel separating the main Island of Malta from the second largest island, Gozo, and its smaller neighbour, Comino shooting, of all things, *star shells* to attract the enemy’s attention. Yarmouth had immediately come under fire from the Yavuz’s 6-inch secondary battery, and soon afterwards from plunging fire from the third large ship approaching from the north. Approaching the Yavuz and the Sverdlov class cruiser from a more oblique angle than Talavera she presented a bigger target and had suffered accordingly.

“Yarmouth is on fire forward and abaft her stack, sir. She’s slowed

down but she’s still closing with the enemy!”

Talavera was straddled by a shower of smaller projectiles.

There was a sickening metallic crash somewhere beneath Peter Christopher’s feet.

“Range eight thousand yards!”

Chapter 60

13:02 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

Ever since she had been a little girl Clara had hated heights. The roof of the final building sloped precipitously to the very edge of the ramparts; if she slipped there was a two hundred feet sheer drop to the foot of the Citadel rock. She had kicked off her shoes; they were ruined with blood, anyway. She hoped her bare feet would give her better purchase on the lichen damp, fragile slates.

It was only a few steps; it might have been a thousand miles. All she had to do was traverse a few steps across the slanting tiles, climb over the low retaining brick wall and then the roof beyond was flat. She would have to be careful not to make a sound crossing to the skylight; and leaving her shoes behind would help with that, assuming that she did not fall to her death first.

She thought about trying to crawl along the ridge. No, that would never work. Somebody would see her and the way things were they would shoot her, or she would have to shoot them. Either way, she would be frustrated in her belated attempt to do what she ought to have done several weeks ago. Betrayal was a funny thing; sometimes it was unclear who was betraying whom and the meanings of loyalty got twisted, blurred out of any kind of recognisable shape.

She had comforted herself that she was not the first double agent to become a triple agent, or to forget who she was really working for and then lapse into a state of self-defensive quasi-denial. She had allowed her emotions to get in the way. She had fallen in love with this island and the people who had treated her, for the first time in her adult life as a *normal* woman. Worst of all she had got too close to Arkady Rykov and fallen in love with him. Was it any surprise that she had lost the plot? Yes and no. At some level she had known she was doing the wrong thing, permitting her feelings for a monster to warp her perspective. Nobody had ordered her to do otherwise and it was hardly as if she had sworn any kind of oath of fealty to

the British or what remained of their stupid Empire. Notwithstanding, in retrospect she had made a series of increasingly bizarre, and in the light of recent events, very bad decisions.

The odd thing was that if that fucking Spetsnaz trooper had not murdered Margo Seiffert she would have carried on being Clara Pullman, the aging courtesan who was for a while the mistress of *Arkady Pavlovich Rykov* and who had been, in her naivety duped by him just like everybody else including the Head of MI6.

Unlike the illustrious Head of the Secret Intelligence Service she could blame her hormones; she had fallen in love with Arkady, and for a short time honestly believed despite all the evidence to the contrary that one day she might be his wife.

How did I get across that sloping roof?

Her shame, anger and self-loathing had transported her across the treacherously angled tiles before she knew she had even set off. One moment she was burning with a nameless violent fury, the next she was clinging to the lintel of the wall between the buildings, peering over the empty, flat roof between her and the skylight above the office of the Chief of Staff of the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations.

She sucked in air, her chest heaved.

It was ludicrous but she felt uncomfortable, unhappy for anybody to see her the way she was with her hair a mess and wearing the blood-spattered slightly oversized pale blue nursing auxiliary's smock that gave her figure a vaguely dowdy, matronly look. What little make up she had put on that morning must be a disaster area, and to cap it all she had broken a least two nails.

Her scalp was sticky with blood, a rivulet of which trickled down the back of her left ear.

I must look like a scarecrow!

She dragged herself over the wall, aware for the first time of her bone deep weariness and near exhaustion.

She straightened, took a fresh grip of the AK-47 Kalashnikov loaded with a red-dotted magazine filled with doctored man-killing, flesh and bone wrecking bullets. A brief shake of the head to clear her scattered thoughts and she was moving forward again, like a tigress stalking her prey.

Chapter 61

13:04 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 9 miles west of Sliema Point

Joe Calleja had been dragged onto the deck behind the splinter-riddled funnel by Petty Officer Jack Griffin. The other men hastily recruited to the replace the members of the original Torpedo Crew cut down by before the ship had got out of the Grand Harbour, were similarly hunkered down behind or under the loaded quadruple mount, and around them on the deck. Standing up was to invite being sawn in half by flying shrapnel. Around them HMS Talavera was being shot to pieces. Somehow, the Battle class destroyer kept moving forward but there were fires burning aft and the ship was down at the bow. Each time a new salvo arrived the deck recoiled with fresh impacts, water deluged onboard and Talavera shuddered. And yet 'B' Turret was still firing, the starboard twin 40-millimetre cannon thumped, and on the cruelly exposed aft deck house volunteers queued to step up to man the surviving 20-millimetre Oerlikon cannons as men before them were cut down and their bodies piled on the bloody deck house roof.

The Yavuz had stopped shooting at Talavera with her big guns.

Joe did not know why. Perhaps, Talavera was so close the Turkish battlecruiser could no longer depress the barrels enough?

Talavera was making clouds of acrid black smoke to help mask her dark bow on silhouette against the background of the island as the ship drove deep into the giant thunderstorm which was advancing on Malta from the south east. Jagged spears of lightning lit the unnaturally gloomy afternoon.

This must be what it is like in Hell!

The destroyer's hull rang like a bell as white-hot metal smashed into her port side forward of the bridge, and miraculously, exited her starboard side without exploding. The last time Joe had dared to look up he had seen the long low outline of a foreign-looking grey warship less than a mile away. The other big ship appeared to fire rockets at Talavera; he might have imagined that because nothing made much sense anymore. He had never

imagined anything so beautiful and as deadly as the tracers arcing between the ships and crashing into the destroyer's side or watching the dark harbingers from the starboard Talavera's 40-millimetre guns walking along the decks of the nearest enemy ship.

Petty Officer Jack Griffin was grinning.

He was actually *grinning*!

"Two minutes!" The red-bearded man shouted.

Joe Calleja was determined not to raise his body a single inch above the deck. He was not particularly happy or comfortable with his nose pressed hard against the planking, but it was infinitely preferable to standing up in the constant rain of splinters and shrapnel.

Jack Griffin understood this and on a man to man, personal level he entirely sympathised, not to say empathised, with the dockyard electrician's preference in the small matter of wanting to stay alive a little longer. Notwithstanding, he hauled the other man to his feet, brushed him down and looking him straight in the eye said: "Don't you dare try to tell me that this isn't the most fun you've ever had in your entire fucking life, Mister Calleja!"

Chapter 62

13:05 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
USS Iowa, 10 miles South of Marsaxlokk Bay

“The Berkeley and the John King are engaging a Krupny class DD at extreme gunnery range!”

Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt stepped across to the plot to watch the display update. *Extreme gunnery range* for the Mark 42 5-inch 54 calibre automatic guns on the two Charles F. Adams class US Navy destroyers was between twelve and thirteen miles. Shooting at a potentially fast moving, aggressively manoeuvring relatively small target at that kind of range was a singularly unrewarding pastime. Each shell would be in the air over a minute. Never mind, if nothing else the sudden barrage of plunging long-range fire - up to eighty rounds a minute from each ship - was likely to concentrate the enemy’s mind *wonderfully*.

Captain Schmidt stomped to the front of the bridge, gazed down grimly upon the Iowa’s forward main battery turrets as they swung ponderously to point their great Mark 7 16-inch 50 calibre naval rifles towards the co-ordinates supplied by the Berkeley and the John King.

Each barrel was loaded with Mark 8 ‘super-heavy’ 2700-pound APC - armour piercing capped – shells which, when fired with a maximum charge of 660 pounds of cylindrical-grained propellant was capable of hitting a target over twenty nautical miles distant.

Leaving the muzzle at a velocity of 2690 feet per second, the shell would be in flight over one-and-a-half minutes and at the end of its trajectory retain sufficient inertia to penetrate deck armour twice as thick as that protecting the decks of any ship in the World, excepting the other three – mothballed - Iowas.

At a range of twenty miles a Mark 8 round would cleave through the three-inch Krupp deck armour of the Yavuz very much in the fashion of a red-hot knife going through butter. At half that range a Mark 8 would scythe through the ten-inches of cemented belt armour protecting the Yavuz’s

machinery spaces, magazines and turrets with only minimal retardation.

"I want constant real time updates on the co-ordinates of the Yavuz and the accompanying heavy!" Schmidt demanded, marching purposefully back to the plot. Not an overly religious man this was one of those days when he was convinced that God was on his side. And *his* God was of the righteous, angry kind. "Iowa will commence shooting when in range."

Chapter 63

13:06 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina

Clara did not try to fool herself that taking a look through the skylight was a good idea. However, jumping through it without knowing who or what was waiting for her in the office below was an even worse idea.

She was pleasantly surprised to discover that the skylight was ajar, presumably propped open before the battle to allow fresh air to circulate in the room. It had always been a mystery to her that a people who came from such a cold, wet place like the British Isles where in her experience the sun hardly ever shone, could be so fixated with 'fresh air'.

Not being too proud to look a 'gift horse in the mouth' – another peculiar British saying, she thought – she gently eased the skylight open and clambered into the relative gloom of the office. Her left ankle twisted as she dropped to the floor. Her gasp of pain was silent. To never betray one's pain was a thing she had learned in the camps as a child; and it had stood her in good stead ever since.

There was desultory occasional gunfire in the lower levels of the Headquarters complex. 'Complex' was a generous word to describe the warren of offices, walk-in cupboards, the old chapel, the bunkers and dungeons in the lowest reaches of the former Emergency Command Centre. The 'complex' had been set up during the Second World War and largely neglected in the ten years before its reactivation after the air raid last December, which had destroyed practically every other key command and control installation on the archipelago. In the farther distance she recognised the clatter of Sten Guns, the faster 'burping' of Kalashnikovs, the single shots mostly from hand guns, and the less frequent crack of rifles.

The door to the Chief of Staff's office was closed.

She did not waste time putting her ear to the door.

She pushed it open and stepped into the adjoining office where she discovered Admiral Christopher's new flag lieutenant – actually a middle-

aged lieutenant-commander – dead on the floor. Two head shots. Another man, a youthful Army second-lieutenant with the pale features of a man freshly arrived from England was sprawled behind another desk.

The Second World War 'Emergency Headquarters' had become the Central RAF Officers' Mess on Malta in the 1950s, now she walked through the old bar onto what had been the magnificent terrace where officers had wined and dined their guests, and invited countless pretty girls to impress them with the panoramic view of the island from tables perched seemingly at the top of the ramparts.

"Hello, Clara."

The woman froze.

The door to the Commander-in-Chief's room was ajar.

Clara turned but did not immediately raise the muzzle of the AK-47. Dying was one thing but dying for dying's sake another.

Arkady Pavlovich Rykov beckoned her to follow him inside, gesturing with the muzzle of the Browning semi-automatic pistol in his right hand. Clara wondered why he was holding the gun in his right hand before she noticed the blood dripping down his left arm from a wound somewhere above his elbow. From the way he held the arm and the hint of greyness in his face she guessed the bullet had shattered his elbow.

Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations was standing behind his desk with his left arm cradled by his right hand, cool, collected and more than somewhat disenchanted. Blood flowed freely from his left brow and from his left nostril, his hair was a little awry, his uniform jacket soiled and torn. More blood was travelling down his uniform from a shoulder wound close to where his left collar bone met his sternum. He looked tired, and somehow, enormously dignified. He swayed on his feet as he viewed Clara.

A Soviet officer in standard airborne camouflage fatigues but with KGB flashes on his collar was covering the Englishman with a 9-millimetre Makarov pistol.

There was a sustained burst of automatic gunfire on the floor below.

"A little mopping up, my dear," Rykov declared. "We're almost finished here. I should have asked you if you wanted to come with us when we left. But..."

“It slipped your mind Arkady Pavlovich?” The woman inquired acidly.

“Something like that...” Rykov’s voice trailed off. He had been holding his gun loosely, pointed at the ground.

But the muzzle of his former lover’s AK-47 had risen to point at the middle of his chest.

The man viewed her quizzically for a moment.

“Perhaps, you should give me the gun?” He suggested, with the impatience of a man who had finally realised that he could be surprised like any other man, by the actions of a woman he had been convinced he understood better than any man alive.

She made no move to surrender her weapon.

“There is no time for this, Clara,” the Russian said flatly, dangerously.

Involuntarily, she quirked a half-smile.

Out of the corner of her eye she later recollected that Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations had also been smiling. As if he knew exactly what was going to happen next and was wholly reconciled to it.

“My name,” she said quietly, “is not *Clara*.”

That was when she pulled the trigger.

Chapter 64

13:04 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 9 miles west of Sliema Point

“TORPEDO ATTACK PORT!"

Initially, that had confused Joe Calleja. Lieutenant-Commander Weiss had specifically told him to position the quadruple 21-inch torpedo launcher to fire at an angle of forty-five degrees to STARBOARD.

Petty Officer Jack Griffin, whom seconds earlier had practically manhandled him into the director seat on the right-hand side of the quadruple 21-inch torpedo tube mounting, sensed his indecision.

“The fuckers changed course!” He yelled. Thumping the civilian’s shoulder, he went on: “Swing the tubes to PORT!”

The mount moved at a stately, unhurried pace, the drive motor whirring, the whole installation groaning and trembling and then, abruptly, it stopped and there was a new smell of burning practically beneath Joe’s chair. The mount was pointing only a few degrees off the centreline of the ship, aimed directly at the aft port footing of the wrecked lattice foremast.

Both Joe Calleja and Jack Griffin cursed foully and eloquently in their own native tongues.

“The servo has burned out!” The Maltese dockyard electrician cried.

The muscular Petty Officer had jumped up to stand astride the mount. He started bawling orders and men magically appeared from under cover.

“Let out the fucking clutch or whatever you do to free up the movement on this fucking thing!” He bellowed at Joe Calleja.

The mount began to swing to the left.

Joe checked the board. Mostly green lights!

“Nobody stands behind the tubes when we launch!” He screamed.

The Mark VIII 21-inch torpedo weighed over a ton-and-a-half and needed a great deal of persuasion to eject itself from a firing tube. On a submarine the job was done using a blast of compressed air; on the mount that Joe Calleja was sitting on it required a small explosive charge to ‘impel’

each fish on its way.

There was a meticulously choreographed drill for launching a torpedo off the deck of a moving ship for the very good reason that the exercise was inherently fraught with difficulties, and *very* dangerous to everybody involved. However, to do the job *safely* and without the risk of a major disaster, like a fish catching fire in the tube or worse, exploding, the execution of the well-practiced, precision 'drill' pre-supposed the presence of a trained and competent crew of about a dozen men. On this spring afternoon the destroyer's 'torpedo crew' comprised a concussed dockyard electrician, a petty officer who had never had anything to do with torpedoes until that day, and a motley collection of – mostly walking wounded – Royal Marines and seamen who had happened to be fighting fires or sheltering in the vicinity of the tubes.

Marshalled by Jack Griffin the tubes swung ponderously.

"That should do it!" He shouted, grinning broadly.

The destroyer bucked as she was hit twice more.

Somebody was barking orders with a megaphone from the bridge above their heads.

Jack Griffin slapped Joe Calleja on the back.

"Wind up the fish!"

"They'll catch fire if they run too long in the tubes!"

The red-headed and bearded Petty Officer thought this was the funniest thing he had ever heard anybody say in his whole life; in other circumstances he might have rolled around on the deck laughing until his ribs cracked or he pissed himself.

"Start them up, Joe!" He shook his head. "The moment we turn we'll show the bastards our whole broadside and they'll probably blow us out of the water anyway!"

Joe Calleja was acting like an automaton by then.

It was all a dream.

He was not really sitting in the exposed director chair on an open deck while two huge ships with very big guns tried to kill him. It was easier to let his mind move outside his body and to watch what was going on from a distance. His hands fumbled the controls and the mount began to vibrate, shake and rattle as the torpedo motors ran up. Time telescoped, everything became fast and slow in the same instant and suddenly, the young Maltese

dockyard electrician and trades union activist was completely *unafraid*.

The destroyer heeled into the turn.

Jack Griffin's hand slapped down on his shoulder.

"FIRE ONE!"

The mount bucked as there was a muted WHOOF and Tube One spat out its long silver merchant of death.

Joe had been so preoccupied watching the lights on his director board that until then he had had no time to steal a glance beyond the side of the ship. Now he was momentarily transfixed by the sight of a great grey ship belching enormous clouds of pitch black coal smoke. Talavera was so close to the leviathan that he could almost have reached out and touched the Yavuz.

"FIRE TWO!"

At the moment the torpedo exited the tube the whole length of the Yavuz disappeared behind a wall of fire.

There was no time for Joe to shut his eyes before the storm of metal and high explosive passed *over* HMS Talavera. Or at least, it mostly passed over the shot-riddled destroyer. There were clangs and crashes all around him as smaller rounds came inboard, and a ripping, rending thunderous express train roar as the battlecruiser's main battery broadside cleaved the heavens asunder barely feet overhead.

Afterwards there was a peculiar silence before Joe's ears again registered sounds; the asthmatic rushing of the blowers, the sea coursing down the ship's sides, men calling out and the staccato the pumping of the 40-millimetre cannons thirty feet away. Further aft at least one of the twin 20-millimetre Oerlikon mounts was pouring fire directly onto the deck of the seemingly impregnable wall of steel in front of him. He saw the sparks of the small rounds travelling along the battlecruiser's main deck, and a stream of 40-millimetre shells bursting on the dreadnoughts stumpy, ugly bridge and conning tower.

"FIRE THREE!"

That was when a giant fist punched HMS Talavera amidships. The destroyer sagged, attempted to lurch forward. It was useless, the blowers died and she began to coast to a water-logged stop.

"FIRE FOUR!"

Chapter 65

13:07 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Battery Caves, Kalkara, Malta

Although nobody was inclined to move far from the entrance of the bomb shelter, everybody had edged cautiously out into the smoky afternoon sunshine. The small crowd watched in horror and awe as the great thunderstorm tracked to the north across the distant sea battle. The sound of guns and great explosions rolled onto the land, whispers of the war. Giant tridents of lightning stabbed jaggedly into the fog of battle. It was like a distant glimpse of Hades.

Marija Christopher and Rosa Calleja had stumbled to the top of the ridge where they stared at the two sleek grey American destroyers creaming north so close to the shore that it seemed that they must surely run aground any moment. The gun in each ship's fo'c'sle turret fired every two seconds, the smoke of each shot instantly whipped away by the rushing wind.

The bombardment of Valletta and the interior of the main island had stopped several minutes ago, while out at sea to the north-east fires flashed, sparkled and were swallowed in the haze and smoke. The young women were silent, holding each other's hands; appalled and fascinated, knowing they were watching the most terrible of things and yet sadly, hypnotically they were utterly enthralled.

Valletta was burning. The airfield at Luqa and all the surrounding villages burned. Senglea, Cospicua, Birgu were on fire. She could hardly imagine what carnage the rain of shells might have wrought in the dockyards of French Creek, Dockyard Creek and elsewhere in the Grand Harbour, the surface of which was now vilely fouled with leaking bunker oil. There was far too much smoke to tell if Marija's new married home still stood in Kalkara. Beyond Valletta there were big fires in Gzira and Sliema. The whole island was fast disappearing beneath a growing pall of smoke, dust and ash.

Unconsciously, Marija put her free hand over her abdomen.

Some things in life were meant to be.

“Sister?” Rosa asked anxiously.

Tears trickled down Marija’s cheeks.

“What is it?”

Marija forced a tight-lipped smile.

“Nothing. It is nothing. Whatever happens we must have faith in the future.”

Rosa stared at where her sister rested her free hand.

Marija met her gaze, and tight-lipped, shrugged.

Chapter 66

13:19 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 10 miles west of Sliema Point

Commander Peter Christopher staggered to the bridge rail. His ship was dead in the water, shrouded in smoke from her fires. In his dazed, half-deafened, shocked state he had trouble piecing together the events of the last few minutes. There had been no time to take in anything while it was going on but now, in this surreal lull the temporary absence of madness allowed numbed minds to come to terms with realities that were like ghastly nightmares.

Somebody was still shooting, he could hear the regular fall of shot a mile, perhaps less distant. Nobody was shooting at Talavera at the moment; that was the main thing. The ship beneath his feet was broken. He could feel it, and he shared the old destroyer's pain. Whatever happened one fought until one could not fight any more; that was the tradition, the legacy that Nelson had handed down to generations of Royal Naval officers and men.

But HMS Talavera's fight was over.

Talavera's first torpedo had porpoised and run away at an oblique angle missing both enemy ships. Neither the old battlecruiser nor the Sverdlov class cruiser tracking half-a-mile in her wake had attempted to take evasive action until after Talavera had launched the last of her fish. The destroyer's second torpedo had not found a target either.

The Yavuz had started to turn away from the destroyer when a giant geyser of water had erupted thirty or forty feet inboard of her swinging stern. Within seconds the smoke from her coal-fired boilers had filled the gap between the two ships. Then, about twenty seconds later there had been a very heavy underwater explosion.

'Captain!'

Peter Christopher had turned and looked in the direction that the wounded yeoman clinging to a twisted stanchion which had once supported the starboard signal lamp was pointing.

At first, he did not quite believe what he was seeing.

The Yavuz was steaming in a slow circle to starboard and visibly down by the stern. Beyond her the Sverdlov class cruiser was dead in the water, settling by the bow. The cruiser's entire fo'c'sle was bent down at an unnatural, impossible angle just forward of her first turret.

One Mark VIII with a contact detonator had hit the Yavuz in her most vulnerable area – her propeller shafts and rudder – and a Mark VIII with a magnetic warhead had gone off beneath the keel of the cruiser. The water under the Yavuz's stern stopped churning.

It was already too late.

It was exactly like watching a car crash in very, very slow motion, albeit on a grand scale.

'Oh, my God!' Peter Christopher had muttered.

The sound of the Yavuz's straight-stemmed ram bow burying itself forty feet deep into the armoured steel flank of the Sverdlov class cruiser – just behind her bridge - carried loudly across the mile of open water between the two doomed giants and the sinking British destroyer.

"ONE-ZERO-FIVE!" A man shouted from nearby. "I can see the number on her side. That makes the cruiser the Admiral Kutuzov, sir!"

The Captain of HMS Talavera would have liked to have savoured the moment. But war is Hell and all that. His half-scrambled wits registered the scream of plummeting shells only after the salvo had turned the seas around the destroyer into a maelstrom.

Both main battery turrets were out of action.

His ship was dead in the water.

Talavera had just been bracketed by a ranging salvo from another big ship.

"If it's not one thing it's another!" Miles Weiss, the destroyer's bloodied Executive officer complained dazedly, irritably, picking his way across the wreckage of the bridge to join his friend by the binnacle. Blood trickled from his left ear and his eyes were unfocused, as if he was a little drunk.

Peter Christopher quirked a wan smile at the other man.

"Very true, Number One," he agreed amiably.

Chapter 67

13:20 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
USS Iowa, 1 mile off St Thomas's Bay, Malta

"The range is clear, sir!"

Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt looked at the plot. He did not know if he ought to be humbled and awed by what the lone British destroyer had done; or incredibly pissed off that it had done most of his work for him. He had ordered the two Charles F. Adams class guided missile destroyers under his command to proceed north and to interpose themselves between the Soviet cruiser coming down from that direction and, if it was still afloat, the surviving British destroyer. In the meantime, he was going to give his main battery gun crews a little much needed target practice. He had adjusted the battleship's course by a few degrees to starboard to open her 'A' arcs so as to allow her entire broadside bear on the enemy.

"Your targets are the two Soviet heavies bearing approximately zero-three-zero! Broadsides! COMMENCE FIRING!"

The firing bell clanged.

There was a short delay.

Travelling through the water at nearly thirty knots the leviathan seemed to halt for a moment as her nine great naval rifles discharged. In that instant over thirteen tons of steel and high explosive belched forth on one-and-a-half minute twenty-mile-long arcing ballistic trajectories towards targets as yet invisible to the naked eye but painted for destruction by the USS Iowa's fire control radars high above her bridge.

Chapter 68

13:27 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 10 miles west of Sliema Point

The two American destroyers had surged between Talavera's sinking hulk and the doomed leviathans locked together in a death embrace some two thousand yards farther out to sea to the east. The long lean greyhounds had had magnificent bones in their teeth, creaming enormous bow waves under their clipper bows, their guns firing with regular, fast, THUMPS! Those men on Talavera's deck who were able had raised a ragged cheer.

And then the forest of immense shell splashes had risen around the Yavuz and the Admiral Kutuzov. Not so much geysers of water the size of a small office block, these geysers were veritable giant Redwood trees. The second salvo straddled the two helpless ships, three shells from the third found their targets. Red flames splashed across the Soviet cruiser, sending debris flying mast high, and falling into the water hundreds of yards away. Over a mile distant Peter Christopher could see smashed pieces of the cruiser's superstructure cart wheeling through space. Fires belched evil black smoke shot through with crimson. There were two hits from the fifth broadside, another from the seventh. The cruiser was on fire, settling fast. The Yavuz's superstructure seemed to have been blasted flat and one of her amidships turrets suddenly vented a plume of dazzling iridescent white fire.

The old dreadnought and the Soviet cruiser drifted apart, the Admiral Kutuzov instantly lurching to starboard. The fifteen-thousand-ton cruiser capsized a minute later, her upturned hull floating briefly before sinking by the bow. Her stern hung in the air for some seconds, suspended a hundred feet in the air before her amidships compartments filled with water and the cruiser slid into the oily, flotsam-fouled sea.

The Yavuz trembled under a rain of shells.

The old battlecruiser wallowed deeper and deeper in the water as a deluge of huge 2700-pound super-heavy Mark 8 armour piercing rounds fell upon her. Some carved right through the ship and exploded in the water

around and beneath her, while others wrought untold mortal carnage within her thickly armoured carapace.

Nobody on HMS Talavera actually saw the Yavuz turn turtle or linger capsized on the surface for another minute as one last dreadful broadside lanced down upon her from the darkling, lightning bolt illuminated squall like blows from Thor's mighty hammer. There was one final great explosion, her boilers filling with sea water or a magazine igniting, and then the dinosaur was gone, her death agonies mercifully concealed by a veil of smoke and steam.

With her engines silent Talavera's surviving electric generators struggled to power the pumps.

Presently, the destroyer's bow was awash.

Peter Christopher's last act as Captain of Her Majesty's Ship Talavera was to order: ABANDON SHIP!

[The End]

Author's Endnote

Thank you for reading this book; and secondly, please remember that this is a work of fiction. I made it up in my own head. None of the fictional characters in *'The Burning Time – Book 5 of the 'Timeline 10/27/62 Series'* - is based on real people I know of or have ever met. Nor do the specific events described in *'The Burning Time – Book 5 of the 'Timeline 10/27/62 Series'* - have, to my knowledge, any basis in real events I know to have taken place. Any resemblance to real life people or events is, therefore, unintended and entirely coincidental.

The *'Timeline 10/27/62 Series'* is an alternative history of the modern World and because of this real historical characters are referenced and in many cases their words and actions form significant parts of the narrative. I have no way of knowing if these real, historical figures would have spoken thus, or acted in the ways I depict them acting. Any word I place in the mouth of a real historical figure, and any action which I attribute to them *after* 27th October 1962 *never* actually happened. As I always say in my Author's Notes to my readers, *I made it all up in my own head.*

The books of the *Timeline 10/27/62 series* are written as episodes; they are instalments in a contiguous narrative arc. The individual 'episodes' each explore a number of plot branches and develop themes continuously from book to book. Inevitably, in any series some exposition and extemporization are unavoidable but I try – honestly, I do – to keep this to a minimum as it tends to slow down the flow of the stories I am telling.

In writing each successive addition to the *Timeline 10/27/62 'verse'* it is my implicit assumption that my readers will have read the previous books in the series, and that my readers do not want their reading experience to be overly impacted by excessive re-hashing of the events in those previous books.

Humbly, I suggest that if you are 'hooked' by the *Timeline 10/27/62 Series* that reading the books in sequence will – most likely - enhance your

enjoyment of the experience.

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As a rule, I let my books speak for themselves. I hope it does not sound fuddy-duddy or old-fashioned, but broadly speaking I tend towards the view that a book *should* speak for itself.

However, with your indulgence I would like briefly – well, as briefly as is possible without being overly terse – to share a few personal thoughts with you, the reader about the *Timeline 10/27/62 World*.

I was not yet seven-and-a-half years old in October 1962 when I realised my parents were paying an awful lot of attention to the radio, devouring every line of print in their daily newspaper and were not quite themselves, a little distracted in fact, now that I think about it. I heard the word 'Cuba' bandied about but did not know until much later that the most dangerous moment of my life had come and gone without my ever, as a child, knowing it.

I was not yet eight-and-a-half years old when one day in November 1963 the World around me came, momentarily, to a juddering halt. I had heard the name of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and I even knew that he was the President of something called the United States of America. I did not know then that he was a womanising, drug dependent and deeply conflicted man who had lied to the American people about his chronic, periodically disabling illness which in any rational age ought to have disqualified him from the Presidency; *but I did know that he was a charismatic, talismanic figure in whom even I, as a child more interested in soccer, model trains and riding my new bicycle, had invested a nameless hope for the future*. And then one day he was gone and I shared my parents' shock and horror. It was not as if a mortal man had been murdered; JFK had become a mythic figure long before then. It was as if the modern-day analogue of King Menelaus of Sparta - hero of the Trojan Wars and the husband of Helen, she of the legendary face that launched a thousand ships - had been gunned down that day in Dallas.

The Cuban Missiles crisis and the death of a President taught a young boy in

England in 1962 and 1963 that the World is a very dangerous place.

Many years later we learned how close we all came to the abyss in late October 1962. Often, we look back on how deeply Jack Kennedy's death scarred hearts and minds in the years after his assassination.

There is no certainty, no one profound insight into what 'might have happened' had the Cold War turned *Hot* in the fall of 1962, or if JFK had survived that day in Dallas. History is not a systematic, explicable march from one event to another that inevitably reaches some readily predictable outcome. History only works that way in hindsight; very little is *obvious* either to the major or the minor players *at the time* history is actually being made. Nor does one have to be a fully paid up chaos theoretician to know that apparently inconsequential events can have massive unforeseen and unforeseeable impacts in subsequent historical developments.

Consider the example of Adolf Hitler.

If *Corporal* Adolf Hitler had died in a gas attack on the Ypres salient in Belgium on 14th October 1918 – as he might well have died that day – it is possible that there would have been no Holocaust, no Nazi Party, and no death camps.

Notwithstanding, with or without Hitler it is also possible, more likely probable, that there would have been a second general European War two or three decades later, albeit not the one we actually had. Hitler's war aims in 1939 were strikingly similar to the Kaiser's in 1914, unsurprisingly because most of what we regard as being *his* war *aims* were in fact drafted by members of exactly the same military caste which had been so keen on war in 1914, and had been so embittered by Germany's crushing defeat in 1918. While I readily concede that no senior officer of the German General Staff went so far as to write a book extolling the necessity for lebensraum – or 'living space in the East' – Hitler was by no means the only man in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s who publicly and unashamedly yearned to expand the Pax Germanica, the *German Peace,* into the Baltic States, Poland, White Russian and the Ukraine. Moreover, it was not Adolf Hitler who invented the

‘myth of the betrayal of Versailles’. The invention was the convenient fig leaf behind which the High Command of the vanquished German General Staff hid behind – all the better to gloss over its numerous egregious military and political war time blunders - to undermine and discredit the democratic legitimacy of the post-war Weimar Republic which to a man, its members detested.

Adolf Hitler was an undeniably horrible, bad, psychopathic despot who was very good at public speaking and without him German history between the World Wars would have been different in character but not necessarily in outcome. Basically, there is no way in which we can actually *know* that Corporal Hitler’s demise in the 14th October 1918 gas attack would have prevented World War II; or with or without the little corporal’s survival, that another even more catastrophic and tragic war was, sooner or later, inevitable.

I do not pretend to *know* what would have happened if the USA and the USSR had gone to war over Cuba in October 1962. One imagines this scenario has been the object of countless staff college war games in America and elsewhere in the intervening fifty-three years; I suspect – with a high level of confidence - that few of those war games would have played out the way the participants expected, and that no two *games* would have resolved themselves in exactly the same way as any other. That is the beauty and the fascination of historical counterfactuals, or as those of us who make no pretence at being emeritus professors of history say, *alternative history*.

Nobody can claim ‘this is the way it would have been’ after the Cuban Missiles Crisis ‘went wrong’. This author only *speculates* that the Timeline 10/27/62 Series reflects one of the many ways ‘things might have gone’ in the aftermath of Armageddon.

The only thing one can be reasonably confident about is that if the Cuban Missiles Crisis had turned into a shooting war the World in which we live today would, *probably*, not be the one with which we are familiar.

A work of fiction is a journey of imagination. I hope it does not sound corny

but I am genuinely a little humbled by the number of people who have already bought into what I am trying to do with *Timeline 10/27/62*.

Like any author, this author would prefer everybody to enjoy his books – if I disappoint, I am truly sorry – but either way, thank you for reading and helping to keep the printed word alive. I really do believe that civilization depends on people like *you*.

Other Books by James Philip

Other Series and Novels

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Book 2: Winter's Revenge
Book 3: Winter's Exile
Book 4: Winter's Return
Book 5: Winter's Spy
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Part 2: The Road to Berlin – October 1943
Part 3: The Big City – November 1943
Part 4: When Winter Comes – December 1943
Part 5: After Midnight – January 1944

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