TALES OF BRAVE ULYSSES

TIMELINE 10/27/62
BOOK SIX



JAMES PHILIP

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Tales of Brave Ulysses

TIMELINE 10/27/62 – BOOK SIX

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Tales of Brave Ulysses

[Timeline 10/27/62 – Book Six]

Chapter 1

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL – MOST SECRET

J.W. Malling
K.H.S. Meredith-Hall
B.T. Terrell
C.H.O. Alexander
GCHQ, Benhall/Oakley
Cheltenham

Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Corpus Christi College
Oxford
England

11th March 1964

Dear Mrs Thatcher,

It is our understanding that prior to the removal of the government to Oxford it was not possible to find an appropriate gap in your diary to permit you to visit GCHQ at either the Benhall or the Oakley sites in Cheltenham. We feel confident that had you visited GCHQ and spoken to fellow departmental heads that the headlong post-war decline of this organisation might not have been permitted to continue.

At the end of the 1939-45 war the Government Code and Cipher School based at Bletchley Park was the premier code breaking and military traffic analysis centre in the World. Subsequent to the end of the 1945 war ill-advised cutbacks by the Atlee Government led to the return of over ninety percent of all of Bletchley Park's wartime staff to

the civilian sector of the economy sworn to indefinite silence under the terms of the Official Secrets Act. At that time budgetary parsimony and governmental neglect effectively ensured that Britain's world lead in cryptography, nascent computing technology and modern electronics was allowed to wither on the vine. Some of our best people went to America, many others returned to academia and business. Several of our best people were subsequently persecuted by the Security Service, and in more than one case individuals were driven to early deaths by a combination of this persecution and by the sense of having been betrayed by their own government.

To cut a long story short in the early 1950s the GC and CS, renamed in 1946 as the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) with a remit similar to that of the American National Security Agency headquartered at Arlington, Virginia, moved from its temporary accommodation (1946 to 1952) at Eastcote in Middlesex into two sites outside Cheltenham where, by chance, it survived intact the war of October 1962.

The Cheltenham operation was always modest in comparison the NSA's setup in Virginia. For one thing the operation has never been adequately funded, or given, within Governments of all political shades sufficient priority for resources to enable it to attract and to retain the best people.

While GCHQ 'survived' the recent war it would be accurate to report that what actually survived was the electronic 'machine' component of the GCHQ operation. Robbed of so many of its finest minds and with the elimination of the headquarters of MI5, MI6, the expertise and administrative backbones of the Foreign and Defence Ministry intelligence staffs, and stripped of the implicit structural support of Whitehall and other long established governmental infrastructures, the post-war GCHQ operation is analogous to a huge 'brain' suddenly shorn not just of all its key 'inputs' – its sense of taste, smell and its ability to hear and see far and wide across Europe and beyond – but physically crippled and in some respects paralysed. Moreover, unable to communicate anything but a tiny fraction of its 'musings' for want of experienced and trained staff to analyse its 'outputs', the organisation was largely deaf, dumb and mute at the very

moment the civilian and military authorities needed, for example, intelligence on US ship movements and tactical intentions in the North Atlantic at the time of the passage of the Operation Manna convoys last November and December.

The authors of this letter have formed the opinion that the organs of the reconstituted Defence establishment and senior intelligence officers at the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office, and both MI5 and MI6 cannot have communicated to your Government the parlous state of GCHQ at this time.

Since October 1962 GCHQ has been unable to provide any meaningful traffic analysis for those areas of the Soviet Union suspected to have been only partially devastated in the recent war. This being the case it is impossible to form any manner of informed view as to the residual military capabilities of the undoubtedly, very hard hit former Soviet-Warsaw Pact block. This has made the meaningful interpretation of the limited information that has been available about the true Krasnaya Zarya/Eastern Mediterranean Theatre of Operations situation virtually impossible. Individual pieces of intelligence are meaningless without context, and context can only be established by good overall coverage and the consistent, systematic application of proven traffic analysis protocols to the relevant data sets.

It is our view that you should be made aware that post-war GCHQ has lost over seventy-five percent of its world-wide listening posts, and ninety percent of its supporting 'intellectual muscle'.

This has resulted in a situation in which the primary intelligence gathering tool at the disposal of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom is unable to meaningfully fulfil its vital function.

Moreover, what intelligence GCHQ is generating is worthless because there is virtually nobody qualified to rigorously assess its veracity or to analyse what it may mean.

Pray forgive our impertinence, Prime Minister. GCHQ has always operated in such an opaque bubble of secrecy that we, as senior directors, literally have no idea whether prior to your assumption of the premiership you were let into the secret of what really goes on at GCHQ, or what previously went on at Bletchley Park during the 1945 war.

For example, we have no way of knowing if you have ever heard of

the word 'ENIGMA' or 'ULTRA' in this connection. Between 1939 and 1945 ULTRA was the biggest secret of all. Back in those days we called the German U-Boat code 'SHARK'. Shortly after we broke that code we (and the Royal Navy, of course) won the Battle of the Atlantic in a matter of weeks. But for the work of GCHQ the 1939-45 war might have been lost; conceivably it might still be going on! Breaking the German (and later the Japanese) codes probably saved the lives of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of our people and shortened the war by many years.

While politicians and generals were awarded peerages and medals and 'cashed in' publishing memoires that only told half the story of how the victory was actually won, the names of those who made that victory possible have never been made public, or publicly acknowledged on grounds of 'national security'.

While we as the heirs to such remarkable men, geniuses in any other land or at any other time in history such as Alan Turing and Bill Welchman, take for granted that the work that went on at Bletchley Park won the war very few people outside our circle are 'in the know' and judging by the way your Government has treated GCHQ in the three months since you became Prime Minister, it is clear that memories of lessons learned painfully in previous conflicts have been grievously neglected or completely forgotten.

We for example, know that Montgommery was not 'reading Rommel's mind' before El Alamein in 1942, rather he was reading the Desert Fox's radio traffic to and from Berlin, and every little bit of chit chat he exchanged with his Panzer commanders, everything. Monty literally knew what Rommel was thinking before, during and after the battle which is why Churchill was so upset after the Battle of El Alamein that Monty, cautious to a fault, allowed the defeated rump of the Afrika Korps to escape in good order and thus prolonged the war in North Africa by several months.

At times during the war we were decrypting German and Japanese radio traffic faster than their front-line units! By the mid-years of the 1939-45 war Bletchley Park was the biggest code-breaking factory on the planet and like idiots when the war was finished we just shut it down. Ever since then we have been totally dependent upon, some would say at

the mercy of, the Americans and in the way of these things our friends across the Atlantic grew accustomed to telling us exactly and precisely only what they want us to know.

Had you visited us before the Government removed to Oxford we would have communicated all this and much more to you in person. If as presently seems likely we are fighting a war against enemies we barely see and understand less, this is because GCHQ is failing the nation, and the reason it is failing the nation is because the nation has shamelessly neglected it. In Cheltenham we have some of the most advanced computing equipment in the world but without funding, manpower and the intellectual power locked away in our universities (still comfortably insulated from the reality of the common man in their silvery academic towers) and the reconstruction of its former support structures you might as well, frankly, knock down both GCHQ buildings at Benhall and Oakley, and go back to making do with sticks and stones.

Our deepest fear is that some dreadful unforeseen disaster will befall the country and our brave armed forces, because GCHQ in its current state simply did not, and could not, see that disaster coming.

Thank you for reading this letter. We hope and pray that you will see fit to ensure that GCHQ's work is given the funding and support that, in the national interest, it deserves.

Respectfully we are:

J.W. Malling (Director of Signal Interception and Radio Communications Engineering)
K.H.S. Meredith-Hall (Director of Traffic Analysis)
B.T. Terrell (Director of Computing Technologies)
C.H.O. Alexander (Director of Cryptanalysis)

Chapter 2

13:30 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Lower Barraka Gardens, Valletta, Malta

Thirty-year-old Barry Lankester had survived the Coventry blitz in November 1940 as a small child. After this early trial by fire he had lived a life only a little less ordinary than his fellow pupils at Bablake School which he had left in 1951. Having joined the British Broadcasting Company – the BBC – in 1955 he had slowly begun to build a modest career in radio and television in the years before the October War. The highlights of his pre-war career had been introducing Benjamin Britten's War Requiem at the 1962 Coventry Festival; and from 1960, becoming 'the voice' that introduced the popular daily radio serial '*The Archers*' across the BBC network. But the war had swept away all that and in the immediate aftermath his 'broadcasting career', such as it had been had counted for nothing in the chaos.

For several months he had worked for – or more correctly, been dragooned by – the West Midlands Regional Emergency Commissioner's (REO) Office and become a part of the Wolverhampton-based regional 'Information Group'. Basically, he had become one of several supposedly 'trusted and reassuring' mouthpieces for the REO; disseminating essential public administration, rationing and health information and directives, and whatever sanitised version of the local news that the authorities deemed it fit for the surviving populous to hear.

However, everything had changed on the night of 30th January that year in Cheltenham when he had found himself playing the role of nervous, timid – and to be honest, frightened – moderator in the now legendary 'Clash of Titans'. That was the night when the new Prime Minister, every bit the dazzling blond bombshell he had been warned to expect; and the wizened, tortured eminence grise of Midlands and national politics, former intelligence officer, poet and scholar John Enoch Powell, the Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South West, had gone 'head to head' in a no holds barred debate before a countrywide radio audience of millions in the febrile

gladiatorial atmosphere of the packed old Edwardian Town Hall.

That night had accidentally launched his post-war career on a new, wholly unexpected and exhilarating new ballistic trajectory. The 'great debate' had ended in the high drama of a failed assassination attempt on the life of the Prime Minister, the wounding of Enoch Powell and one of Margaret Thatcher's Royal Marine bodyguards – neither seriously, thankfully – and overnight the name of Barry Lankester became forever associated with that singular 'event' and therefore *known* to every household in the land. Moreover, for reasons beyond his ken, the 'big wigs' at the BBC had concluded that he had deported himself so well that they concluded the Corporation had stumbled upon a new Alan Whicker or a likely new Richard Dimbleby; and promoted him accordingly. It was all a little bizarre and he was still getting used to it but who was he to look a gift horse in the mouth?

In the last few weeks the former introducer of '*The Archers*' had been 'borrowed' by The Ministry of Information and personally despatched by the Secretary of State – Iain Norman Macleod, one of the Prime Minister's closest lieutenants - to Lisbon, Gibraltar and latterly, Malta, to make a series of special 'foreign movie features to boost morale on the Home Front'. Along the way he had, among other things, been catapulted from the deck of a Royal Navy aircraft carrier – HMS Eagle – in the second seat of de Havilland Sea Vixen jet fighter, been ferried hither and thither on numerous Royal Fleet Air Arm and RAF helicopters, been royally entertained in the Mess of a V-Bomber Squadron and in the Wardrooms of half-a-dozen frigates and destroyers and frankly, he had had the time of his life.

Nevertheless, nothing had prepared Barry Lankester or his four man crew – a cameraman who had been with Eighth Army in North Africa at the time of the Battle of El Alamein, a boyish assistant cameraman with an unruly beatnik haircut, a soundman who had worked for EMI before the October War, and an amiable old BBC stager who performed the combined roles of director, producer and general fixer – for what they had lived through, and somehow survived, in the last two hours.

The crew had been setting up for a routine background, or 'filler' piece – just to lend an extra layer of local colour and context to the melange of material they had recorded in the last week – when, out of a half-blue, half-overcast warm Mediterranean spring sky, salvos of huge shells had begun to fall on the island. It had been as if the heavens had suddenly been torn

asunder, ripped apart. The air itself had screamed in agony and then belatedly the sound of the first great explosions had tolled like thunder across the previously idyllic sandstone buff and yellow bastions, ramparts and close-packed houses in the cities surrounding the Grand Harbour.

Coincidentally, the crew had found itself in a prime position to witness what followed. The Lower Barraka Gardens commanded an unobstructed view of the Grand Harbour and of all traffic entering and leaving port via the gap in the King George V Breakwaters which protected the anchorage from easterly storms. The 'gardens' contained a colonnaded neo-classical temple – a 'folly' erected in fairly recent times – and monuments to the person of Alexander Ball, the first British governor of Malta and commemorating the Great Siege of 1565.

Barry Lankester had been delivering a loosely scripted talk to camera as he strolled – very slowly – through the gardens, which were a little overgrown and somewhat unkempt, about the person of Sir Alexander John Ball, when the World went mad.

Notwithstanding, Nelson had described him as a 'great coxcomb' on first acquaintance in 1782, Ball was by all accounts a remarkable man. Ball had subsequently confounded his old friend's opinion of him when in command of HMS Alexander at the Battle of the Nile in 1797, and later achieved the rank of Admiral. Appointed Civil Commissioner of Malta he was sent to the archipelago in 1801 as the *Plenipotentiary Minister of His British Majesty for the Order of Saint John* to arrange the evacuation British forces in accordance with the provisions of the Treaty of Amiens, that most ill-found of armistices which book-ended the two great paroxysms of the Napoleonic Wars. When those wars had re-ignited, partly because of the British refusal to hand over the Maltese Archipelago to the 'Little Corporal', Ball became the man responsible for first bringing the Maltese islands into the Empire.

'Napoleon had once said that he would rather see a suburb of Paris under the governance of the British if that was what it took to remove the Royal Navy from the Grand Harbour,' Barry Lankester had been explaining in what he hoped was his trademark urbane, engaging way. 'Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1814 as ratified by the Congress of Vienna, Malta and all its dependencies passed to the British. Ball was greatly loved by the Maltese people; he had after all saved the islands from the brutal despotism of Napoleon. Ball's secretary and assistant from around 1804 was a certain

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a man whose poetry would later leave an even more indelible mark in history. Coleridge said of Ball that he was *a truly great man...*'

That was when the first shells had screamed over the Grand Harbour and rained down on the most strategically vital airbase anywhere in the British Commonwealth.

Barry Lankester had swung around to watch the pillars of smoke and fire erupting from the direction of RAF Luqa. He had stared for some seconds in disbelieving shock, until registering the banshee ululating wailing of the air raid warning sirens sweeping across the island he had got a grip.

Thereafter he had kept talking; the soundman had kept on recording and the camera had kept rolling until they had exhausted their Kodak 16-millimetre film stock.

Now the five dusty, ragged looking BBC men surveyed the carnage in Valletta and in the cities across the Grand Harbour; the vile stench of burning was in their faces, and oily smoke fell into the anchorage like an evil miasma. Distantly, small arms fire rattled; here there, everywhere it seemed because their ears still rang with the concussion of the savage bombardment which had eventually silenced the 3.7-inch calibre guns – no more than peashooters in comparison with the naval rifles of the big ships off shore - of St Elmo's Fort less than a quarter of a mile away.

Barry Lankester blinked, his sore eyes full of pulverised grit.

"Please tell me we got *that* destroyer on film," he demanded rather than asked.

None of them had quite believed what they were seeing.

The long, grey deadly silhouette of HMS Talavera – festooned with gun barrels, her decks a hive of activity and with a multiplicity of flags running up and being run up her masts – had raced for the open sea throwing up a seething white bow wake the like of which the Grand Harbour had never before, nor would in all likelihood, ever see again. The ship had seemed so close to them that they could almost have reached down and touched her mastheads at that moment when two thirds of her length had disappeared – completely disappeared – inside a monstrous forest of shell splashes.

They had all held their breath for a moment, and another.

And then the destroyer had rushed out of the maelstrom.

Even from the best part of two hundred yards away Barry Lankester had

seen the splinter damage on the Talavera's bridge, the bodies strewn on her decks, glimpsed the fresh red blood spilling down her flank and splashed across her single elegant funnel.

The image of the blood and the great battle ensign streaming from the ship's main mast halyards would be etched on his waking thoughts forever...

"I got everything, Barry," the crew's balding, greying cameraman said, his taciturn delivery edged around with atypical breathlessness. "I got the ship, the bombardment, even the parachutists. We've got five reels of gold dust; absolute pure bloody gold dust, mate!"

The man patted his camera.

"The battle out to sea was probably too far away to show much of anything in particular except gun flashes and the lightning," he went on. "But I got good long steady shots of those Yank destroyers and that bloody battleship blasting away as they headed north; pure bloody gold dust!"

Barry Lankester turned away and looked out to sea where in the middle distance a great spring squall was tracking across the leagues of ocean where the modern Battle of Malta had just been fought. It had been a battle fought with unremitting, mercilessly savagery like some terrible trial by combat of yore; with no quarter asked or given while all the while the thunder clouds gathered and giant tridents of lightning spiked down into the midst of the fight. He felt like he had just witnessed some kind of *Götterdämmerung*; a scene straight out of a Wagnerian opera, a dreadful twilight of the gods.

It was as if the World had been turned upside down yet again.

Chapter 3

13:33 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 10 miles west of Tigne Point, Malta

HMS Talavera was sinking. The horribly mauled carcass of the old destroyer wallowed deep in the troughs of the short Mediterranean swells. She was no longer rolling with the seas, more a water-logged breakwater than the sleek deadly war machine she had been when she and her consort, the desperately under-gunned modern frigate HMS Yarmouth, had joined battle with the Turkish battlecruiser *Yavuz* and the former Soviet cruiser *Admiral Kutuzov*. Great gouts of venting steam escaped from her riddled funnel, fires burned on her deck and within her mangled superstructure both fore and aft. In a moment a change in the wind blew the steam and smoke out to sea cruelly laying her mortal wounds bare for any eye that could still see.

Lieutenant Alan Hannay clung to the shoulder frame of the twin 20-millimetre Oerlikon cannon mount into which he had been strapped for the final dreadful, exhilarating minutes of the fight. His right hand was still closed over the big trigger mechanism of the twin mount although both magazine boxes were empty and the guns had been silent several minutes. The dead still lay around him; at his feet and sprawled obscenely mutilated on the stern house gun platform.

The sun had come out just after the battle and now the blood which randomly splashed him from head to toes was drying, coagulating fast in the warmth of the early afternoon. He guessed that some of the blood was probably his but there was as yet, little pain. He was still mostly deaf; his ears rang and nothing he saw was *real*. Somewhere in the back of his mind he understood that he had just survived the most intense, insane few minutes of his life. However, if anybody had stopped to ask him what had actually happened in the last hour he would have been hard pressed to explain.

His thoughts jarred, one falling over another in no particular order or rational sequence as he desperately attempted to collect his scattered and shocked wits.

In what seemed like less than a blink of the eye ago HMS Talavera had been tied up alongside the ammunitioning wharf below Corradino heights; that much at least made some kind of sense. Reloads for the main battery had been passing down the chutes into the forward shell rooms; that had been the Gunnery Officer's concern while Alan Hannay had supervised and chivvied along the general provisioning of the ship.

As he had organised the human chains transferring frozen and chilled meat, porridge oats, coffee, tea, soap, tins of spam and dried fruits, bags of bread flour, pulses and bottles of cooking oil, engine room spares and books and magazines for the ship's tiny onboard library, he had been assiduously preoccupied with ensuring that the galley pantries and larders, refrigerators and freezers, spares and pre-designated lockers were stacked and stocked in an orderly fashion so that once at sea it would be unnecessary to constantly turn them out to find a given item. When he had taken over as HMS Talavera's Supply Officer and Purser he had been shocked by the disorganised, slovenly way his predecessor – the poor fellow had been badly wounded in the Battle of Lampedusa so he tried not to think of speak ill of an injured fellow officer other than in moments of particular angst – had managed his bailiwick. All the fellow had had to do was make sure the ship had the supplies and spares it needed to go to sea; but somehow, he had made a complete hash of it!

Alan Hannay was proud of the way he had swiftly put his department in order and quickly freed up sufficient of his time to be able to offer his services and that of his senior divisional writer as stand-in Captain's Secretaries...

The ship lurched drunkenly under his feet and there was an ominous creaking, tearing sound from somewhere deep in the bowels of the sinking destroyer.

It was a funny old World...

The strangest thing was that what with one thing and another the last few days and weeks had been by far and away the happiest days of his life...

Rosa...

He had fallen head over heels for his commanding officer's beautiful dark-eyed sister-in-law shortly before coming onboard HMS Talavera. This despite the fact that the first time he had encountered Rosa Calleja – who was still officially a married woman because her missing husband had not been

legally declared dead - she had been an invalid with her right leg in a bulky plaster cast and half her head swathed in thick bandages. None of that had mattered one jot. He had taken one look at her and for a split second she had looked back at him... And, well, something had just *clicked*. It was nothing he could put his finger on yet the moment had been uniquely *electric*.

He had never even known that Rosa existed until she had been blown up and badly injured in the same explosion which had killed his first real friend on Malta, Lieutenant Jim Siddall...

Jim had been a fine fellow...

Rosa, there were so many things I ought to have said but...

Alan Hannay felt a firm hand on his arm.

"Mister Hannay."

His fingers were being gently prised off the twin Oerlikons' trigger.

"It is time to go now, sir."

He stared at Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann's bloodied face. The Talavera's senior non-commissioned officer – the ship's Master at Arms – had taken hold of the younger man's left elbow.

"There's no more to be done here, sir," the older man said, his voice reaching Alan Hannay's traumatised consciousness as if it was coming from the other end of a long tunnel.

Spider McCann was a small, sinewy, muscular man of indeterminate middle years who had once been the Bantamweight boxing champion of the Mediterranean Fleet. His face was deeply burnished by the sun and wrinkled with irrefutable salty sagacity. The man was the rock around which the Talavera's mixed complement of battle hardened old sweats and green new draftees had coalesced in recent weeks and months. Within minutes of Alan Hannay reporting onboard either the Captain or the Executive Office, he could not remember which - and this bothered him somewhat - had succinctly explained the unique status of the destroyer's Master at Arms thus: 'There are only three people who have the right to give Mister McCann a direct order; God, Mrs McCann and the Captain.' Apparently, the Executive Office got away with it on good days, but the rest of the wardroom 'asked' politely and respectfully, rather than 'ordered' the diminutive former pugilist when they required his assistance.

In the recent battle Alan Hannay had staggered onto the stern to discover the Master at Arms standing atop the deckhouse bellowing at damage control

teams as he stomped through the wreckage. The stern house cannons had been silent, their crews lying in shredded heaps on the bloody steel deck plates.

The destroyer's Supply Officer was, even at that relatively early stage of the battle, already feeling a little worse for wear and sorry for himself; by then having already been blown off the stern deckhouse at least once.

'Get yourself back up here, Mister Hannay!' The Master at Arms had bawled. 'Sharply, sir, if you please!' It had never occurred to the younger man to hesitate, let alone query the unequivocal *command*. Confronted by the carnage on the stern deckhouse gun deck he had been momentarily paralysed. 'Worry about those boys later, Mister Hannay,' Spider McCann had counselled, grabbing his arm at the very instant HMS Talavera seemed to plough into an impenetrable wall of huge shell splashes. All around him the ship had clanged and shuddered as a storm of shrapnel had filled the air. The two men had been drenched and forced to cling onto the nearest Oerlikon twenty-millimetre mount to stop being bowled over the side of the ship. One smashed body and several parts of another had disappeared by the time the destroyer surged defiantly through the near misses and out into clear air again. 'Look at me, sir!'

Alan Hannay had looked into the older man's cloudy grey-blue eyes and seen pure cold patent steel.

'Are you with me, sir?'

'Er, yes...'

'Good! I'll take over the damage control crews," Spider McCann had growled, 'you get these guns back into action!'

HMS Talavera's Supply Officer had only a very limited theoretical knowledge and no practical experience whatsoever of organising, directing and co-ordinating 'damage control'; but when it came to shooting guns that was a different kettle of fish. Everybody in the Royal Navy understood the basics. The bullets went in at one end and came out the other, point the end farthest from the breech in the general direction of the target and pull the trigger; when the gun stops firing load more bullets. Simple! Even a Supply Officer could manage that!

'Whatever you say, Mister McCann!'

That could only have been minutes ago; but it seemed like hours because in between then and now the madness had been so outrageous that his mind

was incapable of reconciling the mill race of events with his, or anybody else's actions. He had been in a daze, some kind of trance, almost as if he had been outside of his body watching the nightmare unfold...

The Master at Arms had donned a yellow life preserver over his filthy, blood-stained and ragged uniform. He was holding out a second life jacket in his free hand.

"You need to put this on, sir," he directed with gentle, calmly compelling implacability.

Alan Hannay felt his arms sliding into the unwieldy jacket.

That was when he finally took a pause for breath; and gazed, perhaps for the first time down the length of the doomed destroyer and his conscious mind actually registered what he was seeing. From his viewpoint on the shattered stern deckhouse roof he could see approximately two thirds of the ship's length from the stern to the wrecked bridge. The stump of the great smashed lattice foremast blocked any sight of the foredeck.

His first thought was: *how on earth is Talavera still afloat?*

The sleek lines of before were gone, above him the tattered and torn battle flag still flew, somehow, from the halyards of the pole mainmast but everything around it and forward of it was mangled, charred, on fire and there were bodies *everywhere*. Men were clambering up onto the chaos of the main deck from below and the wounded were being carried to the port rail. Around the ship an evil brown-black slick of heavy bunker oil was spreading across the choppy waters, calming the short, close-packed waves before they could strike the flanks of the stricken ship.

Suddenly, Alan Hannay felt very tired.

Was that me screaming and cursing as I swung the barrels of the cannon round to bear on the nearest of the two big ships? That ship which looked like something out of somebody's First World War scrapbook? How could we possibly have been that close to a monster like that? I just pulled the triggers and watched the shells walking down the main deck of the dinosaur...

Strong hands grabbed him otherwise he would have fallen.

He thought he was going to be sick.

The moment passed and he felt a little better, suddenly his ears seemed to be working again and he shrugged off the supporting hands.

The ship was steadier but down several degrees by the bow.

In his peripheral vision he was aware of a looming long grey shape.

He blinked at the apparition in mute *supplication*.

The big American destroyer was very nearly alongside.

So near he wanted to reach out and touch her.

The other ship had to be one of the two modern Charles F. Adams guided missile destroyers which had creamed past the Talavera to interpose themselves between her and the surviving Russian cruiser coming down from the north east. Both American ships had surged past with huge bones in their teeth, their quick firing automatic five-inch guns pumping defiance.

Now the other ship completely filled Alan Hannay's field of vision, rising and falling on the swell as she manoeuvred to shelter the Talavera in her lee. Boarding nets were rolling down the American destroyer's flank; men were crowding her starboard rail as if steeling themselves to jump down onto the Talavera's deck.

Unyielding steel ground against steel as the ships came together.

The first men threw themselves from the side of the American destroyer and landed amidst the carnage on the stricken destroyer's main deck. Multiple lines were hurled. Alan Hannay watched mesmerised, hardly believing what he was seeing. Talavera could sink or capsize any moment. She might blow up and take both ships to the bottom. More men from the American destroyer tumbled onto the Talavera; he could hardly credit the courage of the men jockeying to be the next man to leap onboard the stricken Battle class destroyer, already groups were gathering around the wounded men lying on the deck behind the bridge.

A flapping, cracking sound over his head made Alan Hannay glance upwards to where HMS Talavera's battle flag still streamed proudly, raggedly in the gusting wind.

"Mr McCann," he said hoarsely. "If you'd be so good as to haul down the remaining flags." As an afterthought, most likely grinning like an idiot he added: "The way things are in the World these days I wouldn't be the least surprised if we don't need those *dusters* again one day!"

Chapter 4

13:34 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Royal Naval Hospital, Bighi, Malta

Marija Christopher and Rosa Calleja were carefully, almost tenderly, handed down from the back of the army Bedford lorry they had flagged down at Kalkara. Marija had taken charge the moment it became evident the truck was transporting badly injured men to the nearby hospital at Bighi. The grim-faced, trigger-happy soldiers riding shotgun had gladly relinquished their charges to the two young Maltese women. There were five men lying on the bloody floor of the Bedford. One was already dead. There were two Royal Engineers with single gunshot wounds to the torso, and an unconscious Redcap – a Royal Military Policeman – with a facial wound that looked a lot worse than it was and messy shrapnel injuries to both legs. The other wounded man was wearing strange and unfamiliar grey camouflage fatigues.

'He's a fucking Russian!' The women were informed.

Marija was a nurse; she did not care whose side the wounded man had been on before he had been injured and captured.

The enemy soldier's left arm was shattered above the elbow and he was in terrible pain.

No, there had been no morphine left!

Marija had applied pressure to the wound of one of the badly injured Royal Engineers and brusquely ordered the nearest guard to turn the other onto his left-hand side before he drowned in his own blood. Meanwhile, Rosa had taken the Russian's undamaged arm, begun to talk lowly, reassuringly to him as the lorry bumped and ground along the pot-holed road above the burning village of Kalkara.

Prior to deciding to get to Bighi as soon as possible the two young women had not spent overlong surveying the devastation of their island home before leaving their shelter on the heights and flagging down the Bedford truck.

They had watched the two modern American destroyers racing north like

sharks hunting prey, their guns spitting fire. Both ships had passed so close inshore that they had, briefly, feared they might run aground as they ran up the coast at breakneck speed, carving huge bow waves as they cut every corner to close the range with the enemy as fast as possible. The gun in each ship's fo'c'sle turret had fired every two or three seconds, the puff of grey smoke of each shot instantly whipped away by the rushing wind.

Marija had spared herself the indulgence of a single second glance over her shoulder.

Valletta was burning. The airfield at Luqa and all the surrounding villages burned. Senglea, Cospicua and Birgu where she had been born were on fire; she hardly trusted herself to imagine what carnage the rain of shells had 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. She had wondered briefly if her new married home in Kalkara had survived. Beyond Valletta there were big fires in Gzira and Sliema, and distant Mdina was enveloped in the burning haze. The entire island was disappearing beneath a spreading pall of smoke, dust and ash.

Notwithstanding that Marija understood that in the last hour her whole life had just been torn asunder she had important work to do. Far out to sea her husband – the man she had loved since she was thirteen – had probably gone to his death in the last few minutes. It had been impossible to make out the details of the faraway battle in the middle of the darkling, lightning-forked Mediterranean squall. Guns had flashed; there had been huge explosions, and the rumbling thunder of distant big guns. Future historians would know the exact moment the final sea battle had begun because the big guns had stopped shelling Malta when HMS Talavera had commenced her attack; one small ship against a whole fleet...

Oh Peter!

The Russian soldier groaned as he was dumped on the ground.

Marija realised she had been wool-gathering.

That was unforgivable.

"Be careful please!" She snapped in the tone of voice she had learned from her friend and mentor, Margo Seiffert. Marija knew she had a long way to go before she could match her friend's uncanny talent for turning strong men's knees to jelly; so, she was pleasantly surprised that when the soldiers next picked up the delirious Russian it was with no little *care* for his injuries.

The air was laced by fine ash and pulverised brick dust and tainted with drifting smoke. One part of Marija's mind registered that a fire was burning somewhere in the hospital complex and that there were spent cartridge shells in the rubble under her feet. Occasionally, there were single gunshots, now and then bursts of automatic gunfire and the crack of grenades. Fortunately, the shooting sounded as if it was several hundred yards away. And mercifully, the naval bombardment had not yet resumed.

She became aware of Rosa's presence at her shoulder.

"What shall I do, sister?" The other woman asked simply.

Marija thought about it.

The two women had been strangers – they had not even liked each other – before Marija's elder brother, Samuel, had gone missing a day or so before HMS Torquay was destroyed by sabotage in the Grand Harbour. Soon afterwards Rosa had been injured in the booby trap explosion which had killed Marija's friend and self-appointed guardian, Lieutenant Jim Siddall, when they had gone together to examine her brother's workshop. The women had been brought together by their grief and been virtually inseparable – Marija's short weekend-long honeymoon apart – ever since. Marija was the slimmer of the pair, descended from a half-British and wholly Sicilian mother; Rosa was the daughter of an old Maltese landowning clan that rather looked down on 'dockyard' families like the Callejas, a family which had no claim to having been 'of the archipelago' for centuries past. Rosa was a little shorter, bustier and her unhappy marriage to Marija's brother had made her a little dowdy, filling her with a self-doubt that had only really begun to fade with the hesitant, rather shy introduction of Lieutenant Alan Hannay into her life. Both women had fled from the house they shared in Kalkara when the alarms had sounded and the first shells had screamed overhead on their way to RAF Luqa.

They looked at each other. They were grimy, sweaty, hair awry like urchins in some World War II Pathe report on the bombing of Malta straight out of 1941 or 1942. Instinctively, the two young Maltese women exchanged forced smiles.

"I am not a nurse," Rosa reminded her friend.

"I don't think that matters, sister," Marija decided.

An emergency casualty clearing station had been established on the ground floor of the damaged West Wing of the hospital. The 'damage' was,

blasted windows apart, thankfully cosmetic and nobody was overly worried about the splintered glass underfoot. The injured were already backed up into corridors and lying beneath makeshift awnings in the courtyard outside.

A stone-faced Royal Navy Surgeon Lieutenant was hurriedly inspecting each new arrival and mandating priorities.

Marija introduced herself.

"I am Maria Calleja-Christopher. I am an auxiliary nurse," she glanced to Rosa. "My sister and I are at your disposal, sir."

"Calleja-Christopher?" The naval doctor was probably only in his late twenties, little older than Marija and obviously – from his pale complexion – very new to Malta. "Marija Calleja-Christopher?" He asked again, a sudden smile in his eyes threatening to burst across his suddenly not very severe face. He wiped his hands on his apron. "I'm Michael Stephens."

Marija shook the hand he offered.

"I'm Reginald Stephen's nephew," the man went on, his lips quirking into the previously threatened smile.

Marija blinked, struck at once by the absurdity and the poignancy of the moment. She was looking into the face of the man whose uncle – and Margo Seiffert - had painstakingly put her back together again after she had been crippled in a bombing raid over twenty years ago.

"My goodness," the man shook his head. "It really is a small World, isn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed numbly.

"Right," the man declared, coming back down to earth. "I need you two ladies to intercept new arrivals. The dead need to be carried directly to the morgue. The most seriously wounded need to be brought to me immediately, everybody else will have to join the queue. Make sure pressure pads and tourniquets are applied where necessary. Any questions?"

"No," Marija said and turned away.

With Rosa she made her way to the main entrance to the hospital and instructed the guards where to send vehicles bearing the wounded. The truck she and her sister had turned up in had initially been misdirected over rough ground and she made it crystal clear that this was not to be allowed to happen again. Of course, because it was her, she commanded it with a winning smile and the men defending the gate took it in good – albeit harassed - heart.

Then she and Rosa returned to the clearing station to begin their work.

Chapter 5

13:35 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Emergency Communication Room, RAF Luqa, Malta

Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French paced the small, dusty room packed with communications equipment which no longer worked – or if it did still work it either could not talk to anybody else, or there was nobody else left alive to talk to – and technicians, staff officers and countless dazed Maltese civilians simply seeking shelter, like a caged tiger. Radio links with the United States Navy ships in the vicinity of the Maltese Archipelago and sporadic reports from units dispersed across the main island apart, he was both deaf and blind to the actual 'tactical situation'.

"Sir!" A man called from across the room. "I have the Captain of the USS Iowa on the net. He's asking to speak to the 'Surviving Senior Officer on Malta'."

The last message received from Headquarters in the citadel at Mdina had been to the effect that there had been an assault on the HQ complex and that Soviet *Spetsnaz* troops were inside the building...

Dan French took the handset.

"This is Air Vice-Marshal French," he announced. "For my sins, Deputy C-in-C Malta." Even if he had not been so painfully conscious that he was the sole object of attention in the crowded room his voice would still have rung with calm, mildly insouciant command. He owed it to everybody to make a good impression.

He had flown Lancaster bombers over Germany in 1943 and 1944; one night a fighter had shot away large lumps of his port wing over Magdeburg, on another night he had brought back an unrecognisable lump of meat in his rear turret that had once been a nineteen-year-old gunner from Maltby in Yorkshire. The turret had been shattered by a brace of twenty-millimetre cannon shells and the following morning ground crew had had to hose out the blasted remains of the dead boy. The lesson he carried with him from those days was that no matter how bad things looked they could always be worse

and a wise man knew as much.

"To whom do I have the pleasure to be speaking, sir?"

"Captain Anderson Farragut Schmidt, sir!"

Dan French tried and failed to suppress a wan smile.

"How do you do, Captain Schmidt?"

This amiable riposte seemed to momentarily disarm the man at the other end of the connection,

"My radio people tell me that you have limited communications on Malta, sir?"

"I have virtually *no* communications other than with and via the good offices of the United States Navy at this time, Captain Schmidt," Dan French confessed affably. "I am out of communications with my HQ in Mdina. We believe the Citadel may have fallen to enemy forces but we have no way of confirming this at this time. May I rely on you for naval gunfire support if offensive operations to retake the Citadel are necessary and practical later this day?"

The Deputy Commander of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations was a little surprised by the unhesitating vehemence of the other man's reply.

"Yes, sir!"

"Oh, jolly good. That's, er, nice to know. Are you in a position to give me an update of the naval situation around the Maltese Archipelago, Captain Schmidt?"

"Yes, sir. There is one enemy heavy retiring at flank speed to the north east in company with at least two escorts. There are other small enemy surface units retreating in an easterly direction and I have reports of the presence of one confirmed and one suspected enemy submarine to the north." The Captain of the USS Iowa seemed to realise at this juncture it was probable that the man in the bunker at RAF Luqa might not have any idea whatsoever of the bigger 'picture'. He digressed, seeking to ensure that everybody was reading from the same page. "Vice Admiral Clarey is coming south via the Straits of Messina at his best speed in the USS Independence. He has delegated tactical command of all US forces in the area ahead of his arrival off Malta to Iowa, sir. In the meantime, one of the Independence's E-2 Hawkeyes," brand new state of the art electronic surveillance and command and control aircraft, "is operating north of Gozo keeping eyes and ears on all

hostile air and sea activity in the area. Independence intends to mount a strike on all surviving enemy surface and submarine units at the earliest time."

Dan French decided he needed to make an admission.

"I'm pretty much blind here, Captain Schmidt. I have no idea what has been going on for the last hour or so or what the situation of my surviving forces may be. All I know for sure is that the island has taken a Hell of a beating, and that the strike force I launched this morning to intercept a suspected Red Dawn invasion fleet some one hundred plus miles due east of the archipelago has been lost. I have no operable runways on the archipelago, no radio or radar net worth a candle and for all I know there are Soviet paratroopers besieging this command bunker at this very minute."

Such forthright honesty gave the American a very brief pause for thought.

"The naval situation is under control, sir. As to the land situation," there was an unspoken shrug of the shoulders, "that I cannot speak to at this time. As soon as the Independence is in range her helicopters will fly off every Marine in the battle group to assist your ground forces but that won't be for another two to three hours. Independence's E-2 put a couple of sonar buoys in the water and we have anti-submarine aircraft in the air over both suspected hostile submarines operating north and east of the island of Gozo."

The Captain of the USS Iowa digressed again for a moment; he literally could not help himself.

"Somebody ought to start looking for a chest full of medals for your guys on those two destroyers you sent out to attack the Soviet heavies," he observed gruffly.

Dan French frowned.

"We sent ships out to fight the enemy?" He vaguely recollected that the frigate HMS Yarmouth had been running post-refit trials for the last couple of days but had no knowledge of any other 'big' ship available to his friend, the C-in-C, Sir Julian Christopher.

"HMS Yarmouth and HMS Talavera," the American reported, not able to hide his concern that the Englishman apparently had no idea what he was talking about. "Yarmouth decoyed the heavies from the north and the Talavera dove straight at them and put fish into both the bastards!"

That explains why the shelling stopped a while back!

“I thought Talavera was still in dockyard hands?” Dan French confessed before he decided it was for the best to keep his mouth shut.

“I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it. She ran at the bastards for ten, maybe fifteen minutes before she launched her fish,” Anderson Schmidt declared. “One destroyer up against a goddammed dreadnought and a cruiser; by the time she was in close at least two of the Krupny class escorts must have been shooting at her too!”

“What happened to Talavera and Yarmouth?” Dan French demanded dry mouthed.

“Yarmouth is on fire off St Paul’s Bay. She may still be under way but she’s trailing a lot of smoke. The USS Charles F. Adams is manoeuvring to offer all assistance at this time. HMS Talavera is in a sinking condition approximately ten miles off Sliema. The USS Berkeley is alongside her standing by to take off her people.”

Dan French took a deep breath.

“Thank you, Captain Anderson.”

There was a brief pause.

“What are your orders, sir?” The American asked.

Dan French recognised that this was the first time in his life an American serviceman had ever said that to him and meant it. He swallowed hard, looked around the room at the worried, haggard faces.

“Park your ship off the Grand Harbour breakwaters and carry on the good work, Captain Schmidt,” he said. “Oh, and keep this channel open, if you please.”

“Affirmative, sir!”

Dan French surrendered the handset.

“It seems that the cavalry has arrived, gentleman.” There was a hubbub of relief and an undercurrent of muttered dissent to the effect that the cavalry ought to have been on the scene all along, which the Deputy Commander of all British and Commonwealth Forces on Malta immediately quashed. “We will leave the recriminations to the politicians,” the man who, with a heavy heart, assumed he was now probably the man in charge in Malta added grimly, “it is *not* the business of any man under *my* command to cast the first stone.”

This said he headed for the door.

“Right! I’ve had enough of skulking around down here. Somebody find

me a bloody gun!”

Chapter 6

12:35 Hours (GMT)
Friday 3rd April 1964
Leinster House, Kildare Street, Dublin

Sir Ian Morrison Ross MacLennan had been the British Ambassador to the Irish Republic since 1959. He was a seasoned diplomat and considered by his peers in England to be a very ‘safe pair of hands’. Having joined the then Colonial Office in 1933 after graduating from Worcester College, Oxford, he had previously served with distinction as High Commissioner in Southern Rhodesia between 1951 and 1953, in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland until 1955, returning to London for two years as Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office, before undertaking his next High Commissioner stint between 1957 and 1959 in Accra, Ghana during the run up to that nation’s independence. In all his overseas postings the fifty-four-year Ambassador had formed close and lasting friendships and connections men and women who were often instinctively hostile to British interests, but nowhere more so than in Dublin.

Insofar as it was possible for an interloper representing the former imperial power – a power still distrusted and loathed throughout the twenty-six counties – to have built ‘bridges’, few men could have done more than Ian MacLennan in the years he had been in Ireland. Not that many ‘bridges’ had been built in recent months as the strife in the north worsened and passions burned ever more brightly in the south in the aftermath of the October War.

At around the time of the Cuban Missiles disaster Sir Ian and his wife Margherita had been beginning to look forward to his mooted next posting in New Zealand; but that blissful vision had been snatched away from them as had so much else by the war. Neither of their adult children had survived the night of war; both had disappeared without trace like so many other parents’ hopes for the future. Afterwards, there was only duty to fall back upon, no matter how onerous or pointless it sometimes seemed in Dublin, the drably hostile capital of the Irish Republic.

The British Ambassador had received the Taoiseach’s note requesting an

urgent ‘interview’ while breakfasting that morning with Anglo-Irish friends in Wexford. Inwardly, he had groaned because it was frequently the case that whenever the Taoiseach – the Irish Prime Minister – or his colleague, the Irish Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, summoned him at short notice it was often to deliver a new denouncement of perfidious Albion’s ongoing colonial malfeasance. Like all insecure and only superficially united administrations preoccupied with looking over its shoulder most of the time, the Fianna Fáil Government of Taoiseach Sean Lemass, was intensely sensitive to the least suggestion of a slight or insult, large, small or simply imagined towards his person, party or country and the mere continuing existence of the six northern counties of Ulster partitioned from the island of Ireland back in the early 1920s still hung over Dublin like a dark cloud.

Everybody knew the history; but it was not until an Englishman came to Dublin that he understood what that history *meant*. Under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) Ireland had been partitioned north and south on 3rd May 1921. But the Act had solved little. Under its provisions the entire island of Ireland had become the Irish Free State on 6th December 1922 which ought to have been but was never going to be the end of the affair; because on the 7th December 1922 the Parliament of Ulster had formally opted *not* to join the new Dominion of the British Empire and thereafter the ‘Irish Question’ had remained malignantly unresolved, a festering canker. To the majority of undeniably decent, peace-loving Irish folk Sir Ian MacLennan was, therefore, the living embodiment of Oliver Cromwell’s ghost and there was nothing he could say or do to win over hearts and minds. Other that was, than to take the slings and arrows that regularly flew his way with unflappable, unfailing good grace.

It had been with a weary sense of ‘here we go again’ that he had finished his breakfast, bid farewell to his wife and their hosts - there was no point dragging Margherita back to the bear pit of Dublin since he planned to return to Wexford as soon as possible - and driven in the company of the customary Irish Army escort the eighty miles back up the coast road to Dublin. Stopping briefly at the British Embassy in Merrion Square near Leinster House, the home of the *Oireachtas Éireann*, the Parliament of the Irish Republic to collect the latest Foreign Office telegrams, he had immediately set off again for his ‘interview’ with the Taoiseach.

In the back of the Embassy Bentley he had glanced at the latest

telegrams.

It seemed the Argentine had seized Port Stanley on East Falkland.

And South Georgia...

That did not sound like good news.

Malta was under attack...

By whom?

The Ambassador rifled through the other telegrams; none of which shed fresh light on either the situation in the South Atlantic or in the Mediterranean. Did the Irish know something about these widely separated incidents? No, that was hardly likely. There were few more parochial administrations on the planet than the one in Dublin. He brought himself up short; knowing he was being unfair. The Irish might have escaped direct attack in the October War but they were as much its victims as the United Kingdom. Sporadic American aid had taken the edge off the hunger on the streets of Irish towns and cities immediately after the war; otherwise austerity had bitten hard throughout the twenty-six counties and contrary to what many people in England believed, the government in Dublin wanted nothing to do with the near civil war in the six northern counties of Ulster. Not least because although it had shamed the Fianna Fáil Government of Sean Lemass to accept it, the food ships diverted – at Margaret Thatcher's direct intervention – from the Operation Manna convoys to both Belfast *and* Dublin during the past winter, had probably stopped thousands of Irish men and women starving to death.

Nobody needed to tell an Irishman or woman about the tragedy of war and the last thing most Irish people south of the border wanted was a shooting war with their wounded but infinitely more powerful and potentially vengeful neighbour across the other side of the Irish Sea. However, if anybody in England had anticipated that the unsolicited charity of the unexpected food ships arrival – barely publicised or acknowledged at the time - in Dublin to ameliorate ancient hatreds, they would have been rudely disabused of that hope by the upsurge of violence in the north in recent weeks.

Sir Ian MacLennan was a little surprised to discover that the Taoiseach was not alone in his rooms at Leinster House. Frank Aiken, the Minister for External Affairs and Lieutenant General John McKeown, Chief of Staff of the *Óglaıġ na hÉıreann* – a title literally translated as 'Irish warriors' but

more prosaically descriptive of the ‘Irish Defence Forces’ - rose to their feet when the British Ambassador was shown in.

Sixty-six-year-old Frank Aiken was no friend of the United Kingdom but if he had ever been one he had long ago ceased to be a blanket ‘Brit hater’. The former IRA – Irish Republican Army – veteran of the Civil War and one of the longest serving members of the Dáil, the Irish Parliament, had been a campaigner on the European and wider World stage for de-colonisation, equality, peace and nuclear disarmament before the October War and like most old soldiers, he had no appetite for a new civil war in Ireland that might entrench the current partition of the island for another generation.

A tall, thin man with a brush moustache Aiken stepped forward and shook Sir Ian MacLennan’s hand, greeting him with a solemn nod of his head.

Lieutenant General John McKeown had lost the sun-burnished tan acquired during his pre-war tour as Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Force in the Congo. His conduct of that operation had earned him high praise and respect well beyond the boundaries of the Irish Republic and raised the profile not just of the small Irish Army, but of the whole nation in the eyes of professional military contemporaries abroad.

McKeown’s presence troubled Ian MacLennan.

As did the worried look on the face of the Taoiseach because it was unlike Seán Francis Lemass to betray anything of his underlying misgivings in the presence of the Ambassador of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom.

“Good day to you, Ambassador,” the Irish Prime Minister said in Gaelic, quirking a momentary wry grin as hands were shaken.

Ian MacLennan had not been a Gaelic speaker when he was posted to Dublin; since then he had acquired sufficient of the language to make polite conversation and to sometimes – if his interlocutors spoke slowly and they had Dublin accents – to follow the gist of conversations.

“And to you too, Taoiseach,” he replied in kind. His ghastly, very ‘English’ pronunciation rarely failed to raise at least a half-smile even on the lips of even the most partisan of Irish nationalists. “Might I inquire,” he went on in his own native tongue, “after the health of the President. When I left Dublin earlier in the week I was led to believe that Mr de Valera’s condition had stabilized?”

The sixty-nine-year-old New York born President of the Irish Republic, Éamon de Valera had been rushed to hospital over a fortnight ago and as yet, no public announcement had been made on his illness. The Republic – *Eire* – without the man who had been its guiding hand for the best part of five decades of war and interminable economic and diplomatic struggles would be another, very different country. A country even less well understood both by its own people and by MacLennan's clients back in England.

"The *Uachtarán na hÉireann* has not given up the fight," the Irish Prime Minister said, as always insisting on using the Gaelic version of titles and ranks. "We pray that he will pull through this travail."

The other three men nodded concurrence with this sentiment.

The four men in the cool, strained atmosphere of the Taoiseach's comparatively old-fashioned, almost Spartan room recognised only too well that relations between the British and the Irish governments had reached a new nadir that spring. The fact that the British Ambassador spent most of his time out of Dublin to avoid providing an easy 'static target' for an assassin in the Republic's capital city was eloquent testimony to the ongoing crisis.

The chairs in the room were neither new nor threadbare simply well-used and a little tired. The description might have applied to the nation beyond the walls of Leinster House; a country trapped in a cycle of dreary stagnation. The saddest thing was that Ian MacLennan knew that appearances were misleading and that but for the recent war and the troubles along the northern border, the Irish Republic might already be taking tentative steps towards a brighter, more optimistic and prosperous future.

Seán Francis Lemass had been born *John* Francis Lemass in Ballybrack, Co. Dublin in 1899. He was the second of seven children. As a child his family had called him 'Jack'. At school he excelled at mathematics and history but aged fifteen he had lied about his date of birth and joined the rebel Irish Volunteers. Enlisted into A Company of the 3rd Battalion, whose adjutant was Éamon de Valera he had become '*Seán*'. Arrested after the Easter Rising in 1916 during which he and his brother Noel had fought at both Moore Street and at the General Post Office, the British had released him because of his youth. Nonetheless, he had spent much of the rest of his early life fighting the occupying power.

Lemass had been one of Michael Collins's 'Twelve Apostles', the men of the Dublin Brigade of the IRA responsible for a series of murderous attacks

on British agents operating in the city. A veteran of the War of Independence and later the Irish Civil War, Lemass's life had been unusually blighted by loss. He had accidentally shot and killed his own twenty-two-month-old brother Herbert with a revolver in January 1916. In 1923 his twenty-five-year-old elder brother Noel was kidnapped and later murdered by pro-Treaty men under the command of Emmet Dalton, a close confederate of Michael Collins. Those terrible days when true Irishmen had routinely killed each other over the clauses of a British mandated Anglo-Irish Treaty – over whether Ireland should, or should not be partitioned – still overshadowed later generations.

The armed struggle between the Irish Free State and its colonial overlords was long over and nobody in that room in Leinster House wanted a return to those days, but the partition of the thirty-two counties of Ireland in the 1920s had settled nothing and they could never pretend otherwise.

The four men sat down, settling uncomfortably.

"You'd best tell Sir Ian the bad news, General," Sean Lemass sighed, passing a weary hand involuntarily across his face.

Lieutenant General John McKeown sat stiffly upright in his chair. His gaze zeroed in on the British Ambassador.

"You will be aware, Sir Ian," the soldier prefaced, his tone business-like and unapologetic, "that since the unfortunate incidents which occurred in December..."

"The attempted regicide of Queen Elizabeth and her family at Balmoral," Sir Ian MacLennan interjected urbanely, unwilling to let the magnitude of the *outrage* pass. The attempted assassination of the Monarch was not an 'unfortunate incident' it was an *obscenity*!

"Quite so, Sir Ian," the Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces agreed softly. "Since that 'incident' we have, as you know, at the request of Her Majesty's Government, taken a close interest in traffic in and out of Casement Air Base, its associated logistics depot, and at the site of its sister establishment adjoining Shannon airport. At the same time Customs officers have been instructed to closely monitor trans-Atlantic shipping movements into and out of Irish ports."

Sir Ian MacLennan's expectations of a session in which he was to be the butt of his hosts' displeasure began to dissolve. Something else was going on. The men around him were sending out unfamiliar signals. They were

worried and perhaps, even a little afraid.

He said nothing.

The United States had taken over and massively expanded Casement Air Base in the months after the October War. Denied the use of its former bases and facilities in the United Kingdom the United States Air Force had wasted little time upgrading its lodgements in Spain, and lengthening the runways at what had previously been a small Irish Air Force field at Casement, approximately nine miles from the centre of Dublin, hurriedly building a large prefabricated military camp which had grown to cover several square miles of the rolling green hills to its north and west. Giant radar and communication towers had sprouted from within the high-fenced compounds and hordes of American servicemen and civilian contractors now roamed the bars and streets of the capital most nights.

The capital's pre-war dingy back streets had spawned several new 'red light districts'. *Decent folk*, especially women aged between eighteen and forty, ventured out alone onto the streets of Dublin at their peril after dark. It was well known that many of the well paid American GIs and 'contractors' treated ordinary Irishmen and women with condescension and openly expressed the view that they had been posted to a 'third world country'.

The British Ambassador suspected that the attitude of senior American commanders, the Pentagon and many members of the Kennedy Administration was not dissimilar. Its recent track record in taking into account – forget 'respecting' – its allies interests and opinions was less than stellar. The Americans had gone to war without consulting their oldest, supposedly most respected Ally – whose armed forces, it had always been assumed would play a key role in any war scenario in which the Soviet Union was involved – so once the Pentagon had planted foot in the door to the Irish Republic it was hardly like to have grown new spots in the last seventeen months.

"The long and the short of it, Sir Ian," Lieutenant General John McKeown said, biting the bullet, "is that our most recent intelligence assessments indicate that significant quantities of mainly American-made light armaments and munitions have been stockpiled by the IRA and other Nationalist and Republican insurgent groups."

"What sort of 'light armaments' are we talking about General?"

"Infantry weapons, sir. Machine guns, modern assault rifles such as M-

16s, pistols, various types of hand grenades and a significant quantity of military grade plastic explosive, along with detonators and time delay fuses."

Sir Ian MacLennan looked to Sean Lemass.

"Her Majesty's Government was given assurances earlier this year that the Irish Government was taking steps to," he paused, 'counter this *threat*, Taoiseach?"

More importantly, in January the President of the United States of America had personally promised Margaret Thatcher that *his people* would crack down hard on '*any leakage of weapons from US sources*' to dissident factions within the Irish Republic.

"The American authorities mounted a crackdown about two months ago but since then the situation has got worse rather than better," Frank Aiken growled. "Your Government accuses *us* of trading food and medical aid donations from the Irish in America for arms! That's pure blarney! We spend every penny we get trying to feed and clothe our people and keeping our hospitals running! Most of the money that comes into this country from the Americas goes straight into the hands of self-appointed 'Irish Aid' committees and most of those are either fronts for the IRA or for organised crime gangs."

The British Ambassador had heard this narrative before; unlike his compatriots in Ulster and the rest of the United Kingdom he actually had a deal of sympathy with it. Ireland was an impoverished country attempting to cling onto its self-respect. It did not have a large army or police force and given the choice of alienating the United States or the United Kingdom it was permanently pinned on the horns of an intractable dilemma.

"From what you've said, General McKeown," he suggested, knowing that he had not yet heard the really bad news, "the IRA is gearing up for a renewed offensive along the border, and presumably, in Londonderry and Belfast this summer?"

"Probably sooner than that, sir."

That was hardly news; Northern Ireland Command had been preparing for just such an upsurge in violence for several weeks. The British Ambassador had already warned – informally and very confidentially all three Irishmen in the room that such an offensive, if in any way supported by or encouraged by the Irish Government, or by members or organs of that Government, would regrettably have potential consequences equally violent

if not more so, south of the border.

However, it was evident that this was not what was worrying the Taoiseach, his Minister for External Affairs or the Chief of Staff of the Irish Armed Forces.

Sir Ian MacLennan's throat had gone dry.

He focused on the Irish Prime Minister and to his credit Sean Lemass did not flinch.

"What else has the IRA managed to acquire from its American 'friends' on the black market, Taoiseach?"

Chapter 7

13:36 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 10 miles west of Sliema Point

Dockyard electrician Joseph Calleja recovered consciousness in a miasma of pain in which he was struggling to catch his breath. He did not know where he was wounded; he just hurt everywhere.

I was on the quay below Corradino heights?

But he was somewhere else now.

It was like a dream. The panic, the alarm, the water suddenly churning under HMS Talavera's stern; crew men wrestling with the destroyer's mooring ropes. Something had made him step – consciously, deliberately - from the dock onto the deck of the ship while all his fellow dockyard hands were desperately attempting to disembark. In no time at all the destroyer had been charging towards the opening in the Grand Harbour breakwaters at a rate of knots that would have got her captain cashiered on any other day...

Just before the Talavera reached the breakwaters she had been bracketed by a salvo of big shells. One had landed in the water so close that the whole ship had seemed to lurch sideways for a moment before she charged on out to sea.

His ears had been ringing; everything had been in slow motion for a while after that. He had picked himself up, ripped off his jacket and without thinking balled it up and pressed it into the horrific wound in the young Torpedo Officer's thigh to try to stop the bleeding. There had been a lot of blood, and everywhere around him on the deck other bodies had lain torn and twitching. He had been totally focussed on the ashen boy lying in a spreading pool of his own life blood until a burly Royal Marine had got a tourniquet in place and the wounded officer had been carted below...

Did that really happen?

He was staring at grey, sooty smoke drifting across a perfect azure blue spring sky, aware, but only in passing, that there were other men prostrate on the deck around him. It took several more seconds to work out what he was

doing lying on the unforgiving steel deck.

And then the memories came back with a rush.

He was fairly confident that they had got the fourth and last torpedo away before most of the ship around the torpedo tube mounting had fallen on top of him. He remembered the *thump* of the impellor charge, the soft *whoosh* of the fish and a big splash as it went into the water...

Or at least he thought he remembered that.

Things were a bit confused and he was not sure if he was remembering them in the right order.

Had he and that red-headed idiot Jack Griffin really been jumping up and down on top of the mounting?

Yes, they had!

Everybody around the quadruple 21-inch torpedo mount had been pointing at the fish, yelling encouragement as if they were in the grandstand at a horse race. One of the fish had porpoised and disappeared, he remembered that. But the other three seemed to have run true. Suddenly the bow of the big Russian cruiser had sagged down brokenly and the big ship had come to a dead halt. And then there was a big explosion at the stern of the old Turkish battleship...

Yes, after that he and Jack Griffin had been jumping up and down on top of the torpedo mounting. They had been laughing like madmen, hugging each other like they were long lost brothers.

And then there had been a huge explosion and now...

And now he was lying on the deck.

And he hurt *everywhere...*

“Jesus wept!” Complained the man spread-eagled on top of the stocky Maltese electrician. He coughed asthmatically and rolled off the smaller man. “Jesus,” he whistled dazedly, “I think we just sunk half the whole fucking Russian Navy!”

This said Petty Officer Jack Griffin lay for some seconds on his back, ignoring the discomfort of the miscellany of sharp shards of debris sticking into his torso and legs.

“We did?” Joe gasped. His ribs felt like they had just been released from the squeezing clasp of a giant vise, his face was wet and his right arm felt *wrong* but for the moment he did not care about that as he sucked in huge gouts of air and contemplated how pleased he was to still be alive.

“Too fucking right we did!” Jack Griffin groaned, trying to sit up. His movements were like those of a drunk who has fallen over one too many times trying to get back to his ship after a run ashore. His first couple of attempts to raise himself from the deck failed dismally. However, he accomplished his mission on the third attempt.

Swaying drunkenly, he looked around at the burning scrapheap which less than an hour ago had been *the* finest ship in the whole Royal Navy; and was both relieved and pleasantly surprised to discover that nobody seemed to be shooting at HMS Talavera anymore. The quadruple 21-inch torpedo tube launcher mount on which he and his unlikely Maltese comrade in arms had been so exuberantly *cavorting* shortly before seemed to have *gone*. It had completely disappeared, in fact. Where it ought to have been – welded to the deck abaft the destroyer’s single funnel – lay the mangled remains of what might once have been the port amidships twin 40-millimetre Bofors cannon tub.

Mashed body parts of the Bofors’s gunners were liberally distributed across the deck and hooked obscenely on jagged outcrops of what little survived of the torpedo director. “Shit,” he muttered, realising for the first time that he and Joe Calleja looked as if they had been rolling around on the floor in an abattoir.

Joe Calleja moaned loudly when the other man shook his shoulder.

“Good!” Jack Griffin chuckled. “If it hurts you must still be alive!”

“Obviously!” Joe complained, his voice slurred.

“Cheer up; nobody’s shooting at us anymore!”

Joe Calleja took very little comfort from this.

“At the moment!” He gasped.

“Oh, well. That’s the Navy for you!” As his wits slowly unscrambled Jack Griffin’s mind was turning to practicalities. His first rational thought was to search for the Captain.

No, if the skipper was still alive he would have people around him already. Today, he would have to settle for saving the Old Man’s brother-in-law’s life. Today was one of those days when it was easy to be a hero. Besides, the successive waves of nausea probably meant he had either lost a lot of blood or taken a bad knock on the head; he was not about to go climbing ladders up to the bridge until he got his balance back again. “Can you move?” He asked his companion.

“Maybe. My arm’s bad...”

Jack Griffin eased the younger man into a sitting position, all the better to view the last minutes of their lives. Men were struggling up from below and steam was escaping, hissing insanely as it vented through the big steel sieve that had previously been the destroyer’s perfectly proportioned funnel.

“I thought I was already dead,” Joe Calleja declared philosophically as he tried to cradle his broken right arm with his left. Most of the pain had subsided but he felt so terribly, helplessly tired, old and cold.

Shadows fell across both men.

Unwounded men had come to help them.

“Naw!” Jack Griffin shouted, angrily fighting off helping hands. “Leave the civilian to me! Help those boys over by the 40-millimetre! We’ll be fine!”

It was the self-evident absurdity of this latter declaration which finally snapped Joe Calleja back to reality.

“We’ll be fine?” He demanded incredulously.

Jack Griffin lurched to his feet again, established his balance and looked down at the shorter man with vaguely pitying eyes.

Civilians!

“Aw, stop belly-aching!” Behind the harsh sentiments and the apparent reprimand there was a peculiar respect. Moreover, when he went on there was a hint of a twinkle in the Navy man’s eyes. “There are boys with real wounds over there! Not a couple of little scratches and a sprained wrist like you!”

Joe found himself being hauled unsteadily to his feet.

The other man flung his arms around him to stop him immediately crumpling back onto the deck. Joe cried with pain as his damaged arm was crushed in the protective embrace.

“Sorry,” the other man grunted.

Jack Griffin sniffed the smoky air, looked around.

“See? Nothing at all wrong with you!”

Joe Calleja was staring past the other man’s shoulder at the futuristic, long grey silhouette of the big ship close alongside the water-logged, wallowing hulk of HMS Talavera. He felt almost close enough to shake hands with the American sailors poised at the other ship’s rail braced to leap across fast the narrowing gap between the warships.

“Now ain’t that a sight for sore eyes?” Jack Griffin exclaimed grudgingly, less than ecstatic to be in such a hopeless situation that he had to be rescued by a bunch of *Yanks*.

Joe’s head lolled against the other man’s chest.

“What did I say?” Jack Griffin chuckled. “Didn’t I say this was the most fun you’ve ever hand in your whole fucking life?”

“Yes, I recall you said something like that...”

Chapter 8

13:37 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina, Malta

Over half-an-hour after the event she wondered if she had glimpsed the ghost of a smile forming on Arkady Pavlovich Rykov's face in the split second before her finger closed on the trigger of her AK-47 Kalashnikov. However, by the time she had emptied approximately half a magazine of hollow point rounds into her former lover's torso and his broken body had jerked obscenely backwards until it met the wall and slowly, slowly slid down to the floor leaving a broad track of gore on the plaster and the floor, his amusement had been well and truly *terminated*.

She had known that there was nothing she could do to save Admiral Sir Julian Christopher's life. She was in a small room with two KGB assassins and by the time she had executed the first one the other would have had ample opportunity to despatch her. That was why she did not try anything clever. She held down the trigger until she had all but destroyed Arkady Rykov. It was Arkady who had re-taught her that one always had to decide what was most important; who to kill first. Killing him had seemed the most important thing in the World at the time she pulled the trigger.

The silence was dangerous and threatening.

The atmosphere stank of burnt cordite and blood.

Fresh blood, she had discovered long ago had an iron, slaughterhouse stench that lingered in one's nostrils and face for days. Especially, when it had been explosively sprayed upon one and upon practically everything around one...

She had waited for the bullet.

Perhaps, I am already dead?

No, that was crazier than all the other possibilities!

Without lowering the muzzle of the AK-47 in her coldly steady hands she had turned.

Julian Christopher was slumped into his chair, deathly ashen, hardly able

to keep his eyelids open; standing behind him the second KGB man, dressed in airborne forces camouflage battle dress was pressing the muzzle of his 9-millimetre Makarov pistol to the seated man's head.

The shooting elsewhere in the Headquarters complex had suddenly ceased.

'Admiral Christopher will die if he does not get urgent medical attention,' the man with the KGB flashes on his collar observed in heavily accented *Moskva* Russian. *Moskva* Russian that was so heavily accented it struck her as being almost theatrical.

She had not imagined the scene playing out like this. Not that she had had much of an idea about how anything in particular was going to play out at any time since she had been sent on her mission to find Arkady Rykov in the months before the October War. An hour ago, she had been waiting to see what happened next; and but for the murder of Margo Seiffert by that brainless – probably panicking and scared shitless - paratrooper who had got his chute hung up on the chimneys of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women she might simply have kept her head down, contented herself with protecting the nurses and patients in the basement of the hospital. That was the trouble with life, something always came along and threw all the cards into the air, and afterwards nobody could ever predict which way up they would fall.

Russians were a strange and fascinating people; that much at least she had learned in her years as a spy. Russians were strange, fascinating and fundamentally unpredictable. Therefore, she was not quite as surprised as she ought to have been when the KGB man holding a gun to the head of the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations indicated to her that he wanted to cut a deal. Of course, the man holding the Makarov pistol had not actually said that; but they both knew that was exactly what he meant because he had not yet put a bullet in Admiral Christopher's brain.

The man could have killed her while she was dealing with Arkady Rykov if he had wanted but where was the profit in that?

The KGB man had concluded that the British had probably fought off the assault on the building and that if she was between him and the first angry, vengeful soldiers who burst through the door his chances of staying alive were exponentially improved. When those soldiers came through that door their blood would be up and if the first thing they saw was a woman – albeit

one spattered with blood and wielding a Kalashnikov – they were much less likely to roll a couple of grenades in front of them or to start blazing away with automatic rifles.

'Kill him, Miss Pullman,' Julian Christopher muttered with a voice that was so deeply exhausted his words were barely audible.

There were boots stomping and trampling through the building.

She was sorely tempted to kill the KGB man.

Very tempted but the killing was over.

'Drop the gun on the floor and come around to this side of the desk!' She barked at the KGB man. 'Now, or I *will* kill you!'

The Russian was in his thirties, swarthy but dapper in an apparently military way. However, now that she had properly appraised him the woman could tell from the fit and the neatness of the man's battledress that it lacked the feel of a lived in, fought in uniform. The man knew how to act like a real soldier but he was a fraud.

The man had slowly taken the gun away from Julian Christopher's head and, with the muzzle pointed at the floor drawn it away to the side before dropping it. She had not seen the man flick on the safety before he discarded the weapon. It thudded onto the stone floor with a ringing metallic sound that had so alarmed the woman that she almost pulled the trigger of the AK-47.

Why does this man look so familiar?

The woman had assumed that he was going to make a grab for the Kalashnikov at the moment he dropped the pistol, just not that he would be so clumsy or so inept in his attempt. In the event he telegraphed his intentions so obviously that she was very nearly caught unawares.

He *threw* himself at her.

He actually tried to throw himself at her!

In her aching weariness she reeled aside.

It took her an age to regain her balance; if the man had been a professional he would have lunged at her again by then. Instead, he had rolled on the ground to break his fall and only slowly picked himself up.

The fool had been worried about hurting himself when he attacked her!

The wooden stock of her Kalashnikov proscribed a short, vicious arc which connected with the back of the *amateur's* neck. He slumped onto the carpet in front of Admiral Christopher's desk like a sack of potatoes falling off the back of lorry. Just to make sure he was out cold she stamped on his

left hand, so hard she heard bones crack.

She had slung the gun over her back and gone to do what she could for Julian Christopher by the time the rescue party barrelled through the door.

As she had guessed the garrison of the Citadel had prevailed, eventually.

'The Admiral has been shot and is bleeding internally,' she had yelled, cradling the great man's head to her breast in an attempt to hold his upper body at an attitude likely to stop him bleeding out before help arrived. She knew it was useless. The bullet that had hit him had entered in a relatively high, innocuous position close to the inner end of his left clavicle but it had travelled down and exited his back level with his heart, almost certainly nicking an artery on the way.

Of course, there was no doctor.

Margo Seiffert might have saved Julian Christopher if she could have got him into an operating theatre but she was dead, and he would never survive the journey to the nearest hospital with sufficiently advanced equipment and skilled surgeons.

'What is your real name, Miss Pullman?'

A medical orderly had rushed into the office and wanted to pump an ampoule of morphine into the dying man's arm; she had waved him away. Julian Christopher did not seem to be in great pain, if any, he was too far gone for that.

'"I was born Rachel Angelika Piotrowska in Lodz in nineteen twenty-eight,' she had confessed. 'But it has been a long time since I used that name."

"Dick White refused to tell me your real name," he muttered, almost wryly.

"You know what spies are like, Admiral," she whispered.

"Yes..."

Julian Christopher had coughed feebly.

"The shelling has stopped..."

"Yes," she agreed, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks.

"*The boy*," the man said. It took him several seconds to summon the strength and the will to continue. "*The boy* and *his Talaveras* must have settled the bastards' hash..."

She had stroked the man's brow awhile.

"Please... Tell Peter I am proud of him..."

It was the last thing the Commander-in-Chief of all British Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations said. Forcing out those words had exhausted his final reserve of strength and he had died in her arms a few minutes later without regaining consciousness.

Chapter 9

12:37 Hours (GMT)
Friday 3rd April 1964
Balliol College, Oxford

Home Secretary's hackles were rising. In the three months that he had been in his current post nothing – absolutely nothing – had so infuriated him as the brainless, bully boy arrogance and stupidity of MI5.

'Dr J.W. Malling, Mr K.H.S. Meredith-Hall, Mr B.T. Terrell and Mr C.H.O. Alexander are being held incommunicado at HMP Gloucester pending the completion of a Security Service review at GCHQ Cheltenham. The four men were arrested on 15th March 1964 on suspicion of gross breaches of Section II of the Official Secrets Act...'

Forty-three-year-old Roy Harris Jenkins was the son of a Welsh miner who by dint of sheer intellectual acuity and determination had breezed through his years at Balliol in the late thirties and early years of the 1945 war. In the very halls where the rump Home Office now operated he had enjoyed some of the happiest days of his life. In his previous spell at Balliol he had formed many lifelong friendships, including one with the late Edward Heath; whose sad death in the White House shortly after the Battle of Washington he still deeply lamented. It had been while he was at Balliol that he had become Secretary and Librarian of the Oxford Union Society, the Chairman of the Oxford University Socialist Club and embarked upon his life in politics. Albeit a life interrupted after he had achieved a First-Class degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics in 1941 by four years spent in the Royal Artillery.

Illness had prevented Ted Heath recruiting him into his United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration shortly after the October War and he had been genuinely taken aback when his old friend's successor, Margaret Thatcher, had approached him and asked him to join *her* Cabinet.

'In the current emergency I see the job of Home Secretary to be more that of an *Interior Minister* along the lines of the American or the traditional Western European model, Mr Jenkins,' she had declared. 'You will be the

man who ties together and ensures that all the other home ministries *talk to each other*. I know that Mr Heath was driven to despair sometimes by the fact that often the left and right hands of government seemed not to know what the other was doing!'

He had hesitated before accepting a post in Margaret Thatcher's Unity Administration of the United Kingdom; not so much because he knew little or nothing of the lady or her likely policies in government, but because in the year since the recent war he had been near death more than once and wondered how his impaired constitution would stand up to the rigors of eighteen hour working days, and the intolerable mental and spiritual stresses and strains of life at the heart of Government. He had never actually previously held high office and like any reasonable man, he had seriously wondered if he was physically and mentally up to the challenge.

'Mr Heath thought very highly of you, Mr Jenkins,' the lady had assured him in that brisk, no nonsense way that so endeared her to her countless doting admirers throughout the country. 'That is quite sufficient for me!'

The Cabinet posts in the Unity Administration had been split between the Conservative and Labour Parties and the Liberals approximately in proportion to their respective shares of the popular vote at the last General Election in 1959; or would have been had the leader of the Liberal Party – which had received just under six percent of the vote in 1959 – accepted the offer of the post of Secretary of State for Scotland. Roy Jenkins's own party, Labour, had since split into several bitterly warring factions; and the fault lines between parts of the Prime Minister's own party had, to a lesser extent begun to widen alarmingly but the UAUK retained a solid cross-bench majority in the newly reconvened House of Commons and had seemed in recent weeks to be finally coming to grips with things.

Later that day Roy Jenkins had been looking forward to bringing together Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Gregson-Phelps, the Royal Engineer officer nominated as the Greater London Survey Officer, representatives of survivor groups who had already re-colonised areas of the bomb-ravaged capital and the newly constituted Home Office Reconstruction Planning Executive in what he hoped would be a weekend-long 'meeting of minds'. The Home Secretary was a convinced believer in the principle that if only right-minded men and women could be brought together and persuaded to talk with each other, there was nothing that could not be achieved.

The previous evening, he and his wife Jennifer had dined with Miriam Prior, the red-headed, combative and very, very shrewd former primary school teacher from Islington around whom, with ‘King Harold’ – Harold Strettle a former London Underground worker - a band of several thousand survivors had coalesced in the bomb-ravaged capital. King Harold’s loosely articulated transient fiefdom perambulated between the northern and western suburbs and the heart of the wrecked city; from the north bank of the River Thames at Westminster all the way out to Windsor and Eton twenty-five miles to the west and Watford over twenty miles north west. Fascinatingly, Miriam Prior had intimated that on previous encounters with ‘the forces of reaction’, that is, the Government and the Armed Forces, she and King Harold had made a point of ‘consistently understating’ the numbers of people who had already moved back into the margins of the ruined metropolis.

Colonel Gregson-Phelps, the most senior of the team of ‘survey officers’ reporting back to Roy Jenkins had promised to update him on the latest ‘refugee debriefings’ of the increasingly large number of people making the perilous journey across the English Channel from Northern France, and in some cases from Holland and Belgium. While it was known that in the low countries and parts of Denmark, Belgium and Northern France disparate ad hoc regional communes, collectives and military protectorates ‘seemed to have been set up’ very little had been known about the real situation on the ground until recently. Likewise, it had not been appreciated until about six weeks ago that there was an established functioning governing regime in Southern France.

Apparently based in the Auvergne around Clermont this administration’s writ might reach half-way north to Paris and all the way from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. However, other than that the ‘South France Government’ was secretive, possibly socialist or Marxist and almost certainly militaristic, little was known of it. For example, it was not known if this regime controlled seaworthy former vessels of the French Navy, or airworthy military or civilian aircraft, whether it had contacts with the junta in power on Corsica, or contacts with Franco’s Spain or the Tuscan League Fascists of the Italian Peninsula. Jeremiads worried whether Southern France had become a ‘safe haven’ for Red Dawn sympathisers or might one day have ambitions of its own in the Mediterranean, or aspirations to command the Bay of Biscay. Wiser heads counselled that lack of contact was not evidence, of itself, of ill-

will or hostility and that the only wise course of action was to wait and see.

Tom Harding-Grayson's skeleton 'French Section' at the Foreign Office had flagged the uncommunicativeness of the putative 'South France Enclave' as problematic but not necessarily worrying; although privately, the Foreign Secretary was not so sanguine. In this troubled age sane men looked for friends wherever they might be found and silence was if not dangerous, then almost always *troubling*.

The last thing Her Majesty's Government needed right now was a new armed neutral, or worse, a potential new enemy threatening its Atlantic flank and menacing the western Mediterranean.

As for 'home affairs', Roy Jenkins was keenly interested to learn what news Colonel Gregson-Phelps had gleaned since their last meeting a fortnight ago.

It vexed him more than somewhat that MI5 had stayed aloof from involving itself in the business of investigating or in any way 'vetting' the refugees coming ashore in increasing numbers on the southern shores of England. Not that MI6 had been any better. What was going on in France was as big a mystery to the Secret Intelligence Service as it was the Security Service! MI5 claimed its focus was on the 'Irish Problem'; MI6 had lost all its continental networks in the October war and was a shadow of its former glory. Both organisations claimed chronic shortages of 'qualified staff' and that erratically shifting Government policy had made it impossible to rebuild 'on a firm footing for the future'.

'*The attached letter, bearing the signatures of the four suspended directors, is obviously injurious to the interests of home and overseas security and represents a prima facie case which must be prosecuted against the men involved...'*

Roy Jenkins groaned out aloud.

In the last six months the United Kingdom had very nearly blundered into a disastrous war with the United States of America because of faulty, misleading and in critical areas, non-existent intelligence. Aircraft operating from Spanish bases had been able to launch devastating attacks on British ships *without warning*. Malta had been attacked in December *without warning*. The whole sorry saga of Red Dawn – *Krasnaya Zarya* – had fallen upon British Arms in the Mediterranean and over-run Anatolia, Turkey, Crete, the Aegean and parts of the Greece and the Balkans *before* anybody in

England had had any real inkling of what was going on. There had been *no warning* of Red Dawn's use of nuclear weapons against Royal Navy targets. There had been *no warning* of Red Dawn's nuclear strikes against targets in south-eastern Europe, Egypt and on Malta. Self-evidently, the Government Communications headquarters (GCHQ) had comprehensively failed the nation.

And now Roy Jenkins was discovering that MI5 was wasting time mercilessly prosecuting the four senior men who had had the temerity to go over the heads of their chiefs to appeal to the Prime Minister in an attempt to remedy this disgraceful state of affairs!

"I take it the Prime Minister has not had sight of this letter?" The Home Secretary asked his Private Secretary, a young man snatched from his post-doctoral studies in economics and politics at Worcester College in January.

"No, Minister. It is my information that MI5 intercepted it and this is the first time it has seen the light of day since then."

For all that Roy Jenkins sometimes gave the appearance of a mild-mannered, bumbling country solicitor with a minor speech impediment there were occasions when a volcanic fury fulminated just beneath his calm, unruffled mask.

"Where pray is the Director General of the Security Service?"

"I believe he is in Belfast, Minister."

The Home Secretary was tempted to observe that if Sir Roger Hollis, whom he had come to regard as a hollow place man, was in Ulster then he was probably in the one place in the kingdom where he could not possibly make the existing situation worse! However, he refrained from voicing his innermost thoughts out aloud.

He slapped the file before him shut.

"I intend to show this to the Prime Minister at the earliest opportunity."

Thereafter, he strongly suspected that Sir Roger Hollis would be seeking alternative employment. It beggared belief that MI5 had, in effect, been conspiring to suppress bad news coming out of GCHQ!

Chapter 10

13:38 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
HMS Talavera, 10 miles west of Sliema Point

Commander Peter Christopher had realised what the captain of the USS Berkeley was planning to do and had hopped falteringly to the port bridge rail, a less than straightforward business since the bridge was a barely recognisable tangle of twisted and blackened metal and his right knee and ankle collapsed agonisingly every time he tried to put any weight on that wing. He was as bloodied, battered, bruised and scorched as any man and had absolutely no idea how he or anybody else on the bridge had survived. Leaning over the rail he had cupped his hands to his mouth.

'STAND OFF, SIR!'

His voice had cracked with strain.

'STAND OFF, SIR!'

The immaculate superstructure of the modern American guided missile destroyer had ranged alongside and the gap between the two ships had rapidly narrowed; already Talavera's bow-heavy wallowing motion previously threatening an imminent capsize had moderated, sheltered as she was in the lee of the bigger US Navy vessel.

On the bridge wing opposite Peter Christopher a man in a helmet wearing a bulky life preserver raised a megaphone to his lips.

'NEGATIVE TO THAT, SIR! PREPARE TO RECEIVE BOARDERS, SIR!'

Despite everything Peter Christopher had half-smiled and had shaken his head. This latter was a bad idea because he almost passed out. Had his hand not involuntarily tightened its grip on the bridge wing and somebody behind him not steadied him he would surely have taken a fall.

'TOO DANGEROUS, SIR!' He had protested, cursing his failing voice. 'TALAVERA MAY CAPSIZE OR BLOW UP ANY MINUTE!'

'DAM THE TORPEDOES, SIR!' Boomed back the uncompromising reply from the lips of the commanding officer of the USS Berkeley.

Peter Christopher would have argued the point further but his seaman's eye recognised that the two ships were about to come together regardless of any action he or his American counterpart took in the next few seconds. He also knew that because of the American captain's courage and willingness to put his own ship directly in harm's way that potentially, many of his men – and most of his seriously wounded - who would surely have died in the water, would now live.

Besides, he was in no position to argue. His counterpart on the USS Berkeley had a megaphone and he only had his broken voice.

'All hands to assist with the evacuation of the wounded to the USS Berkeley!' He ordered, knowing that it was not an order he actually needed to give.

He was very nearly beyond reason by then.

Despite the warmth of the afternoon he shivered.

'Sir?' An anxious voice inquired.

'I'm okay,' he had retorted instantly, harshly. 'I'm fine, I'm fine, thanks,' he had added, more gently.

The USS Berkeley had ground against the sinking destroyer with a loud squeal of metal on metal, and a veritable flood of men had leapt down onto Talavera's decks. Peter Christopher had watched as a helpless spectator, humbled and thankful that so many of his men who would otherwise have died in the seasonal cold of the waters off Malta would now live.

"We should go down to the fo'c'sle, sir?"

"Yes," he agreed, watching the first of his most badly wounded being hauled onto the deck of the Berkeley. "Clear the bridge!"

But the Captain of HMS Talavera himself made no move to follow.

While a single man remained alive on *his* ship he would remain aboard.

He had led his men into the jaws of death; what honourable man could conceive of saving himself before he knew that all those brave fellows who might be saved had been saved?

A hand touched his left elbow.

"Wasn't that a thing?" Miles Weiss, HMS Talavera's Executive officer and Peter Christopher's oldest surviving friend in the service observed rhetorically. He blinked and squeezed his eyes shut, unable to focus on anything in particular as blood trickled from his left ear. Remarkably, he had survived the destruction of the gun director – by a direct hit from a large shell

which had failed to explode – with hardly a scratch.

The Captain of the destroyer half-turned.

“Wasn’t it just,” he concurred.

“You can’t stay here, Peter,” the other man said quietly, his words a little slurred as if he was moderately inebriated.

“What else can I do, Miles?”

The two friends looked dazedly one to the other, unhurriedly contemplating the matter as if there was no particular urgency in their situation.

Peter Christopher met his friend’s unfocused stare for a moment. The two men understood each other perfectly. Miles Weiss knew that if it had come to it he would have driven Talavera into the side of the nearest of the two big ships. Given the option he would have rammed the Soviet cruiser; that would have been better than crumpling his fragile little ship against the thickly armoured carapace of the *Yavuz*, the ancient battlecruiser the Turks had inherited from the Kaiser’s High Seas Fleet back in 1914. The Soviet cruiser *Admiral Kutuzov’s* armour was less than a third as thick as the old German behemoth’s, at speed Talavera would have made a big hole in her...

Thankfully it had not come to that.

One of Talavera’s torpedoes had jammed the old dreadnought’s rudders; another had exploded beneath the keel of the Sverdlov class cruiser and broken her back somewhere in the vicinity of her forward turret. While she was lying dead in the water the Yavuz, her rudders jammed and out of control had rammed the Admiral Kutuzov moments before the first giant armour-piercing shells of the USS Iowa’s 16-inch 50-calibre main battery had started to fall like watery Redwood trees all around the two interlocked, stricken enemy warships.

Not for the first time since the night of the October War the twenty-seven-year-old commanding officer of the sinking Battle class destroyer HMS Talavera paused to take a deep breath and to reflect upon his situation. He was living his life in a series of intense thousand mile-an-hour episodes, each climactic battle more desperate and more murderous than the last; but even by *his* standards the events of the last hour had been completely *insane*.

That the battle had cost him his ship there was little doubt; nothing else was simple, or straightforward. Many of *his* men, *his* people, had been killed and maimed in a battle that neither he, nor anybody else should or ought to

have had to fight.

He thought about his father in distant Mdina; was he still alive?

'Cut your lines and go, Peter!'

For all he knew those would be the last words he would ever hear his father say to him.

And what of Marija?

There had been no time to worry about Marija once he had decided what he had to do. Between that moment and now he had not, for a moment, believed that he or any of his men were going to survive the day. That had been easier to accept than the dreadful uncertainty of not knowing if the last people on earth he loved and cared for were dead or alive.

He had peered at the two enemy ships – Red Dawn ships, perhaps – locked together in their deadly dance as the USS Iowa's broadsides had plunged down through the great electrical storm which had become the Wagnerian background to the battle. Massive blooms of crimson fire had splashed across the Admiral Kutuzov. Pieces of the cruiser's superstructure had been sent wheeling through space to crash into the ocean hundreds of yards away. Enormous fires had begun to belch black smoke, one of the Yavuz's amidships turrets had ignited like a giant Roman candle and burned with the momentary blinding ferocity of a two hundred feet tall blow torch. Later, the cruiser had drifted away, settling fast as seawater rushed into the huge rent in her side. With spine-tingling speed, the fifteen-thousand-ton Admiral Kutuzov had lurched to starboard and within less than a minute capsized, her red-leaded hull briefly visible before she went down by the bow. He stern had hung suspended in the air for a moment and then she had dived towards the bottom of the sea.

The Yavuz had reeled away, her screws reversed and her rudders hopelessly jammed she had proscribed a wide slow circle under a murderous rain of shells. The old battlecruiser had disappeared from sight each time a new deluge of 2700-pound super-heavy Mark 8 armour piercing 16-inch rounds fired by the fast approaching USS Iowa fell upon her. Some of the battleship's shells 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 had actually seen the Yavuz turn turtle or linger capsized on the surface for another minute as one last dreadful

broadside lanced down upon her like multiple blows from Thor's mighty hammer before the darkling, lightning bolt illuminated squall finally drifted away to the east.

The skies over the seas which had consumed the two great ships remained grimly brooding; now and then the last paroxysms of the enormous electrical storm which had raged throughout the battle sent tridents of lightning spearing into the iron grey Mediterranean in the middle distance.

If there had ever been a time in Peter Christopher's life that he had been tempted to or had entertained a sneaking suspicion that there was some guiding handing in human affairs, that time was long gone. Surely, no merciful loving God would sit on *His* hands and allow what had happened this day. The only kind of deity who might conceivably take any pleasure from the sheer bloody murder of the last couple of hours was the sort whose rightful place was adjacent to Lucifer's right hind claw.

Mile Weiss had patted his arm a second time.

"We have to go, Peter."

The commanding officer of Her Majesty's Ship Talavera nodded. He waved for his friend to precede him to the ladder. They were alone on the bridge and the destroyer was settling ever deeper into the water beneath their feet.

At the head of the ladder Peter Christopher hesitated.

Talavera's bow was awash now in an oily, flotsam fouled sea.

There would still be men trapped below decks in the mangled, twisted wreckage and he imagined he could hear their plaintive, hopeless cries for a succour that would never come.

He felt physically sick.

Was this what the future held?

War and only war?

War without end?

Chapter 11

14:22 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
USS Independence (CV-62), passing South through the Straits of Messina

The whole ship shuddered as two McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantoms thundered off the foredeck catapults, and with full after burners lit climbed into the stormy Mediterranean skies like a pair of homesick angels.

On the aft flight deck of the USS Independence Marines and every man with medical training and first aid skills who could be spared were being packed – like sardines, in fact – into three waiting Sikorsky SH-3 Sea Kings for the long flight to Malta, still more than two hundred miles to the south. Down in the fire rooms of the great ship all eight of her Babcock and Wilcox boilers were on line, and in the huge machine rooms the carrier's four Westinghouse geared turbines were running faster, hotter and farther beyond the red line than anybody had ever run them.

Six months out of dock and long overdue a full machinery overhaul the one thousand and seventy feet long seventy-five-thousand-ton super carrier was hurtling south at flank speed, thirty-three knots – over thirty-seven miles an hour in landsman's terms - on a mission.

Several of the big ship's smaller consorts were already trailing far in her wake. The nine thousand ton Leahy class nuclear powered guided missile destroyer leader Bainbridge, commissioned only days before the October War, and designated as the Independence's 'backstop' – or as the British would say 'goalkeeper' – had long been detached and now, ironically, only the fleet-footed Farragut and Charles F. Adams class destroyers of Rear-Admiral Laverne Lucas Detweiller's so-called 'Malta Squadron', still paced the Independence as she crashed south spitting F-4 Phantoms and Douglas A-4 Skyhawks off her catapults as fast as the deck crews could refuel and rearm them.

Fifty-two-year-old Vice Admiral Bernard Ambrose 'Chick' Clarey stood on the inboard wing of his Admiral's Flag Bridge gripping the rail with such angry, helpless fury that his hands eventually rebelled. The agonising spasms

of cramp shot up his arms and he swung away from watching the dangerous, organised chaos on his flagship's flight deck, to face his operations staff.

The USS Independence's CAG – Commander Air Group – had been given his orders and was absent, carrying them out with ferocious and calmly, impressively competent zeal. The carrier's F-4s were assigned to combat air patrol roles over the Maltese Archipelago and its environs out to a range of one hundred nautical miles from Valletta, while A-4 Skyhawks and the carrier's Grumman A-6 Intruders 'dealt with' any 'hostile surface units' they encountered 'anywhere' within a two hundred nautical mile radius of Malta. The Independence had also launched three Grumman S-2 Tracker anti-submarine birds each carrying two live 'homing' torpedoes to hunt and to 'destroy' for any 'Soviet submarine' in the vicinity. Every aircraft and every ship in Bernard Clarey's Task Force – since midnight designated United States Sixth Fleet – was now operating on a war footing, 'weapons free' at the discretion of individual commanding officers.

Bernard Clarey might have been dispatched to Gibraltar to take command of the disparate units of the new US Mediterranean Fleet with orders that focussed more on organisational and diplomatic niceties, than practical war fighting; but now that he was the man 'on the spot' in what was self-evidently a war zone, there was absolutely nothing unambiguous about the instructions he had issued to his captains approximately an hour ago.

IN THE ABSENCE OF OTHER SPECIFIC COUNTERMANDING ORDERS FROM COMSIXTHFLEET YOU WILL SEEK OUT AND DESTROY THE ENEMY AND RENDER ALL POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE TO ALLIED UNITS AND AUTHORITIES!

Bernard Clarey had been in command of United States Submarine Force in the Pacific at the time of the Battle of Washington. This meant that when the Chief of Naval Operations floated his name as the C-in-C of the newly recreated Sixth Fleet neither the White House, or more importantly, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Curtis LeMay, had raised objections to Clarey's nomination.

Bernard Clarey's hands were *clean*. He had had nothing whatsoever to do with the naval comedy of errors which had resulted in the October War, had had nothing whatsoever to do with the provocative operational 'demonstrating' of the Enterprise Battle Group in the Western Approaches to the British Isles at the time of the Operation Manna Convoys, or with the

subsequent unprovoked harassment and bungled attack on the British nuclear submarine HMS Dreadnought. That this unwarranted, wholly illegal attack had taken place in international waters and that in attempting to frustrate it an American vessel, the nuclear-powered hunter killed USS Scorpion, had been sunk by torpedoes deployed by Grumman S-2 Tracker aircraft flying off the Enterprise, spoke – in Curtis LeMay's and the President's minds – as ample testimony to the idiocy of a certain clique of highly placed naval officers at the Pentagon and at Atlantic Fleet Headquarters in Norfolk, Virginia. Any man 'soiled' by contact with this clique was permanently 'damaged goods' in Washington. Thus, when the Chief of Naval Operations had put Clarey's name into the hat his nomination had literally, gone through on the nod.

However, the manner in which he had assumed command – at less than forty-eight hours' notice - at Gibraltar still left a bad taste in Bernard Clarey's mouth. Rear-Admiral David Torrance, his predecessor in command of the Independence Task Force had been summarily dismissed when the Chief of Naval Operations concluded he was dragging his feet about the true battle and sea readiness of his command.

Clarey had not known David Torrance very well but the two men were fellow veterans of the Pacific War against the Japanese and of the later Korean conflict. Torrance had always been a vaguely political – there was no such thing in the United States Navy as an overtly political – officer with the sort of family connections, rich Southern Democrats, who despised everything John Fitzgerald Kennedy and his ilk stood for, and worse, had felt free to periodically declaim as much.

Torrance had done himself no favours the previous year while on a courtesy visit to Madras when he had disparaged both the former colonial power, Great Britain, and the post October War foreign policy of the Kennedy Administration. In front of his Indian hosts and the representatives of the international press at an official public function, he had made a series of less than complementary remarks about the way the [United States] 'Navy was being run post-war' and how it would be 'a good thing if the Royal Navy, *what's left of it*, was *driven* from the Indian Ocean'. In some accounts he had boasted that the Independence could 'do the job in five minutes' if the President had the 'guts to seize the nettle'.

Against this backdrop Torrance's fate had been sealed when rumours about poor morale within the ranks of his Task Force reached the Navy

Department in its new Philadelphia Headquarters on the New Jersey shore of the Delaware River, and it subsequently emerged that the Independence's much discussed 'catapult troubles' had been gravely overstated. Thereupon, the axe had fallen with a sudden, decisive ruthlessness which would have been inconceivable before the trauma of the Battle of Washington.

Nevertheless, the affair still left a bitter tang in Bernard Clarey's mouth; for he was a man who harked after a more honourable time when a man's word was his bond and his oath of service inviolable. Moreover, he had understood that in sending practically every senior officer on David Torrance's Flag Staff back to the States he was effectively ending each and every man's career in the US Navy. He had felt even worse about that.

Although it was now painfully obvious that his predecessor's lack of enthusiasm to join the fight had had potentially disastrous consequences for the fragile re-constructed US-British alliance; he was painfully aware that but for the one-eyed atypical decisions of a man he had known and respected for more years than he cared to recollect, the actual consequences of David Torrance's tardiness and lack of appetite for the fight would probably have been substantially mitigated and the worst effects of the present crisis averted.

Bernard Clarey had watched the tall, bear like lump of a man that was Rear Admiral Laverne Detweiller jump down from the Sea King which had collected him from his flagship, the USS Mahan, and stalk, bowed beneath the still churning rotors towards the bridge.

If Detweiller's modern guided missile destroyers had been patrolling Maltese waters – as they were supposed to have been – it would not have fallen to two small and hopelessly out-gunned Royal Navy ships to stand alone against overwhelming enemy forces. If Detweiller's ships had been in the gun line with HMS Talavera and HMS Yarmouth Laverne Detweiller would be a hero by now rather than the undoubted villain of the piece.

The man whose singular blunder had done more to torpedo Anglo-US relations in a day than any man since Boston tea party on the night of 16th December 1773; stalked past the assembled operations staff to confront his new C-in-C. Not so long ago Detweiller had commanded the most modern and powerful naval squadron in the World. His flagship had been the brand new eighty-thousand-ton nuclear powered super carrier the USS Enterprise; in company had been the nuclear-powered guided missile cruiser USS Long

Beach and half-a-dozen of the most state of the art warships in Christendom. Then one day the Long Beach had been sunk and the Enterprise so badly damaged by a nearby two megaton air burst that without the assistance of her escorting British destroyers, her fires would surely have consumed her. Over a thousand Americans had died that day, hundreds more had been injured, many terribly burned by the thermonuclear fireball which had suddenly bloomed above Detweiller's seemingly invulnerable, all-conquering squadron.

Detweiller had not behaved badly in the aftermath, but in hindsight he had been slow to publicly give the Royal Navy due credit for its efforts in saving those who could be saved from the Long Beach, and in acknowledging the desperate risks its ships and men had taken to save the Enterprise. The USS Enterprise had limped back to Norfolk where she was expected to be in dockyard hands for most of the next eighteen months to two years; and Detweiller left to command his much-reduced squadron but stateside, questions had been asked – legitimately, it now seemed - about what cost the disaster had wrought on him.

In a funny sort of way when Bernard Clarey had received Detweiller's signal, belatedly transmitted eight hours *after* he had departed Malta that he intended to exercise his squadron 'south of Sicily' prior to joining Clarey's fleet for 'familiarization evolutions' it had come as no real surprise that he had left the British in Malta completely in the lurch.

Had Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations not 'counted' on the presence of Detweiller's powerful 'Malta Squadron' of at least four fast, modern warships to safeguard the Maltese base in the absence of the Mediterranean Fleet, it was inconceivable that he would have so comprehensively denuded its defences in favour of the forces he had sent to re-conquer Cyprus.

Clarey looked the much bigger man in the eye.

"If you would be so good as to accompany me to my sea cabin please, Admiral Detweiller."

Rear Admiral Laverne Lucas Detweiller glowered at the man who had so recently leapfrogged him in rank. A fifty-four-year-old third generation American son of Saxon immigrants who had settled in Jones's County, Iowa in the 1880s, he was a towering, blond giant of a man with a handshake that

would have made a full grown Grizzly bear wince; and subsequently count his clawed fingers to make sure they were all still present and correct. Normally the most jovial and big hearted of men, throughout the Navy he was fondly referred to as ‘Det’ or ‘Luke’ by his peers. For his whole career he had been larger than life, an indefatigable Viking of a man. But not today; partly on account of Clarey’s peremptory order to ‘report on board the flagship at your earliest convenience’, partly because he had graduated Annapolis two years before ComSixthFleet and he thought the fleet command ought by rights to have been his, but mostly because he knew his thirty-six-year career in the United States Navy was over.

Detweiller had been operating under direct orders from the office of the Chief of Naval Operations. While he had limited freedom of manoeuvre within the scope of those orders his ‘over-riding consideration at all times’ was specifically ‘the safeguarding of the Maltese Archipelago with a view to ensuring that it was a secure base for future Allied operations.’ Electing to exercise *all* one’s ships several hours steaming time from the base that he was supposed to be and had been ordered to safeguard simply did not cut the mustard.

The CNO had countenanced leaving four large modern US warships ‘swinging around their anchors’ at Malta because the advanced radar and communications suites that they carried was supposed to be filling in the gaps in and backing up the unreliable and much degraded British radar defences. Those ‘radar defences’ had been targeted by Italian Regia Aeronautica US-supplied A-4 Skyhawks and by four 100th Bomb Group B-52s in early December last year and then virtually destroyed by the EMPs – electromagnetic pulses – emitted by the two Red Dawn ICBM near miss air bursts which bracketed the archipelago in February. It was recognised – implicitly - by all parties that without Detweiller’s ships Malta *did not* have a functioning air defence system, and absolutely no *over the horizon* radar early warning capability.

A week ago, Detweiller had complained about his ships having to ‘swing around their anchors’; the Chief of Naval Operations had tersely suggested he *urgently* remedy the situation by sending them to sea to operate as ‘radar pickets’ as per his ‘general operational brief’. It beggared belief that Detweiller had interpreted this ‘suggestion’ as a licence to remove himself completely from Maltese waters.

If Bernard Clarey had his way Detweiller ought not to be just drummed out of the service but court-martialled for neglect of duty and negligence. Moreover, had he known in advance what the 'imbecile' had planned he would have driven his fleet directly into Maltese waters; probably arriving off Malta at least thirty-six hours ago. The Independence's air group would have made short work of the enemy fleet long before it got within gun range of Malta. Hell, it would have been a goddammed turkey shoot!

Instead, hundreds, maybe thousands of people on Malta were dead and the British had been left to fight what might well turn out to be the most crucial battle of the war in the Mediterranean alone! What ought to have been a stunning demonstration of American armed military might had become a wholly avoidable gut-wrenching humiliation.

The door of the admiral's sea cabin, a relatively spacious and luxurious space some four yards by three buried in the great steel tower of the USS Independence's bridge superstructure, clicked shut and the two admirals paused to assess their relative positions.

"For what it's worth," the big man grunted, "I personally discussed and cleared my squadron's movements with the British C-in-C."

Bernard Clarey would have reacted angrily if Detweiller had been offering any kind of apology or explanation. He said nothing and waited for the other man to continue.

"Talavera," he sighed. His pique at being summoned to the flagship had evaporated; it was as if setting foot on the Independence's flight deck had brought the inevitability of his situation home to roost. "Talavera was one of the British destroyers that saved my hide," he shrugged, "heck, all of our hides on the Enterprise when that nuke went off next to the Long Beach."

The new commander of the US Sixth Fleet had thus far only learned the sketchiest of details of the desperate battle off the eastern shores of Malta between two hopelessly outgunned and outmatched British ships, the old World War II vintage destroyer Talavera and the newer anti-submarine frigate Yarmouth, with a Turkish dreadnought, and one, perhaps two fifteen thousand ton Sverdlov class Soviet cruisers and an unknown number – possible as many as seven or eight in total - escorting frigates and destroyers. Notwithstanding, from what he had already learned he was frankly, in *awe*. He honestly had not believed that in this day and age two captains could possible throw their ships against such overwhelming odds in such a way...

It was, well, positively *Nelsonian*...

"Heck, Chick," the big man sighed, employing Clarey's nickname throughout the higher echelons of the US Navy, shaking his head. "What I wouldn't have given to be beside those guys when they dove at that goddammed Turkish battleship and that Sverdlov cruiser!"

Bernard Clarey nodded grimly.

There was no room for sentimentality in high command.

"I relieve you of your command, Admiral," he intoned, taking no pleasure or satisfaction in his work. "Your kit and personal possessions will be recovered from your flagship, the USS Mahan, circumstances permitting. In the mean time you will remain onboard the Independence as a guest of the wardroom. You will be accorded all respect and privileges consistent with your rank but I must request you to understand that in any other circumstances you would be under arrest at this time."

Rear Admiral Laverne Lucas Detweiller made an approximation of standing to his full height – if he had tried too hard his head would have hit the steel beam above it – and came to attention.

He looked the younger man in the eye.

"I made a mistake," he said grimly. "A mistake, that's all."

"I know that, Det. But the way things are these days people like us can't afford to make mistakes."

Chapter 12

07:32 Hours (EST)
Friday 3rd April 1964
British Embassy, Bellfield Avenue, Wister Park, Philadelphia

Having spent the previous evening at a reception in the Philadelphia White House, and subsequently talked long into the early hours of the morning with the United States Secretary of State J. William Fulbright, the British Ambassador had hoped to be able to enjoy a brief 'sleep in' that morning before he rose to commence his next eighteen hour working day. Since arriving in America in January Lord Franks had adopted a punishing regime under which he rose early and retired very, very late. Normally rising between five and six o'clock, today he had asked not to be roused until eight.

Oliver Sherwell Franks had previously been British Ambassador in Washington between 1948 and 1952; but that had been in another age when the World had seemed a safer, saner place and whatever their differences and foibles, the British and the American governments had – after a difficult period in the first years after the 1945 war – played the diplomatic game observing in the main the courtesies appropriate between old and trusted allies. When he had first been in Washington in the late 1940s India and Pakistan had just been granted independence and regardless of how botched and bloody this first great de-colonization exercise had turned out to be, the Americans had greeted it with guarded approbation. They too had once been British subjects and notwithstanding the 'old country' had just 'helped them' to win the war in Europe and to a lesser extent, the war against Japan, most Americans instinctively resented and mistrusted 'the British Empire' and everything it stood for.

In the aftermath of the October War the United Kingdom's remaining 'white' dominions, and virtually all of its still 'white' former dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Southern Rhodesia - even the newly 'republican' South Africa - and a raft of colonial outposts including Singapore, Hong Kong and miscellaneous island dependencies scattered across the Pacific and the South Atlantic – had in effect, circled the wagons

around the dreadfully mauled former mother country. In the United States, itself sorely damaged and bleeding, the sudden unity of the 'British Commonwealth' – the *Commonwealth of Nations* formed in 1931 had formally ceased to be the *British Commonwealth* after World War II but American commentators and most politicians had not yet caught up with the fact yet - had been in stark contrast to the reluctant and the qualified, nervous 'loyalty' it enjoyed from fellow members of the 'Americas club' and the open hostility of the former European colonial outposts in the Caribbean, many of whom had been badly affected by fallout from the destruction of neighbouring Cuba and received no help or compensation from Washington. In short, to many Americans it had seemed lately as if they had no 'real friends' in the World; while the United Kingdom, which in the eyes of many in the United States had somehow 'let down' America, had emerged from the war with a 'new empire'.

The depressing thing was that there were still people in the State Department and within the President's inner circle who doggedly clung to this belief.

Of course, nobody at the British Embassy would ever publicly intimate that far from the United Kingdom having in any way, shape or form 'let down' its trans-Atlantic ally; notwithstanding the general feeling that if anybody had 'let anybody down' it was the Americans who had done all the 'letting down'. This was the rampaging five-ton African bull Elephant drawing breath in the corner of every room that nobody wanted to mention each time the 'two old allies' sat down to 'talk turkey'. Consequently, the British side was never going to forget it, or lightly take the word of any President or of any senior member of any American Administration on trust any time soon. Only deeds counted in this brave new post-cataclysm age.

No matter how blurred 'the facts' were, or were likely to become in the future, Lord Franks knew exactly what had happened on that night late in October 1962. The United States had launched a massive all out pre-emptive first strike against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact enemies, *without* first warning its 'oldest ally'. The first that Harold MacMillan's government had known about the war was when the early warning radars in the Yorkshire had detected the first Polaris missiles breaking surface in the Norwegian Sea and proscribing sub-orbital trajectories towards the east. By then it had been too late to implement the most rudimentary of civil defence measures or to

even sound the air raid sirens left over from World War II; plain language ‘war warnings’ had been flashed to all British forces on land, sea and air by men who knew they would shortly be dead, and the code ‘EIGHT-EAST’ – *you are hereby authorised to attack all designated war targets* - had been flashed to the V-Bomber bases on the English East Coast more or less at the moment the first Soviet missiles had popped up over the horizon.

Shortly thereafter, the dying had begun.

“Lord Franks!”

The British Ambassador blinked bleary-eyed at his First Secretary. The man was irritatingly wide-awake, although his tie was at half-mast betraying that he too, had only recently been awakened.

“Something has happened in the Med,” the man explained. “At Malta, we think. There are already journalists, photographers and a couple of TV trucks outside the Embassy and,” his tone said that the news got worse, “the Secretary of State is on the line and says he has to talk to you. Urgently, sir.”

Although Oliver Franks had never planned to be a diplomat and had had few old friends either in the pre-war Foreign and Colonial Office or in its much-reduced post-October War reincarnation, he had been an obvious choice to replace Sir James Sykes who had been assassinated during the Battle of Washington in December. Serendipitously, he loved America and respected Americans of all mainstream political persuasions and had a wealth of contacts garnered during his earlier period in Washington. More important, there was a calm, gentle method in everything he did. He was that rare thing; a man whose life had prepared him for exactly the challenges confronting him in Philadelphia during this, his second sojourn in America.

“If you’d inform Secretary Fulbright’s people that I will be happy to take his call in five minutes time please,” he decided, stifling a yawn and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He stepped into his dressing gown and stuffed his feet into his slippers. “I will take the call in my office. Be a good fellow and organize a pot of tea please.”

Oliver Frank’s ‘office’ was a large, airy room with – during daylight hours rather than at this time of day – a view of the sprawling campus of La Salle University to the north, and Wister Woods to the east and south spoilt only by the two armoured personnel carriers of the Pennsylvania National Guard permanently posted just beyond the Embassy compound’s razor wire topped steel mesh fence.

The Ambassador trudged down the stairs and entered his working sanctum accompanied by two assistants, both very young and like the First Secretary, vexingly bright-eyed and bushy tailed!

Bill Fulbright wants to talk to me 'urgently' at a time of day when neither of us – were we in our right minds – would want to discuss anything of substance?

Oliver Franks pondered this thought as he settled behind his desk, eyeing the phone next to his right hand as he began to work through the possibilities ahead of hearing what inevitably was going to be very bad news.

His calmness was no act. He was as unflappable as he seemed. A lifetime of service had taught him to see past the emotional and the emotive, to cut logically to the heart of a matter and if it was humanly possible, form opinions and judgements with equanimity. Although in practice this was harder to do – especially in a crisis – than say, he had learned to master most of his fears and now this 'trick' served him and his country well.

Born in 1905 Oliver Franks had been too young to fight in the Great War. A graduate of Queen's College, Oxford, he had pursued an academic career between First and Second World Wars. In the 1930s he had been Provost of Worcester College, and then between 1936 and 1946 – a period interrupted by war service - Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. During Hitler's War he had joined the Ministry of Supply, rising to become its Permanent Secretary, and after 1945 he had dutifully encapsulated the lessons learned during the war in *Central Planning and Control in War and Peace*, a document which had, apparently, never been far from Margaret Thatcher's elbow – throughout her pre-prime ministerial role as Minister of Supply in Edward Heath's United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration - and remained the source 'bible' for much of the work of the Ministry of Supply. A man of the middle, moderate left of British politics, Franks had been a close personal friend of Clement Atlee, the Labour Prime Minister between 1945 and 1951, and of Ernest Bevin. It was Bevin, the first post-1945 Foreign Secretary who had tempted him away from Queen's College, where he was Provost, to head the British mission to discuss the Marshal Plan. Later as Ambassador in Washington he had been intimately involved in the negotiations which resulted in the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In due course he had become the Chairman of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation and

had spent the eight years before the October War as the Chairman of Lloyds Bank.

The phone rang with brutal suddenness.

"Sorry to call you at this time of day, Oliver," growled the familiar voice of the United States Secretary of State.

"Please don't apologise, Bill," the British Ambassador replied evenly, as if he was greeting an old friend at a quiet, private reception. "I am at your disposal. To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

"My people woke me up thirty minutes ago," the other man explained tersely. "Somebody started the rumour mill running last night about the situation in the Mediterranean. The guys on the duty desk at the State Department just logged it to begin with and then my liaison officer at Defence reported there was some kind of communication breakdown with Malta."

Oliver Franks said nothing.

He and Missourian James William Fulbright had been born just fifty-two days apart and the two men shared a great deal more in common than simply the year of their birth. They were unlikely kindred spirits, if not in their politics but in their uncannily shared appreciation of the 'big global picture'. Of all the men closest to the President only three had really impressed Oliver Franks – Lyndon Johnson, the Vice President; Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defence; and Fulbright – and of the three Fulbright had instantly struck him as being the most impressive.

Fulbright, who was still – by dint of Congressional dithering and obfuscation - officially the 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 was a formidable man physically, intellectually and politically, a man of conviction and surprisingly contrary views. In retrospect many people now believed that if President Kennedy had had the nerve to install him at the State Department in the spring of 1961; things would have turned out very differently when the Soviets attempted to base medium range ballistic missiles on Cuba. The reason why Jack Kennedy had *not* appointed Fulbright secretary of State at the outset of his Administration was because he was an unrepentant Southern Democrat and that at the time his unshakable commitment to multilaterism – regardless that it accorded perfectly with the President's own personal but

publicly understated internationalism – would actually have sat much more comfortably with the expressed foreign policy agenda of an administration run by JFK's rival in 1960 for the Presidency, Richard Nixon. Such were the contradictions inherent in the American way of doing politics.

The Secretary of State had been the junior United States Senator for Arkansas for nearly two decades, a member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations from as long ago as 1949, and the committee's Chairman for the last four years while remaining a convinced segregationist. It had been this that was probably the clinching argument that had handed Dean Rusk his seat at the top table back in 1961. Yet famously Fulbright had been had been the only member of the Senate to vote *against* a 1954 appropriation for Joseph McCarthy's *Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations*, under the purview of which McCarthy's ongoing unholy inquisition against alleged *Un-American Activities* was pursued in the 1950s. A former Rhodes Scholar and attorney who had been admitted to the bar in Washington DC as long ago as 1934, he had gone into politics while he was lecturing in law at the University of Arkansas, first being elected to Congress in 1942.

To Oliver Frank's mind, keenly tuned to the nuances and the convoluted ways and means of the American political system, Bill Fulbright was exactly the sort of independently minded and almost quasi-religiously motivated political animal whose success was utterly incomprehensible to most non-Americans. To an outsider his liberal multilaterism and opposition to right-wing anti-libertarian dogma, or to any trammelling of civil liberties by the government seemed to sit diametrically opposed to – and irreconcilable with - his trenchantly avowed racist segregationist position, and the gusto with which he had helped filibuster, for example, the 1957 Civil Rights Act. Only in America could a man have made his mark sponsoring a program - the Fulbright Program in 1946 - providing for educational grants in overseas countries to promote understanding between the United States and those countries; and a few years later vehemently *object* to the Supreme Court's decision in the 1954 Brown v Board of Education case, whereby Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren had ruled that Kansas's State-sanctioned segregation of public schools amounted to a violation of the 14th amendment and was therefore unconstitutional. *Only* in America could a man like William Fulbright have prospered, and eventually, become the safe pair of hands into which his President had belatedly entrusted the nation's bankrupt

foreign policy.

"I've heard nothing as yet," Oliver Franks reported honestly. He and Fulbright might not share a common agenda but he considered the Secretary of State a friend and between friends, even 'diplomatic' friends, honestly was often the best policy.

"Okay, this is the thing," the Secretary of State prefaced, getting down to business. From his tone it was evident that he did not believe he was actually having to say what he was about to say. "The US Navy stationed four modern warships at Malta under the command of Rear-Admiral Detweiller. Four guided missile destroyers at Malta to cover the archipelago in the absence of your ships on the Cyprus operation, Oliver," Bill Fulbright explained. "Our ships have better communications equipment than your guys on land. They were also there to fill in gaps in Malta's air defence early warning system. The Defence Department is in contact with those ships and they aren't at Malta or anywhere near it."

"Oh." The British Ambassador knew very little about the disposition of 'allied' forces in the Mediterranean; but he did know that every available ship and aircraft had been assigned to the task force charged with ejecting the barbaric Red Dawn horde from the island of Cyprus over a thousand miles east of Malta. However, he quickly joined up the dots and saw the perils of the picture thus revealed. There was a communication breakdown with Malta. The ships stationed at Malta to protect the island were elsewhere. Who exactly was guarding the most strategically important island in the Mediterranean? "Er, you spoke of the rumour mill grinding, Bill?"

"The *New York Times* is running a front-page story headlined '*The Brits Go It Alone'* claiming there's been some kind of major bust up between your C-in-C and Admiral Detweiller," Fulbright said angrily.

Oliver Franks was momentarily too stunned to speak.

"The story is that the British Government is planning to appoint Admiral Luce as Supreme Commander in the Mediterranean of *all* Allied Forces."

"That's nonsense, Bill," the British Ambassador stuttered. He took a deep breath to restore his badly shaken equilibrium. "Madness in fact. I know that our talks with your Defence Department have thus far been inconclusive on the subject of the future structure of the high command in the theatre; but it is inconceivable that the Prime Minister would unilaterally circumvent or seek to anticipate the outcome of those discussions. As you

well know, senior members of Mrs Thatcher's inner circle are reconciled to the post being filled by an American officer. Albeit," he felt duty bound to add, "accepting that this will create difficulties back at home unless or until there are US troops on the ground in the Mediterranean."

Bill Fulbright sighed.

"The *New York Times* isn't the only paper running the story. By noon the House of Representatives is going to be like a wasp's nest somebody just hit with a baseball bat, Oliver."

Chapter 13

12:47 Hours (GMT)
Friday 3rd April 1964
Leinster House, Kildare Street, Dublin

It was horribly quiet in the Taoiseach's office. The quietness was of that indefinably threatening, dangerous kind which easily provoked unthinking words spoken in haste which were later bitterly regretted.

A less seasoned diplomat than Sir Ian MacLennan, since 1959 the British Ambassador to Eire, the Republic of Ireland, that still young nation made up of twenty-six of the partitioned thirty-two counties of Ireland, might have spoken ill-advisedly, without mulling the consequences of his meanings. Even with over three decades of hard-won experience in the diplomatic service, he was sorely tempted to speak his mind. However, Her Majesty's Government had, in its wisdom, not sent him to Dublin to speak *his* mind.

The three Irishmen in the room waited.

The Taoiseach, Sean Lemass drew a tiny quantum of comfort from the greying, elegantly attired and poised Englishman's poker-faced initial reaction to what he had just learned.

Frank Aiken, the Minister for External Affairs, breathed angry, vaguely disconsolate snorts of air as he teetered at the edge of the precipice and glimpsed the dark nothingness below him.

Lieutenant General John McKeown, the Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces, whose total uniformed manpower – including reservists he could not afford to call up without bankrupting his country - numbered significantly less than half the boots on the ground that the British currently had stationed just in Ulster, was less angry than his political masters, for he knew that if it came to war his forces, outnumbered on land and incapable of inconveniencing the might of British arms in the air or at sea, would have no alternative but to lay down their weapons and surrender or be obliterated within days. A soldier's lot was simpler than that of a politician because the realities of a given situation were invariable *stark*, and the scope for manoeuvre limited or non-existent.

Sir Ian MacLennan had heard what he had heard; now he was trying to read the mood of the other three men in the room. It would be this latter judgement rather than the communication of the *facts* that had just been laid before him which would determine the advice that he would, sometime in the next hour, pass on to his old friend the Foreign Secretary, Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson in Oxford.

His own thoughts were racing; that was bad.

Think of something else, man!

He had lost count of the number of times he had visited Leinster House. The building, its name in Irish '*Tigh Laighean*; had been the home of the *Oireachtas*, the Parliament of Ireland since 1922. A great white-washed lump of a Georgian building in keeping with much of the architecture of nineteenth century Dublin, it had been the seat of the Dukes of Leinster, the descendants of the Norman Fitzgeralds who first came to Ireland in 1169 and later became the Earls of Kildare. The history of Ireland had trampled through the corridors of this great building in the heart of Dublin...

Sir Ian MacLennan collected his wits.

"Gentlemen," he sighed, "you will appreciate that it is in all our best interests that I understand *exactly* what you are telling me and *exactly* what your motives are in telling me it. Frankly, I think that we have just stepped beyond the realm of what is, and is not, *diplomatic*. If we in this room cannot speak openly to each other about this matter, honestly and truly, I fear for what may transpire."

Sean Lemass and Frank Aiken looked to John McKeown.

The soldier was grim.

"It is the understanding of the Irish Government that sometime in the last three weeks a consignment of four experimental prototype models of the General Dynamics *Redeye* shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles was brought into the country from the USA. One of these missiles was discovered in a semi-dismantled condition along with a full-functioning M171 missile launcher; the other three weapons are unaccounted for at this time. In the last forty-eight hours definitive information has emerged that these weapons are in the hands of an IRA active service unit known to be planning 'actions' against 'high prestige' civilian and military targets on 'the Mainland'."

Sir Ian MacLennan took a deep breath.

“Have you spoken to my colleague the American Ambassador about how these weapons *came* to be *mislaid*?” He asked of Frank Aiken.

“The Ambassador refused to comment on the specifics of the case,” he retorted irritably. “He also refused to discuss the specifications of the missing ‘*Redeyes*’. Apparently, those details are classified!”

John McKeown cleared his throat.

“However, after making inquiries via ‘back channels’ I have established that the original US Army requirement for an infantry surface-to-air missile system was drawn up as long ago as 1948, Ambassador,” he explained. “The contract for the missiles that we are talking about – with an infrared homing guidance system – was given to Convair in 1959 and the first test launches were conducted in 1960. Shoulder-launch tests began in 1961 but technical problems had stalled the project around the time of the October War. The missiles smuggled into this country are from the first small-scale production run in the second half of last year and are designated as Mark XM41 Redeye Block I models. All the missiles so far produced were intended as ‘live’ and fully ‘armed’ trial, evaluation and practice rounds. The missile we recovered bore US Army certification and testing tags and stencilled serials, therefore, it must at some time have been accepted by, and stored in a US Army armoury prior to its shipping overseas.”

The British Ambassador was interested in this *fact* but he was not convinced it was the important thing.

“Forgive me, I am not a military man, General,” he remarked, his tone relaxed and non-confrontational despite his roiling emotions. “The provenance of the rockets is academic. If the IRA ever succeeds in getting one of these infernal devices onto United Kingdom soil I need to know how dangerous they are?”

“That I don’t know, sir.”

“Why not?”

“The Redeye system has not been accepted for frontline deployment by the US Army. My understanding is that it was about to begin a two-year pre-acceptance testing period.”

“Could it shoot down a V-Bomber or a civilian jetliner, General?”

“Theoretically, yes, sir.”

“And you think the IRA may have smuggled three of these rockets into England?”

"Yes, sir."

"And how long have you gentlemen known this?" Sir Ian MacLennan inquired urbanely, as if the answer to his question was of no consequence whatsoever; when in reality it was the difference between ongoing peaceful co-existence – insofar as that was possible given the troubles in Ulster – or at best, a *retaliation* that was unlikely to be of the minimalistic variety, or at worst, outright war.

"Several hours, Sir Ian," Sean Lemass said. "We believe that the weapons are in the hands of an IRA man called Seamus McCormick. Your authorities in England, Special Branch and I daresay, MI5, will know him as Stephen Michael McCormick. He was born in Scotland in 1934 and applied to stay in the British Army at the end of his period of National Service in 1954. He deserted while stationed in Derry in October 1961. He had married a local girl from Dungannon when things were much *calmer* in the north. Her people were Catholics, like McCormick. One afternoon she was returning home with several other women when a gang of boys and young men started throwing stones at them. McCormick's wife, Siobhan, was struck by a stone, actually it was a half-brick, and in falling fractured her skull. She never regained consciousness. She was twenty-four at the time of her death and expecting her first child. It seems that McCormick had previously joined the British Army to get away from the sectarian strife of Glasgow where he had grown up."

The British Ambassador arched an impatient eyebrow.

"Anyhow," the Taoiseach went on, "at the time he deserted McCormick was a sergeant in the Royal Engineers. He was an ordnance specialist; a bomb disposal expert. Between 1956 and 1959 he was based at Bovington and assigned to the Royal Tank Regiment's Experimental Ordnance Company; which means he is familiar with, and presumably expert in the maintenance and deployment of prototype wire-guided rocket-propelled anti-tank and other precision guided munitions. The IRA have plenty of men who know which end of a gun to point at the target, and quite a few bomb-makers, I'll be bound. But unless somebody came over with the *Redeyes* from America, they've only got Seamus McCormick who can actually make the things work."

"Why haven't you arrested this man McCormick?" Sir Ian MacLennan asked, knowing his principles in Oxford would want to know that very, very

badly.

"We tried to," Lieutenant General John McKeown interjected, his tone that of a man offended by the implied suggestion that his country would casually allow criminals to possess and to parade through the streets carrying anti-aircraft missiles. "Garda Síochána and Special Branch officers supported by *my* men carried out a series of raids across this city and elsewhere last night hoping to nip the IRA's forthcoming offensive in the bud."

Sir Ian MacLennan was unimpressed.

Within a couple of hours of the news of those raids becoming public there would be a Republican mob outside the British Embassy yelling abuse, waving outrageous placards and hurling bottles and stones over the fence. The last time there had been a big demonstration all the phone lines in and out of the Embassy had been cut, the water and electricity disconnected and by and large, the Dublin police had sat on their hands and done virtually nothing to keep back the crowds.

"What can you tell me about the 'actions' *Seamus McCormick's* 'active service unit' plan to carry out in England?"

The three Irishmen said nothing.

"Ah, that's the way it is going to be," the British Ambassador groaned. "Just so that we all understand how things stand," he prefaced dryly. "The *Irish Republican Army* which broadly speaking subscribes, albeit violently, to articles of political faith like a united Ireland and an end to British influence in the north - objectives which are coincidentally *peaceful* articles of faith to your own governing Fianna Fáil Party - has acquired sophisticated modern weapons and is determined to wreak havoc in the United Kingdom, England specifically. You have just undertaken what will be interpreted in Oxford as a 'token' series of unsuccessful raids to disrupt the IRA's plans. Those raids failed in even that limited purpose. Therefore, the Irish Government knew what was happening in advance and effectively, did nothing material to stop it. For what it is worth I personally believe that you gentlemen are honourable men and that you have been honest with me today. But *my* Prime Minister and *my* Foreign Secretary have never had the opportunity to meet you face to face and to form a similar personal opinion. When I transmit my report of this meeting to them I pray that they listen not just to my factual report of this meeting but are prepared to listen to the advice that I will attach

to that report. However, I am not at all sure that anything I can say will do much good. Frankly, in the United Kingdom my principals draw little or no distinction between Ireland, the Irish and the Irish Republican Army, and as you well know the failure of the Irish Government to do anything to alleviate the heightened tensions north of the border since the October War has very nearly completely poisoned the well of Anglo-Irish relations."

The British Ambassador got to his feet shaking his head.

The only reason people had not starved on the streets of Dublin last winter was that Ted Heath's and then Margaret Thatcher's administrations had diverted ships from the Operation Manna convoys to Ireland. This was at a time when winter was biting hard on the mainland and the bread and meat ration in England, Scotland and Wales had had to be cut to ensure that supplies lasted until the spring. The decision to divert those ships had gone through on the nod. Nobody in England had asked for a bouquet of flowers for putting food in the mouths of Irish men, women and children that its own government was unable to feed and its American military 'guests' regarded as no more than compliant, cheap labour.

"I say this not as a threat, gentlemen," Sir Ian MacLennan said wearily. "But in the event of an attack on the Royal family, Parliament, even on Oxford itself, let alone an attempted assassination of a major political figure in England I very much doubt that the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom would feel constrained in any respect in its future policy towards the Irish state."

Sean Lemass rose to shake his hand.

"General McKeown's boys will be on the street today, Sir Ian. You and your people will be safe when news of this things breaks."

The British Ambassador took the assurance with a large pinch of salt.

"Look," he murmured, almost thinking better of what he was about to say. "Dammit!" There was nothing to lose and he suddenly thought about the vast majority – the mostly 'silent' majority – of the three million or so souls living in the twenty-six counties of the Republic. Hardly any of them wanted any part in the 'armed struggle' of the men with the guns and the bombs still fighting a war that was over forty years old. Who, if anybody, spoke for them? "Forgive me, Taoiseach," he continued, "but it seems to me that things are so bad that you have two choices; you can either sit here in Leinster House and await events, or you and your colleagues can take the bull

by the horns."

Sean Lemass met his gaze with his own, inscrutable level stare.

"What did you have in mind, Sir Ian?"

"You should send a Minister to Oxford."

"To plead our case like the supplicants we once were?"

"No," the British Ambassador said, suppressing a groan of despair, "to claim Ireland's rightful place as a proud and independent nation in the new World order!"

Chapter 14

14:48 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Turkish Navy Ship Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak, 37 miles NW west of the Grand Harbour

The *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak* had enjoyed a long and somewhat chequered career in the Royal Navy prior to her handover to the Turkish Navy on 29th June 1959. Since the previous autumn she had been assigned to the small flotilla charged with escorting the re-activated Great War battlecruiser *Yavuz* wherever that great ship roamed. A fast, agile and well-found vessel equipped with a new radar and communications suite before her transfer to Turkey, she had been well-appointed for her post-October War role. Her six 4.7-inch guns in three twin turrets, her Squid anti-submarine mortars and her still impressive turn of speed belied her age and, in most situations, made her a formidable foe. However, having witnessed the fate of the Yavuz and the Sverdlov class cruiser Admiral Kutuzov, the crew of the *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak* had, to a man recognised the utter hopelessness of their position.

The corpses of the hated Soviet *advisers* and *political officers* who had foolishly failed to avail themselves of the opportunity to jump overboard at the beginning of the mutiny; now lay in bloody heaps on the deck or swung lifelessly from nooses strung from the foremast and main mast cross beams and were clearly visible in the crosshairs of HMS Alliance's attack periscope.

The commanding officer of the submarine knew the name of his foe because he could clearly read the big D351 pennant number of his quarry painted on the hull beneath her bridge.

Lieutenant-Commander Francis Barrington signalled for his second-in-command to come and take a look for himself. Mainly, on account of the fact he did not actually believe the evidence of his eyes. Or rather, he did not believe what he thought he was seeing, which was even worse.

Lieutenant Michael Philpott arched an eyebrow conspiratorially – albeit cautiously because his commanding officer had only joined the boat at Gibraltar three weeks ago and although he gave every appearance of being a

thoroughly decent and competent skipper with a dry sense of humour one never took these things for granted – as he crouched to peer through the eyepieces of the barely raised attack periscope.

HMS Alliance had been submerged, running ultra-silently with every conceivable piece of non-essential equipment turned off for over eight hours and the atmosphere was already thickening. Not for her crew the five-star luxuries of life on the Navy's newest and most expensive toy, HMS Dreadnought, or the new Oberon and Porpoise class advanced diesel-electric boats; Alliance was a good old-fashioned boat built just after the German war allegedly incorporating lessons learned in *that* war. Consequently, life onboard could be and sometimes still was, a dirty, smelly business and most of the men in the control room sported full 'sets' – beards of various maturities – and the predominant boat-wide odour was one of mingled perspiration and lubrication oil.

The boat had been in transit from Malta to replace HMS Artful in the picket line currently a hundred miles east of the archipelago when it had intercepted the *'MALTA IS UNDER ATTACK BY SEA AND AIRBORNE FORCES OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION'* alert transmitted in the clear from the Headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet.

Philpott peered at the destroyer filling the lens of the attack periscope as it periodically bobbed above and below the waves.

The destroyer was dead in the water less than five hundred yards away.

The periscope brought the details into sharp near focus.

The bodies swinging on long ropes from the yardarms.

The three main battery turrets were trained fore and aft.

And there were huge white sheets flying from every available halyard and draped over the sides of the destroyer...

HMS Alliance's twenty-four-year-old second-in-command stepped away from the periscope.

"Down scope," Lieutenant-Commander Francis Barrington said quietly. He was the old man in every sense in the submarine's wardroom. At forty-two he had been a reservist for fourteen years by the time of the October War and had only belatedly been called back to the colours last autumn. The last time he had been in these waters it had been as a terrified sub-lieutenant on an old U-class boat – the Unbroken – but at least he had known who was trying to kill him in those days. These days, who knew?

Red Dawn?

The old Soviet Union?

The Turks?

The Americans?

He stepped across to the chart table where a rudimentary plot illustrated of what *might* be happening in the general vicinity – between the Alliance and Malta – and where his recently re-fitted but still old command *probably* fitted into the big picture. He doubted anybody knew where the Alliance was or cared. Fleet headquarters in Malta probably had rather more pressing things to worry about than the whereabouts of an old Amphion class boat like the Alliance; and in any event nobody in Malta would know that she had had to spend most of the night bobbing around on the surface with her starboard diesel in pieces on the engine room floor. Alliance had been crawling towards the sound of distant explosions when she had run across the Turkish destroyer lying dead in the water streaming – by the look of it - every piece of linen in the Wardroom cupboard.

Barrington sighed.

It had been impossible to recharge the boat's depleted batteries last night. Sometime in the next hour or so he would have had to have surfaced anyway. Notwithstanding, necessity was hardly any kind of virtue in an ocean which had suddenly become horribly dangerous.

He met the eye of the Engineering Officer, whom he had summoned to the control room ten minutes before.

"Well, Chief," he grimaced. "What do you think?"

The other man shrugged.

"The port diesel will fire up, sir," he declared defensively. "After that," another shrug, "I can't promise she'll stay running..."

The dockyard at Gibraltar had botched the rebuild of the starboard diesel and now it seemed as if they had taken onboard a bad batch of diesel, or one of the bunkers had somehow got contaminated with sea water. It never rained but it poured. A fellow could take it to heart or he could make the best of a bad deal and get on with it!

Barrington chuckled and shook his head.

Sometimes that was all you could do!

Around him the mood lightened.

"The boat will clear for action, if you please, Number One."

HMS Alliance was already braced for battle and within a little over a minute Michael Philpott reported the boat as being “ready for action, sir.”

“Thank you, Number One.”

There was time for a last consideration; one more trawl through the evidence at Francis Barrington’s fingertips and to contemplate the obvious pitfalls of the action he was about to take.

It went against the grain to torpedo an enemy who was so completely at one’s mercy but nobody would offer so much as a breath of criticism, let alone censure, if he simply put two Mark VIII heavyweight fish into the side of the *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak*.

However, that would hardly have been in either the best traditions of the Service, or in any way *sporting*. Moreover, given the number of bodies hanging from the destroyer’s yardarms Francis Barrington thought it was extremely unlikely that the men onboard the Turkish warship would relish falling again into Soviet hands. Which made the idea of surrender if not axiomatic, then at least *pragmatic*; while not completely ruling out the remote possibility that the moment Alliance broke surface the *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak* might not still open fire on her with everything she had...

“Hands to surfacing stations,” he declared.

A thing that must be done was best done swiftly.

He took a final deep breath.

“SURFACE! SURFACE! SURFACE!”

Compressed air blasted into the huge saddle ballast tanks.

Within seconds the one thousand five hundred ton two hundred and eighty feet long diesel-electric submarine broke the oily grey surface of the Mediterranean like a cork. Francis Barrington followed the first two ratings up the ladder to the conning tower. Alliance’s deck-mounted 20-millimetre Oerlikon cannon had been removed in 1960, part of a ‘streamlining’ refit designed to improve the boat’s underwater handling characteristics. The boat had had a temporary mount for a deck gun while she was in the Far East, but this had been removed at Devonport long before Barrington had taken command. However, this was of little consequence because Alliance had surfaced only a quarter-of-a-mile off the Turkish destroyer’s port side with her open bow torpedo tube doors pointing directly at her bridge.

The doors of all six of the Alliance’s 21-inch torpedo tubes were open; and each tube was loaded with a Mark VIII fish. If the *Mareşal Fevzi*

Çakmak so much as twitched in a threatening way Francis Barrington planned to blow her out of the water.

White flags or not!

A small signal lamp had been dragged up to the top of the conning tower – or as it was called in these modern times, the 'fin' – which had been heightened and extended during the boat's last refit. Now it soared over twenty-six feet above the waterline, giving the boat a slightly out of proportion look from some angles and suggesting that the Alliance was actually a very much larger vessel than she seemed at first sight.

An Aldis lamp was winking urgently from the destroyer's bridge.

"S-U-R-R-E-N-D-E-R!"

Oh, well.

That seems fairly straightforward.

Hopefully, the destroyer's captain spoke passable English.

"Signal ALL CREW TO ASSEMBLE ON DECK!"

The small lamp clicked and clattered by his side.

Barrington waited, wondering how he could be so calm. He had spent most of the last fifteen years working as a solicitor's clerk in a sleepy West Country law firm in Bath; trying very hard to forget the spills and thrills and the unmitigated unpleasantness of those desperate missions out of Malta in 1941 and 1942. Every night in harbour the boats would disembark all but a skeleton crew and submerge in Lazaretto or Sliema Creek. To this day he remained undecided whether skulking in a bomb shelter on Manoel Island or inside the fetid submerged pressure hull of a submarine had been worse; at least when the boat was at sea it would sometimes run on the surface at night and the blowers would keep the stench down.

"She's acknowledged, sir!"

Barrington raised his binoculars to his eyes.

Men were pouring onto the destroyer's deck. In fact, they were in such a hurry to comply with his order that men were literally falling over each other in the rush.

Bloody Hell! The former solicitor's clerk from Bath said to himself. *I've just captured a destroyer!*

Chapter 15

19:05 Oxford
Friday 3rd April 1964
Balliol College, Oxford

Roy Jenkins brow was deeply furrowed when he welcomed his visitor and escorted him to his chair. The other man was tall, erect, hurtfully stiff and resembled nothing so much as a shadow of his former self. Yet notwithstanding his physical decline and the terrible scars of the injuries he had suffered on the night of the October War, defiance and battle glinted still in his one good eye.

"Do you know what is going on in the Mediterranean, Home Secretary?" John Enoch Powell, the fifty-one-year-old Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South West inquired in that instantly recognisable nasal, imperious way that had become his hallmark down the years.

"No," the anonymous, bespectacled, balding Home Secretary confessed as he settled in a chair opposite his guest. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary were dealing with whatever was going on in the Mediterranean. His brief was the administration of justice and civil society in the home country and until he was called to Cabinet to be briefed on developments overseas he was getting on with *his* job. Such were the demands and the prerequisites of and for ongoing good government. He met the piercing one-eyed stare of the man who was probably the fiercest constitutional opponent in Parliament, indeed, in the whole country of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom. Today, that did not matter because he had no intention of discussing politics with his Prime Minister's bête noire. Today he wanted – under 'Privy Council' terms of confidentiality – to pick the former Tory minister's brains. "I need your advice, Mr Powell."

The other man's half-paralysed face twitched with what might have been contempt or surprise; it was impossible to guess which.

Roy Jenkins, a prominent and rising member of the Labour Party in opposition, had had very little time for Enoch Powell, a Conservative Cabinet member and a high flier in Tory governments in the 1950s. Powell was also

that little bit older than the miner's son from Wales, and the fact that Jenkins and Ted Heath had been on good terms had made impossible any great meeting of minds in those pre-war years. The Home Secretary had regarded Powell as a remarkable freak of nature, in a former age he would have been recognised for the near genius polymath he was but in the twentieth century, such men were too often mavericks who invariably fell out of favour with their natural friends in politics. And so it had been for Enoch Powell; the advent of Margaret Thatcher had simply accelerated his inevitable divorce from the Conservative Party.

"It is a rare thing for a member of Mrs Thatcher's coterie to ask my advice, Mr Jenkins."

The Home Secretary smiled sheepishly. Opposite him sat a poet who had studied at A.E. Houseman's elbow, become a University Don in his mid-twenties, was only one of two men who had enlisted as a private soldier in the British Army at the beginning of World War Two and emerged at the end of it as Brigadier, a man who spoke countless languages, a man who had learned to speak Urdu specifically because he planned to be Viceroy of India one day. In the decade before the October War he had been a junior Housing Minister, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and Minister of Health and but for the war he would have stood for the leadership of his Party when Harold MacMillan finally retired to his beloved grouse moors.

"I am hardly a member of Margaret's 'coterie', Mr Powell."

"As you wish. You specified Privy Council terms?"

Roy Jenkins nodded thoughtfully. Individuals appointed to Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council occupied, by accepting the 'honour' of the appointment, a unique and sometimes invidious position within 'the establishment' of the British state. At one level the Privy Council was what it had always been throughout history, a body sworn to loyally and to faithfully advise the Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II. However, to be in a position to *wisely* advise the Sovereign nominated Privy Councillors needed to be well-briefed about many, if not all the great secrets of the realm. Therefore, on a second level, because of their duty of confidentiality, a small number of Privy Councillors involuntarily became in effect, the guardians of the nation's conscience.

Enoch Powell almost smiled.

It seemed that doors formerly barred and locked shut were to be

selectively opened for the UAUK's most trenchant Parliamentary critic to look within. It would have been funny had not he been a man to whom his word was not just his bond, but life itself. Wild horses would not drag anything he learned in this room from his lips even though they tore his mutilated body to shreds.

"You were in intelligence during the war?" Roy Jenkins asked. "The forty-five war, I mean?"

"Yes. Military intelligence. In the United Kingdom, the Middle East and later in India and Burma. The longer the war went on the more unpopular I made myself. In war lazy thinking is especially dangerous because it kills people. Lack of intellectual rigor killed far too many of our people in *that* war."

"I'm sure you are right. Can I ask you what you know of Bletchley Park, a fellow called Turing and another man called Welchman?"

"Ah," the MP for Wolverhampton South West sighed because now he understood everything. "I see. You've had a run in with those idiots at Cheltenham!"

"Yes and no," Roy Jenkins conceded, a little put aback. "It would be more correct to say that several senior members of GCHQ have had a run in with MI5."

"Have you talked to Tom Harding-Grayson or Sir Henry Tomlinson about this?"

"Er, no." With the apparent crisis in the Mediterranean demanding the Foreign Secretary's full attention, and presumably, that of Sir Henry Tomlinson, the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service too, he had had no opportunity to beard either man's attention since the GCHQ Security File had crossed his desk that morning.

"Why haven't you rung up the Director of the Government Communications Headquarters? I'm sure your Permanent Secretary will have his direct line number, Home Secretary."

Roy Jenkins tried hard not to get flustered and to lose his temper.

"Nobody in my private office seems to have the necessary security clearances to look into any aspect of the management and administration of GCHQ," he explained patiently.

"Rubbish! You are a bloody Cabinet Minister!"

"Yes, but..."

The Home Secretary was grateful for the urgent rapping at his door. His Private Secretary stepped into the room.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, gentlemen," he apologised smoothly, because private secretaries to senior government ministers did not as a rule allow themselves to seem overly alarmed. "The Foreign Secretary is coming over..."

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson very nearly fell into the room such was his hurry, brushing past the Home Secretary's gate keeper as if he was so much Scotch mist. The newcomer blinked at Enoch Powell, who made as if to struggle to his feet so as to depart.

"Ah, I see. Sorry if I've arrived in the middle of a tete-a-tete, Roy," he grimaced. Then he turned to the MP for Wolverhampton South West. "Please stay, Mr Powell. Your, er, particular perspective on things may be helpful to us."

Without further ceremony he pressed two sheets of Foreign Office notepaper into the Home Secretary's hands.

Enoch Powell had gratefully re-settled in his chair after the agony of attempting to rise to his feet the moment before.

"Oddly enough, I was about to advise the Home Secretary to seek your counsel on a matter related to GCHQ and our *esteemed* Security Service, Sir Thomas," he observed like a cruelly mauled but infuriatingly smug Cheshire cat.

"Oh, yes," Roy Jenkins murmured, scanning the documents he had just been given without resuming his seat. Presently, he looked up. "Oh dear," he concluded. "May I?" He inquired, glancing to Enoch Powell.

"By all means," Tom Harding-Grayson said tersely.

Things could hardly get any worse; there had been some kind of disaster at Malta in the Central Mediterranean, British colonies and dependencies in the South Atlantic, specifically East Falkland and South Georgia had been seized by the Argentine, and now the IRA were planning a new campaign on the mainland of the United Kingdom and the blighters appeared to have acquired the wherewithal to shoot down V-Bombers and jetliners!

The note pressed into Enoch Powell's infirm, shaking hands dealt exclusively with this last calamity. It was the Foreign Secretary's private office's précis of the British Ambassador in Dublin's much longer report of a meeting with the Irish Prime Minister, the Irish Minister for External Affairs

and the Chief of Staff of the Irish Defence Forces earlier that day. The Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South West seemed to only glance at it before handing it back.

"You cannot trust those people in Dublin," he concluded, now painfully levering himself to his feet. "For all we know the IRA men they have sent to these shores to kill and maim are Sean Lemass's own men. The Irish sheltered the people who planned last year's attack on Balmoral. Ever since the war they've been pump-priming the conflict in Ulster. A Government which does nothing to stamp out vipers in its midst is as culpable as the criminals themselves when others suffer the fatal bite."

The two Cabinet Ministers stared at him.

"The Home Secretary," he added, turning towards the door, "was, I think, about to quiz me about matters pertaining to 'Hut Six'," he finished, his right 'good eye' momentarily glinting with rueful amusement.

Roy Jenkins blinked worriedly at Tom Harding-Grayson.

"What was all that about?" The latter inquired when they were alone.

"Oh, nothing," the Home Secretary scowled. "The IRA thing is much more important..."

The Foreign secretary had spent most of his adult life in the higher echelons of the Civil Service and was not the man to allow a politician to get away with changing the subject that easily.

"The IRA 'thing' is only important because this is the first we've heard of it, Roy. What the Devil was Enoch talking about?"

Both men remained standing as the Home Secretary briefly recounted the affair of the four senior GCHQ Directors remanded in Her Majesty's Prison Gloucester, and the intercepted and thus far undelivered letter to the Prime Minister which had landed them in hot water with MI5.

"Margaret hasn't seen this letter they sent?"

"No. The Security Service intercepted it and the case file was only copied to my private office two days ago."

Tom Harding-Grayson pulled up the chair vacated by Enoch Powell and gestured for his younger colleague to sit with him before the guttering embers in the grate. The room was not cold but neither was it warm, for a Cabinet Minister in Margaret Thatcher's Administration was entitled to exactly the same coal ration as a man in the street.

"I have to get back to Corpus Christi in a minute," he groaned. "Things

are looking bad in the Mediterranean and Margaret, and well, the Prime Minister is not herself. Leaving that aside," he shrugged, "once things have quietened down again, if they ever do, somebody's head is going to have to roll at GCHQ!"

Chapter 16

23:51 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Archbishop's Palace, Mdina, Malta

The British had not known what to do with her. The harassed and understandably shaken young officer who had listened to her terse account of what had happened when she had confronted Arkady Pavlovich Rykov and his KGB *friend* pointing guns at Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, had decided that she was insane and she had entirely sympathised with him. Julian Christopher had died of his wounds by then, Arkady Rykov's wrecked corpse was spread across half the room and the KGB man on the floor had still not recovered consciousness. Actually, she had been a little surprised when the man on the floor had actually moaned and attempted to raise himself off the bloody flag stones; she thought she had hit him hard enough to kill him. She had killed a lot of people that day but could not remember exactly how many. Things had happened so fast and she had been so *angry*!

The two big Redcaps who had been with her ever since her *arrest* had finally stopped fingering their Sten guns; but periodically they threw her uncertain, vaguely *shocked* looks.

Because they were British they had looked away both times she had had to use the toilet bucket. They were an odd people – the British – pragmatic, phlegmatic, not often deliberately cruel, sometimes callous without knowing it, and personally, frequently but not invariably, decent. Her grime-streaked, tired, twitchy minders had been as *decent* towards her as humanely possible once they had got over their initial disbelief. They had even adjusted the old, rusty handcuffs that still manacled her wrists in front of her so they no longer pinched off the circulation to her left hand. Now she sat on the stone floor in the corner of the bare-walled cell with her back resting on unyielding cool limestone. In olden times this room beneath the Archbishop's Palace might have been a storeroom or a dungeon, or perhaps the sleeping place of some

unfortunate noviciate patiently waiting his turn to slowly progress higher in the Bishop's retinue.

Wherever one went on Malta centuries of history spoke to one through the stones beneath one's feet and the ancient landscape through which one passed. Here in the Citadel of Mdina, the Dark Age and Medieval capital of the main island, perched several hundred feet above sea level with – from the ramparts – an unfettered three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the entire Archipelago, it was easy to live a life in touch with, and touched by the presence of countless past generations. She had hoped to find peace in Mdina; to hide away in the St Catherine's Hospital for Women, to forget her own history, to disengage with the madness of her life. That had been a schoolgirl daydream shattered in a split second by Margo Seiffert's murder; and now here she was sitting in a cell beneath the ramparts of Mdina in a stinking blood-smeared pale blue nursing smock, watched over by two Royal Military Policemen who had every reason to be terrified of her.

"Might I have a sip of water please?" She asked hoarsely. If she had been in a KGB cell the request would have earned her a savage beating.

One Redcap handed his Sten gun to his partner and stepped close, holding out his own canteen. She took it clumsily; her hands were numb from the weight of the cuffs. The water was warm, brackish but it slipped down her throat like a vintage wine. She almost emptied the vessel.

"Sorry, I was thirsty," she smiled apologetically.

"That's okay," the man grunted, taking back the canteen. He stepped away, retook possession of his gun from his partner and resumed his watching brief.

Rachel had made no move to engage her guards in conversation. If they had to shoot her she did not want them to feel any worse about it than inevitably, they would. It was better if they thought about her as the mad woman who had strolled about Mdina with an AK-47 sowing a trail of death, and somehow ended up in the room in which Julian Christopher had died in the moments before the last Soviet invaders had thrown down their arms in surrender.

She was resigned to her fate.

The worst had happened; never again would she have to pretend she was somebody that she was not. The girl who had been a sewer rat in the ghetto at Lodz, who had killed her first fascist at the age of thirteen – with a knife,

twisted in his guts – and lived a lie ever since was not afraid of dying. She just wanted to sleep and to not dream her dreams.

The October War had driven her a little mad, as it had most people, she supposed. The trouble was that she had inhabited her shadow world for so long that she had become estranged from what was, and was not, *normal*. How else could she have become so fascinated, besotted, so easily taken in by a monster like Arkady Pavlovich Rykov? She had known who and what he was all along; she had been hunting him for a year before she finally caught up with him in that US Air Force hospital at Incirlik just after the night of the war! But for the war her mission would have been to quietly slit his throat from ear to ear that first day; and but for the cataclysm she would have done exactly that without a qualm. But then he had started babbling about *Krasnaya Zarya* in his sleep and she had known that if she executed him she would never learn any of the critical secrets that were capable of tormenting the mind of a man as deranged and inhuman as that of the KGB's legendary – some said mythical - Head of Station in Istanbul. The man's legend was such that many people simply did not believe he existed, that he was an intellectual construct of some drunken MI6 or CIA bigwig desperately attempting to explain away his organisation's latest disasters.

But she had always known he existed and unlike the idiots in London and Langley; she had actually seen him twice. Once in Hungary in 1956 she had stood three metres from him as he executed students – men and women, none of them yet in their twenties – outside a burning secret police building in Budapest at the end of the uprising. Five years later she had almost walked straight into him on street in Beirut; she had been following another target, not broken stride. It had come as no surprise when later she had been asked to find him again and *end his career* once and for all.

Back in 1956 Arkady Rykov had been Major Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov, a Political Officer attached to the Political Directorate of Lieutenant General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's 8th Mechanized Army. Fyodorov was the name he took with him to Istanbul in 1960; she had never found out what he was doing in Beirut in 1961. In Budapest she had been a dirty-faced nobody in badly fitting Red Army mechanic's overalls given a rifle and told to 'kill rebels'. In Beirut she had been dressed like a movie star, her hair raven black with Rayburn shades hiding her eyes as she paraded down the Corniche dressed like a film star, a model, or a very high-

class prostitute. The monster had once asked her where he had seen her before but her legend – over the years she had been the kept woman of a dozen rich and powerful men and had travelled widely in Europe, the Mediterranean and the near east – had kept her safe. That they might conceivably have crossed paths before was unlikely but by no means implausible. Her legend had always had a ring of truth, of impenetrable authenticity because in a way, it was *true*. Anybody who had watched her life – not even necessarily from afar - during the 1950s right up until just before the October War would have taken her for exactly what she seemed to be; an international courtesan living off the largesse of her wealthy and powerful and very appreciative admirers.

Arkady Pavlovich Rykov was no more the monster's real name than Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov; although, oddly near the end she was sure that he – whoever he was – had known that time was running out and that this had somehow, in some perverse way, partially reconnected him with the person he might have been had he not become Josef Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria's pet assassin...

The cell was lit by a single feeble electric bulb hanging from a cracked ceiling rose near the entrance. A thin brown electric cable snaked through a hole drilled in the ancient wooden door frame, up the wall and across the roof to the fitting. She squinted at the light bulb and in her hunger and exhaustion her vision blurred, and her thoughts wandered.

"Miss Pullman!"

She blinked into the face of an ashen, unshaven man in a torn and dirty army battledress who was squatting on his haunches directly in front of her. He stank of sweat and freshly disturbed earth and he still had streaks of camouflage paint on his cheeks.

"My name is not Clara Pullman," she said, forcing a grimace.

"Oh well, never mind," the man replied.

He wore a Captain's stars on his collar tabs beneath his battledress and spoke with an accent straight out of Eton College.

"My company has taken over the security of this area of the Citadel. The thing is nobody is exactly sure why you are being held here?" He did not wait for her to try to explain. "In any event, several of your friends from the hospital where you work have made strenuous and most persistent representations to me to be allowed to visit you."

She stared at him in confusion.

The man turned to the two Sten gun toting Redcaps.

“Why is this woman handcuffed?” He demanded in disgust.

“She had them on when we took charge of her, sir. Nobody told us to take them off...”

“You can bloody well take them off now!” The officer lurched to his feet, shaking his head. “I don’t know what the bloody world is coming to these days!” He muttered almost but not quite under his breath. “And somebody empty that bloody latrine bucket! It stinks like a pig sty in here!”

This said he stalked out of the cell leaving the Redcaps and their prisoner staring, open-mouthed at his retreating back.

Neither of her guards had keys to the handcuffs.

Both men were grumpily apologetic about that.

Apologetic but sensibly still somewhat cautious while they remained in her immediate proximity; she backed into the farthest corner of the room so that one of the Redcaps could safely retrieve the foul-smelling latrine bucket.

“I suppose you wouldn’t believe me if I said I was really quite a nice person?” She queried, entirely rhetorically. The way the Redcaps had been looking at her the last few hours she took it for granted that they had heard about the trail of death she had left across the Citadel the previous afternoon at the height of the battle. “Yesterday was the first time I’d killed anybody for ages,” she added, wanly.

Afterwards, she realised this was probably not the most reassuring thing she could have said or a thing that was remotely likely to set either man at his ease. Feeling a little dizzy with tiredness, with her head aching and with her mind churning with doubt, guilt and not a little self-loathing, her shoulders sagged.

“The last time I did anything like that was when I was fighting with the partisans in Poland twenty years ago.”

The two Redcaps stared at her like she was mad.

But she needed to talk, to confess her sins.

“I was thirteen when I killed my first German.”

“Miss Pullman,” the older of the two Redcaps growled, “you don’t want to be telling the likes of us anything. I don’t know if you did what they said you did yesterday or whether that’s any reason for you to be locked up. But I know you don’t want to be talking to us about it. Not if you know what’s

good for you."

She leaned against the wall, slid slowly down onto her haunches.

Old habits die hard; you never turned your back on a guard.

"My name is not Clara Pullman," she said dully. "I was christened Rachel. That was in Lodz. The Germans were sloppy when they drove us into the ghetto. Skinny boys and girls like me, slipped in and out every night. Of course, they killed us if they caught us. But before they caught us we started killing *them*. That's what you do with Nazis. You can't argue with people like that; you can only kill them."

The older of the Redcaps motioned for his partner to stay outside the cell. His large frame blocked the door. He made no attempt to back out and lock that door. There were flecks of grey at his temples and a thoughtful world-weariness in his dark eyes as he listened, watching the woman like a circling hawk.

"Lodz? So, you're Polish, miss?"

The woman nodded.

"My mother was Jewish. Not religious, you understand. Just Jewish, so she could never forget she was not like everybody else," she twitched a grimace to accompany the revelation. She had always shared her mother's otherness and her sense of not ever wholly belonging wherever she was. "The Soviets took away my father when I was eleven. I never saw him again. When the Germans came they put us all in the ghetto. There was nothing to do, nothing to eat. Killing fascists became our *play*. One night I slipped out of the ghetto as I did most nights; the next morning the SS had put up new roadblocks, new barbed wire and I couldn't get back inside. I never saw my mother after that day."

"Rachel?" The Redcap mused. "That's a nice name..."

"So was 'Clara'. I liked being 'Clara'. In fact, I liked being Clara Pullman so much I forgot who I really was." She hesitated. "No, perhaps not. In my head I'm still that skinny thirteen-year-old Jewish girl on the run from the Germans."

"How did you survive back then?"

The woman looked at the Redcap with new respect.

That was adroit; the way he suddenly changed the whole tenor of our little chat! Maybe he was more than just a Redcap, maybe he was a real policeman like Marija's dead friend Jim Siddall?

“I joined the resistance,” she replied lowly, aware of the cool, clammy air for the first time and feeling the chill of it sinking into her bones. “I didn’t look Jewish, I was a kid and I could get into and go places the adults wouldn’t dare go near. I became a courier, later I became an assassin. I had a natural gift for it and in time of war, people recognise these things.”

She shut her eyes, rested the back of her head against the unyielding stone wall behind her. She felt so tired, things were blurring, and her thoughts were horribly transported into a past she wished so desperately to forget.

“One day my luck ran out, of course. I was captured. I thought they would torture me and shoot me; all they did was beat me up. I was skin and bones; they thought I was a boy so they didn’t rape me. They sent me back to the nearest Gestapo field headquarters but there was a big Soviet offensive about then and I ended up in a train – well, a cattle truck – on the way back to Berlin. I was left for dead at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp when the SS marched most of the other inmates to their death ahead of the advancing Red Army. I looked so dreadful even the Russians didn’t rape me until two months later.”

The Redcap sucked his teeth, remaining silent.

Outside in the corridor there were women’s voices.

Chapter 17

21:15 Hours
Friday 3rd April 1964
Holyhead, Isle of Anglesey

Seamus McCormick dropped the tailgate of the old Bedford lorry – which was decked out in the camouflage livery of the Black Watch – stepped back and stood easy. The young subaltern commanding the bored, tired, disinterested Territorials searching the cars and lorries which had parked up in the inspection area as they came off the ferry from Larne, obviously did not see the point of checking Army vehicles. Nevertheless, the officer, a pale kid who looked like he was just out of school was still trying to do everything by the book.

He shone a torch on the crumpled document McCormick had handed him.

"These poor fellows were killed in Omagh?" He asked, thinking aloud rather than asking a question.

"Sorry, sir?"

"Nothing. Nothing, corporal." The boy went to the back of the truck and shone his torch inside at the four coffins lashed down within. "Bad business," he muttered, thrusting the docket back at McCormick. "Carry on."

Seamus McCormick fought back the urge to sigh with relief.

He had told the others to keep their mouths shut whatever happened. While he sounded and looked like what he was pretending to be, a Scot in uniform, neither of the other men fitted the bill. They looked like good Catholic boys wearing uniforms that made their skin itch and their consciences ache, and if either of them opened his mouth they would shout "IRA!"

The squaddies guarding Holyhead docks looked dozy, half-asleep but nothing was likely to wake them up so quickly as a Dublin accent and they were all fingering loaded L1A1 SLRs – Self-Loading Rifles – and probably had standing orders to shoot first and ask questions later.

"Yes, sir!" McCormick snapped to attention and threw a crisp salute.

Instantly, he turned to his companions. “Put that gate back up and get onboard. Sharply now!”

The Bedford revved hard, struggled to climb out of the port up onto the A5 London Road. That was when a man knew he was back in the old country; when all roads led to London. Except, these days, they did not, of course. London no longer existed, unlike British tyranny which it transpired no number of Soviet bombs could eradicate from the face of the Earth!

“Piece of piss!” Frank Reynolds, the younger of McCormick’s two ‘bodyguards’ chuckled in the darkness.

Seamus McCormick changed gear and let the Bedford coast down the shallow incline towards the causeway carrying the road from Holy Island to Valley on the main island of Anglesey.

“We could hit a roadblock any time,” he cautioned. “When we get to the Menai Bridge they won’t wave us through like they did back in Larne or that kid did just now. They’ll crawl over every inch of this pile of scrap. If we get unlucky they’ll take each of us inside and look at our papers with a magnifying glass.”

“Our papers are good!” Objected Sean O’Flynn the older, at twenty-three of the two IRA men hand-picked from the Kildare Brigade to accompany McCormick to England. Both Reynolds and O’Flynn were killers, men from the north, Derry, who had been at war all their short adult lives. McCormick had no illusion why two such men had been sent with him to the mainland; the IRA high command needed his technical skills but they could not bring themselves to actually trust him.

“They are as good as the guys in Dublin could make them,” McCormick reminded him. “Good enough to fool some lazy RUC,” Royal Ulster Constabulary, “boy, but things are different over here. We have to assume the Brits know we’re coming by now.”

Neither of McCormick’s watchdogs thought it was possible that they had been betrayed. Their hatred for the Brits had long since morphed into contempt and it was always a mistake to hold one’s enemy in contempt. It made one careless and they could not afford to make a mistake.

Frank Reynolds was the marginally more thoughtful of the IRA men.

Just twenty-one a Loyalist bully boy gang had beaten his father to a pulp when he was eleven, leaving his mother and his seven siblings alone to fend for themselves in a friendless Belfast enclave. One of his brothers was a

priest, two of his sisters were married with children in the south but his mother still lived on the Falls Road in West Belfast, now an IRA-run no go area for the RUC unless the British Army rolled in with armoured personnel carriers and machine-gun carrying Land Rovers.

"We were told you'd tell us what was in the coffins when we got to the mainland?"

"We aren't there yet," Seamus McCormick grunted. He had refused to let either of the other men drive the Bedford. He had been trained to drive bigger vehicles than the Bedford, the Derry boys had not. The lorry was a beast, the wheel was heavy and the gear box old and worn, the engine not much better as befitted a vehicle cobbled together out of whatever could be surreptitiously liberated from scrap yards and maintenance depot disposal bins. If either O'Flynn or Reynolds tried to drive the Bedford they would attract far too much attention.

"We're near enough to the mainland," Sean O'Flynn decided.

McCormick relented; he needed the IRA men to trust him.

"Three of the coffins contain partially assembled prototype shoulder-launched General Dynamics Redeye surface-to-air missiles," he said, having to shout above the ragged roaring of the engine. "The other coffin contains a fully assembled M171, launcher, two M-16s and three Browning forty-five pistols, around two hundred rounds of small arms ammunition, fuse wire, half-a-dozen mercury detonators and about eleven pounds of military grade plastic explosive."

The two IRA men were dumbfounded.

A few guns and plastic explosive, or possibly good old-fashioned dynamite had been what they had assumed they were smuggling into England. But surface-to-air missiles!

Seamus McCormick would have told them more about their deadly cargo but he did not think his half-tame assassins needed to know any more. All they needed to know was one further piece of information.

"Without me you wouldn't even be able to assemble the Redeyes without blowing yourself up. I am the only man in the IRA who actually knows how to assemble a Redeye, how to load it into the launch tube and how to fire it at an aircraft in flight. Your job is to keep me alive long enough to shoot all three at British aircraft. Do you boys have any questions?"

No, neither had a question. It was hard to ask any kind of sensible

question when your lower jaw had just dropped onto your chest.

The two gunmen would learn the rest when they needed to know.

Likewise, they would learn – or rather, work out for themselves – that if everything had gone to plan another active service group would have been on the ground in England paving the way for their mission for over three weeks, but only when they needed to know it. By now there ought to be safe houses waiting, secure depots established where the 'equipment' in the coffins could be 'parked', and viable 'launch sites' identified and plans formulated to transfer him and the other 'shooters' he was going to train into position.

The object of the exercise was nothing short of striking a blow so devastating that it would undermine the British will to stay in Ireland. Leastways, that was the objective of the Irish Republican Army Council back in Dublin and the hope of the handful of lower and middle ranking Irish civil servants, policemen, soldiers and several disaffected members of the underbelly of the ruling political party in the Dail, Fianna Fáil.

It mattered little that McCormick's own motivation was almost wholly apolitical.

He just wanted revenge and he really did not care if he lived or died a minute longer than he needed; providing he lived long enough, to see justice done. There would never be any solution to the 'Irish Question' while the English propped up the supposedly 'Loyalist' majority in the 'minority' six counties of Ireland. The RUC had not even bothered to investigate his wife's murder. The Redcaps, the British Army's Royal Military Police had tried to 'look into it' but the local Garrison Commander had quickly put a stop to that 'nonsense'.

It did not do to upset the Protestants!

Never had two communities been so divided by the love of the same allegedly merciful God!

He did not know the names or the addresses of the cowards who had murdered his pregnant wife; but he knew where to find the people who had sent the British Army to Ulster to protect those bastards.

Vengeance will be mine sayeth the Lord...

Chapter 18

00:30 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Balliol College, Oxford

The Director General of MI5 was fuming with barely concealed outrage. He had been summoned back from Belfast at the whim of the latest chinless wonder to sit in the Home Secretary's chair and he did not care for Roy Jenkins's attitude.

Sir Roger Hollis, the fifty-eight-year-old third son of the Bishop of Taunton had been Director General of MI5 since 1956. Educated at Leeds Grammar School and Clifton College in Bristol, he had gone down four terms before he took his finals at Worcester College Oxford and joined Barclays Bank. Later he had worked as a journalist for the *Shanghai Post*, based in Hong Kong before finding a convivial niche with British American Tobacco between 1928 and 1936. Invalided back to Europe with tuberculosis he had unsuccessfully applied for a post with the London *Times*. Espionage was not, therefore, by any means his first choice of profession and there was a distinct *oddness* about his past career that was finally threatening to undermine his long tenure as Director General of MI5.

It was only after he had been thwarted in his efforts to resume his career in journalism in the mid-1930s that he had employed the good offices of an Army friend to apply first for a position with MI5, and when he was rejected, for MI6 with the same negative result. Such was the belated and decidedly inauspicious beginning to what eventually, after these false starts, would prove to be a brilliant career. However, the fact was that he would probably never have gained admittance to the secret world of the intelligence services had he not encountered Jane Sissmore, MI5's first female officer and since 1929 the Head of the Security Service's Russian Desk.

They had met by chance at a tennis party.

It was Jane Sissmore, who had joined MI5 as a clerk in 1915, qualified as a barrister *in her spare time* and been called to the Bar in 1924 while working as a full-time intelligence officer, who had eventually finessed Roger Hollis's

path entry into the MI5 in 1937. Hollis soon became Jane Sissmore's deputy and by the 1939 he had become a fixture in the small pre-war service. If he had been fortunate to gain admittance to MI5 in the first place, his first major advancement and in retrospect, the key promotion of his career that did the most to propel him to the top of the service was even more fortuitous than earned. It happened that he was in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to take advantage of his boss's fall from grace. In November 1940 Jane – now Jane Archer since she had married John Archer a RAF officer who would later be killed in action in 1943, on 2nd September 1939, the day after Hitler invaded Poland – was sacked for 'insubordination'.

Britain was losing the war at the timer, MI5 was a complete shambles but in the best traditions of the Security Service *nothing* mattered so much as the dignity of its then Director General. Jane Archer had denounced the then acting Director General of MI5, Brigadier Oswald 'Jasper' Harker as being 'incompetent'. She was right and Harker was soon replaced but not before – notwithstanding that she was indisputably MI5's premier Russian expert - she had been permanently lost to the service and her deputy; Roger Hollis had automatically stepped into her shoes. MI5 spent the rest of Hitler's War fighting the intelligence organs of the German state, gaining immense experience and learning everything there was to know about *that* enemy, while Hollis and his small Russian Section, under-resourced and very nearly forgotten quietly went about their business. At the end of the war, the old German 'hands' were redundant whereas Roger Hollis was not so much MI5's leading 'expert' on the Soviet Union; as the United Kingdom's *only* real expert on its one remaining enemy.

The rest was history, by 1953 Hollis had been promoted to Deputy Director General. His subsequent elevation to the top chair was axiomatic when Dick White left to take over as Head of the Secret Intelligence Service in 1956.

In the way of these things it was not actually until Hollis reached the crowning pinnacle of his career in MI5, that people began to look back at his apparently brilliant, meteoric ascent and started asking themselves what exactly – if anything - had ever been so 'stellar' about his inexorable two-decade rise?

Although he had been knighted in 1960, Sir Roger Hollis had been the subject of a whispering campaign long before the October War. All the way

back to his China days he had had an uncanny knack of collecting left-wing friends, and the very fact that he had become MI5's 'Soviet expert' during and after the 1945 war dogged his steps and drip fed the rumour mill. It did not help that over the years he had developed a reputation for dourness and had become progressively less tolerant and forgiving of fools; of whom there were many in MI5 in the late forties and throughout the 1950s. Worst of all, he had always been in the long shadow of Sir Richard Goldsmith 'Dick' White, MI5's wartime poster boy and the first man to be appointed Director General of both MI5, and then MI6. Moreover, while Dick White's charm and 'legend' seduced the majority of his establishment peers, Hollis had singularly failed to develop the network of friends and allies in Government and the Civil Service that any self-respecting senior mandarin must if he is to do his job properly. Inevitably, once Dick White had moved on, Hollis's detractors quickly pointed out that a pygmy was now walking in the footsteps of a giant.

Sir Roger Hollis had been living with the whispering campaign and the lies people told about him for several years. He did not like it very much but it was not his job to be liked. What was intolerable was to be called to account by the jumped up little pipsqueak that bloody Thatcher woman had appointed Home Secretary!

Especially a little pipsqueak whose file he had read with immense interest shortly after his appointment in January. Politicians were quite happy to bandy about the less than salacious or judicious University connections of members of the security community; they were not so keen to have their own 'student peccadilloes' and 'attachments' exposed to public scrutiny!

Roy Jenkins viewed the MI5 man over the rims of his glasses. Before the war he had not been without his vices; he freely admitted as much to friends. He had had affairs but he had tried to be discreet. Likewise, he had a fondness for fine red wine, a thing curtailed, like his affairs by the October War. In his younger days one particular male friendship had gone beyond honest good fellowship at Balliol but that 'involvement' had not drawn untoward attention at the time – it had been during the war, anyway - and he could rely on the confidence of the other party. All in all, he did not think that there was anything skeletal in his cupboard that the Director General of MI5 was likely to wave in his face. The trouble with people like Hollis was

that one simply could not afford to underestimate them.

He had only met Sir Roger Hollis two or three times since assuming his current post. The man had been pleasant enough, a little haughty and politely dismissive, clearly not wanting to trouble him with 'technical' security matters. Roy Jenkins had not paid great attention or lent particular credence to any of the malicious rumours flying around the Security Service in the wake of the pre-war Philby scandal. He was a politician; he was accustomed to constant back stabbing by people one had a right to regard as friends. MI5 had assured him that in the matter of the 'Cambridge Spies' appropriate inquiries had been made and all the bad eggs had been 'purged'. MI5 housekeeping was a thing best left to the professionals, and besides, he had been confronted with bigger, more pressing issues in the last three months than the idle gossip of mischievous and disgruntled former intelligence officers.

The problem was that after his 'little chat' with the Foreign Secretary earlier that afternoon the ground had shifted under his feet and he had determined to radically amend his personal rules of engagement with MI5 and its uncommunicative Director General.

'You'll gather from my *Who's Who* entry in the last edition published before the October War,' Tom Harding-Grayson had prefaced. He had done practically all the talking during their *little chat*. 'Between 1939 and 1946 I was posted to the War Office. That's the cover all nomenclature for anybody who was engaged in intelligence work. In my case, it conceals my assignment to the Government Code and Cipher School at Bletchley Park. I was in it from the start. Well, actually from before the war because as soon as we realised the war was coming we started recruiting. We started by recruiting four men. My people called them *The Wicked Uncles*; two of them were certifiable geniuses, and the other two were not far behind.'

'Bill Welchman and Alan Turing are two of the names in the GCHQ letter?'

'They'd be the certifiable geniuses; the other *wicked uncles* were Hugh Alexander and Stuart Milner-Barry.'

'Who exactly were *your* people, Tom?' The Home Secretary had asked, thinking it a perspicacious question until Tom Harding-Grayson had smiled a particularly impish smile.

'Now that really would be a state secret, old man.'

Because he was a pragmatic soul at heart the Home Secretary had abandoned that blind alley and inquired: ‘What can you tell me about *The Wicked Uncles*?’

Tom Harding-Grayson had smiled again but this time he had ruefully shaken his head. The Home Secretary had mistakenly interpreted this as a bad sign and therefore had been immensely relieved when the older man had shrugged, and rhetorically mused aloud ‘where to begin?’

He had begun ‘at the beginning’.

Roy Jenkins eyes must have been the size of dish plates by the time he finished his ten-minute explanation of how it was that *The Wicked Uncles* had, quite literally, shortened the Second World War by years and not to put too fine a point on it, ensured that they were conversing in English not German that evening.

‘The Germans used an electro-mechanical cipher machine called *Enigma* which was so fiendishly efficient at coding their communications that they never once during the war suspected that it was remotely possible that anybody could *break* it. A message coded using an Enigma machine meant that every character of every message could be encoded in billions of different ways. However, to cut a long story short *The Wicked Uncles* broke the *Wehrmacht Enigma*, then they broke the even more fiendishly complicated *Kriegsmarine U-boat Enigma*, and then they helped the Americans to break the *Japanese* equivalent, the *JN-25 code*. In so doing *The Wicked Uncles* practically invented two entirely new *sciences*; the science of *Traffic Analysis* and the *Science of Electrical Computing*. Alan Turing was also interest in a thing call *AI*, that’s *Artificial Intelligence* to simpletons like you and I but that’s a whole story in itself.’

The Home Secretary had asked if he could take notes; the Foreign Secretary had gravely shaken his head.

‘Only if you drink poison first, old man.’

Aged thirty-three William Gordon ‘Bill’ Welchman, the Marlborough schooled Trinity College mathematician had been Dean of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge in 1939. Alan Mathison Turing was twenty-seven in 1939, an old boy of Sherbourne College who had at the tender age of twenty-two been elected a fellow of King’s College Cambridge for his proof of the Central Limit Theorem. Thirty-two-year-old Stuart Milner-Barry had become a city stockbroker after winning Firsts in Classics and Moral

Sciences at Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1923 he had won the first British Boys' Chess Championship and from 1932 onwards he had represented England at chess. The fourth *Wicked Uncle* was Irish-born Conel Hugh O'Donel Alexander, aged thirty in 1939, who like his friend Stuart Milner-Barry, was a former Trinity College man and an international class chess player. Before the war he had taught mathematics at Winchester College.

'Bill Welchman ran Hut Six,' Tom Harding-Grayson had explained. 'Hut Six was in the business of attacking the German Army's Enigma and *Traffic Analysis*.'

'What exactly is *traffic analysis*?' Roy Jenkins had asked plaintively.

'The only plain language parts of any given Enigma message were the *FROM* and the *TO* components. These were meaningless codes of themselves but once Bill Welchman and his people had worked out, for example that CA85X was the Third Kampfgruppe of Fliegerkorps One in France, Bill's people owned 3KG/FCI forever. By the time of the Dunkirk fiasco Hut Six had deduced the complete – and I do mean *complete* – German order of battle in the West. So, before we had *broken* a single Enigma message, Bill Welchman was able to pick up the phone and tell the powers that be not to worry about fighting the Battle of France because we had already lost it. Fortunately, that was just in the nick of time for the Navy could start pulling what was left of the British Expeditionary Force off the beaches of Dunkirk.'

Traffic Analysis told one where and what one's enemy was 'physically' doing; where his forces were deployed, his state of readiness and consequently where one's own defences were the most vulnerable. Without having this 'complete picture' of the enemy's strength and dispositions it did not matter if one could or could not read his coded radio transmissions.

Military intelligence, all intelligence in fact, is about *context*.

Facts tell you nothing in the absence of *context*; a common journalist, academic and political misunderstanding!

'Alan Turing ran Hut Eight. Hut Eight's job was to crack the U-boat Enigma. SHARK. He was a remarkable fellow, after the war he was on the short list for the British Team at the London Olympics for the marathon, one of the top five or six long-distance runners in the country even though he would have been in his mid-thirties by then. Turing was the man who invented an electro-magnetic machine, 'a computer' to speed up the code-

breaking process. He was the master logician who had sat down and worked out, in his own head, how such a machine would work, built it, eventually got it to work and won the Battle of the Atlantic. Albeit, with a little bit of help from the Royal Navy. We had had some early success reading SHARK in 1941 and 1942 but then the bloody Germans started using an extra 'rotor' on the naval version of the Enigma machine and breaking SHARK became exponentially more problematic. It was Bill Welchman, who by 1943 was in charge of mechanisation at Bletchley Park, as well as being the poor chump who was responsible for liaising with the Americans, who designed a modification to Turing's code-breaking machine – his *bombe* – that speeded things up so that we could start reading SHARK again. Bill Welchman and Alan Turing became the 'big men' at Bletchley later in the war; with Milner-Barry and Hugh Alexander respectively taking over the running of Hut Six and Eight from about 1943 onwards.'

The Home Secretary had had a mouthful of questions; but Tom Harding-Grayson was in a hurry to return to the Prime Minister's rooms in Corpus Christi College.

Roy Jenkins had tried to keep things succinct.

'Who actually ran Bletchley Park during the Second War?'

'The War Office.'

'What about GCHQ now? Its remit seems to overlap several departments...'

'Under the War Emergency Acts GCHQ is a Defence Ministry problem. But,' Tom Harding-Grayson had qualified, 'rebuilding the defence-intelligence community which GCHQ formerly served has thus far been a piecemeal affair.'

'What happened to *The Wicked Uncles*?'

'Turing was driven to suicide in 1954. The local police in Manchester persecuted him because he was a known homosexual and basically, nobody in authority who knew the truth about his wartime service raised a finger to help him. The whole affair was a disgrace. My Minister went so far as to forbid me to go to his funeral. It was a bad show all round.'

'Oh, what about the others?'

'Bletchley Park was dismantled after the war. A pale shadow of the wartime Government Code and Cipher School was set up at Eastcote in Middlesex in 1946 but GCHQ in Cheltenham wasn't established until the

early 1950s. Stuart Milner-Barry joined the Treasury in 1946 I think. He was an Under-secretary by the time of the October War. He went missing the night of the war. Bill Welchman got so fed up with the penny-pinching of the Atlee Government that he moved to the United States in 1948. The last I heard he had become an American citizen and he was a top man in the National Security Agency in Virginia.'

'And Hugh Alexander...' Roy Jenkins's voice had trailed away as the penny dropped. The last of the four *Wicked Uncles* who had done so much to win Hitler's war was currently incarcerated at Her Majesty's pleasure in Gloucester. Courtesy of those idiots at MI5!

He fixed the Director General of MI5 in his sights.

"It has come to my attention that officers under your command have wilfully subverted the transmission of a lawful communication from senior government officers to the Prime Minister," the Home Secretary remarked icily to Sir Roger Hollis, the tired, irritated Director General of the Security Service, "allegedly in the name of national security?"

"What of it, Home Secretary?"

"And," Roy Jenkins continued, "employed the powers vested in *my person* by the War Emergency Act (1962), to detain indefinitely without charge four highly qualified men engaged on work of vital national importance."

"Oh, the Cheltenham four..."

"Yes, the Cheltenham Four!"

"So that's what this is all about!"

Although the Home Secretary had discounted the whispering campaign against Hollis, on a night like this when the man seemed almost totally indifferent to the evidence that his officers were more interested in covering up deficiencies in the operation of an institution that was key to the defence of the realm, than they were *in the actual defence of the realm*, that he wondered for the first time if there might be an element of truth in the rumours that Hollis was the 'sixth man' after the three acknowledged Cambridge traitors Burgess, MacLean and Philby, and their publicly unacknowledged co-conspirators John Cairncross and Anthony Blunt.

"I have ordered their immediate unconditional release from prison, Sir Roger. Moreover, I have passed their letter and the relevant MI5 case file to the Prime Minister's Private Office. Further, I have asked to be present if and

when the Prime Minister calls you before her to account for your personal conduct, and that of the officers under you command in this disgraceful business."

Sir Roger Hollis rose to his feet.

He said nothing because he had nothing further to say to the man he worked for. MI5, acting on solid intelligence received from the Secret Intelligence Service in the last forty-eight hours had rounded up over a hundred suspected former Soviet, Red Dawn and other violently inclined malcontents, including several probable IRA men caught red-handed with bomb making equipment and industrial grade plastic explosives. It was MI5's greatest coup since the October War; over the next few days his interrogators would uncover exactly how many networks had been disrupted and rolled up. The operation was still ongoing. He would have given the Home Secretary forewarning of the operation if he had trusted him, or any of his senior officials but he had decided not to risk the security of the operation by 'unnecessary disclosures' to a 'bunch of amateurs'.

The Home Secretary could go to Hell!

Nothing suited him better than to deal directly with the Prime Minister.

He looked forward to 'explaining himself to that lady' whenever she summoned him.

Chapter 19

01:02 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford, England

Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson had made her way across Oxford as the first news of the scale of the disaster in the Mediterranean had reached her. Leaving her charges, the Prime Minister's eleven-year-old twins, Mark and Carol, in the care of friends and a large detachment of Royal Marine bodyguards, she had hurried to be with her younger friend at Corpus Christi College.

"Margaret is in a dreadful state!" Her husband explained, taking his wife by the arm and leading her into an alcove in the corridor leading to the Prime Minister's room. "Willie's being an absolute brick and Walter Brenckmann is doing his best to get hold of every available scrap of information but..."

Lady Patricia – a lifelong socialist with genteel libertarian leanings who was discomforted still with the 'Lady' appellation, a by-product of her husband's advancement to Foreign Secretary after the murder of his predecessor, Lord Hume, at Balmoral in November – had divorced her husband in the fifties and remarried him the instant she discovered that he too had survived the night of the October War. Before the war her unabashed left-wing political affiliations and sympathies, and her successful career as a novelist had once been embarrassing encumbrances to her spouse, whose once brilliant career had been in freefall during the Macmillan years leading up to October 1962. All of which was well behind them both. These days they were a team, intimates and confidantes within Margaret Thatcher's inner circle.

Willie was forty-five-year-old William Stephen Ian Whitelaw, the Member of Parliament for Penrith and the Border and since January the imperturbable Secretary of State for Defence in the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom.

Walter Brenckmann was Captain Walter Brenckmann, United States Navy (Retired), the American Ambassador to the newly re-located court of

Blenheim Palace.

Walter Brenckmann was that rare thing; a man whose voice was listened to and respected on *both* sides of the North Atlantic. A veteran of the Battle of the Atlantic in Hitler's War and the commander of a Fletcher class fleet destroyer during the Korean conflict, after the October War he had been plucked from the obscurity of his Boston law practice and sent to England as a naval liaison officer. Back in November and December he had been a lone voice warning of the dangerous dissonances developing between the World's last two remaining nuclear superpowers. Within the higher echelons of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom he was regarded very nearly as an ex-officio insider, much in the way Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Ambassador to London, John Gilbert Winant, had become between 1941 and 1945. Like Winant, Walter Brenckmann had no political ties to the Kennedy Administration and had quickly become a trusted honest broker between his chief, Secretary of State J. William Fulbright and the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom.

However, inside the Prime Minister's rooms at that moment Walter Brenckmann wanted to tear his hair out.

No matter how hard he tried to communicate with the people around him nobody really got it. The malicious rumour that the British had secretly unilaterally appointed Admiral Sir David Luce, the First Sea Lord as the new Supreme Commander of *all* Anglo-American Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations – allegedly *imperiously* over-riding the Kennedy Administration's recommendation of an *American* officer not to the liking of the British Ministry of Defence – had stirred up a vitriolic firestorm of outrage and recrimination in Philadelphia. It was only a matter of time before a long and vociferous phalanx of isolationist *America First* members of the House of Representatives began to fan the flames of that firestorm.

"Walter," Margaret Thatcher decided, testily signalling that in her opinion there were more important things on the agenda. "Walter, thank you for your concern and for your advice but I am sure this whole thing is a storm in a tea cup. The Ministry of Information is in the process of issuing a firm rebuttal of the stories which have apparently emerged overnight in New York and Philadelphia. What we need to be worrying about presently is the situation of Malta."

Outside the Prime Minister's room Tom Harding-Grayson had also put

the workings of the American newspaper rumour mill to one side in favour of other, immensely more pressing imperatives.

The latest news from Malta could hardly be worse.

The Foreign Secretary had forced himself to move past his initial disbelief, shock and despondency upon hearing the news from the Mediterranean; it was always a mistake to become so preoccupied with the travails of the present that one neglected to look to the future. No matter that there had been an unexpected seismic shift in the geopolitical realities of the region; it was his job as Foreign Secretary to provide his Prime Minister with realistic policy options in the new, radically altered situation. But not right now. Right now, the problem was wholly in the hands of the military men because it was obvious that what had just happened in Malta was – the October War excepted – the most disastrous day for British arms since the fall of Singapore in 1942.

It was precious little comfort to reflect that but for the heroism and sacrifice of the Royal Navy and the fortuitous belated intervention of the USS Iowa and her consorts, things might have been even worse. Around lunchtime the previous day he had been in a funk about Argentina invading a few small islands eight thousand miles away; islands of minimal strategic importance to and of no material political significance to the UAUK. Since then he had been blaming himself for being completely surprised by the events in the Mediterranean. In the fullness of time the inevitable inquests would ineluctably prove beyond any reasonable doubt that had he and many others in government, the intelligence community and the military had *not* been 'on the ball' because whatever the circumstances, Malta should *not* have been left so criminally undefended.

"Nobody will say what's actually going on?" Pat Harding-Grayson put to her husband in a conspiratorial whisper.

"That's because the commander of the US Navy squadron that was supposed to be 'guarding' the Maltese Archipelago decided to rendezvous with the larger American force approaching Malta," the Foreign Secretary hissed, "*without* first informing Admiral Christopher when exactly the aforementioned *larger American force* was due to arrive in the Central Mediterranean. On the basis of existing intelligence, it seems that the C-in-C decided *not* to turn the sudden departure of Admiral Detweiller's four big modern guided missile destroyers into a diplomatic incident. Consequently,

when the smelly stuff hit the fan around mid-day yesterday local time all he had to hand was an under-gunned frigate, HMS Yarmouth, and HMS Talavera, a 1945-war vintage destroyer only recently out of dockyard hands. Apparently, both ships captains were ordered by Admiral Christopher to quote 'get out to sea' but in the event took it upon themselves to directly engage a hugely superior enemy fleet. In so doing they cut short the enemy bombardment of Malta and contrived to so badly damage two large enemy warships that they were sitting ducks by the time the Yanks belatedly came to the rescue."

It was like something straight out of the pages of *Boys' Own*!

However, Pat Harding-Grayson realised that she had missed something very important.

"What happened to the RAF while all this was happening?"

"All available strike aircraft had previously been sent to attack a suspected invasion convoy. Early indications are that this air strike, backed up by a later attack by an American nuclear submarine largely destroyed this enemy force."

"Oh. So, we've beaten off the invasion?"

"Yes, but at a very high cost. Some reports say that as many as two thousand Soviet paratroopers were dropped on key installations across the archipelago and that isolated fighting is still going on."

Pat scowled at her husband.

"There have been very heavy casualties, particularly amongst the civilian population," he responded, unable to get past his customary reticence even though he usually made a point of *not* keeping secrets from his wife. "Especially, in Mdina. It is feared that Sir Julian Christopher is among the dead."

This struck Pat Harding-Grayson like a slap in the face.

"God! No!"

While a lot of people at the heart of government *suspected* that Margaret Thatcher and the famous 'Fighting Admiral' were more than just 'friends'; the number of people who actually knew of their betrothal could be counted on the fingers of one hand; Sir Julian's prospective best man, Captain Nicholas Davey, currently off Cyprus in command of the 23rd Support Flotilla, Pat herself, and the couple themselves. A formal announcement had been tentatively planned once Operation Grantham, the massive amphibious

assault to expel the Red Dawn horde from the island of Cyprus had come to a successful conclusion but the couple had not planned to marry until Sir Julian's tenure in command at Malta concluded sometime in the next eighteen months.

The great Anglo-American fleet currently gathered in the Eastern Mediterranean poised to fall upon Cyprus would have swatted aside the enemy force that had bombarded Malta; but it had been a thousand miles away and the big guns of two – Red Dawn or Soviet, it mattered not – warships had, virtually unopposed, systematically rained death on the single most strategically important bastion of what remained of the British Empire. In comparison with what had just happened and was continuing to *happen* across the Maltese Archipelago, the humiliation of Anthony Eden's Administration over the Suez Debacle in 1956 was as nothing.

And now Margaret Thatcher; widowed in the October War - scarred forever by *that* loss - had been cruelly robbed of the man who would surely have been her rock in years to come.

The door to the Prime Minister's office opened and a tall broad figure emerged. Sternly lugubrious at the best of times James Callaghan, the fifty-two-year-old leader of the Labour and Co-operative Party, Secretary of State for Wales and Margaret Thatcher's deputy in the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom trudged wearily towards the Harding-Graysons.

"Thank goodness you are here, Pat," the big man sighed. "Margaret was unspeakably rude to the First Sea Lord earlier; she wouldn't listen to a word he had to say to her. She was almost as bad with the Chief of the Air Staff. Willie is trying to smooth things over. This is a terrible business but we should be keeping our powder dry for dealing with the Americans not squabbling amongst ourselves!"

Tom Harding-Grayson groaned out aloud.

"We can't blame the Americans, Jim!" He protested, not troubling to veil his exasperation. "What happened yesterday was a massive failure of intelligence and of political imagination on *both* sides of the Atlantic!"

"You try telling that to the Prime Minister, Tom. I wish you luck because I've been trying to talk some sense into her for the last two hours and all I've got for my pains is a splitting headache!"

Pat Harding-Grayson sometimes asked herself why even intelligent men with wide and varied experience of life were often such complete asses?

“Don’t you understand? Margaret was engaged to be married to Julian Christopher,” she whispered angrily. Adding: “You idiots!”

The two men looked at her with momentarily slack jaws.

“Pat, you said nothing?” Her husband blurted, wide-eyed.

“It was supposed to be a secret!”

“Oh, yes, but...”

“She absolutely adored *that* man!” The Foreign Secretary’s wife hissed in unmitigated exasperation. “She must be *distraught*...”

“Oh,” her husband muttered. “You never...”

“Of course, I didn’t tell you, Tom,” she retorted impatiently. “You’re a politician now. The last thing anybody with any sense does is share their innermost secrets with a politician! And besides, Margaret swore me to secrecy.”

“Oh, fair enough...”

James Callaghan was looking at the husband and wife as if they were lunatics. Tom Harding-Grayson ignored the Deputy Prime Minister’s incredulity.

“Who is in with Margaret at the moment, Jim?”

“Er, Airey and Iain have just gone in.” Weariness fell upon him as he explained. “Iain thinks Margaret might lose the Party over this. Malta, I mean.”

The Foreign Secretary said nothing.

His wife was made of sterner stuff.

Airey was forty-six-year-old Airey Middleton Sheffield Neave, the Minister of Supply and the Prime Minister’s closest friend in politics. Airey Neave was universally recognised as that most rare and precious of things in this post-October War age; a living national treasure. Among his many distinctions Airey Neave had been the first British officer to escape from the infamous German prisoner-of-war camp Oflag IV-C, *Colditz*, and subsequently make a successful ‘home run’ back to the United Kingdom in 1942. A qualified lawyer who spoke fluent German he was the man who had read the indictments to the surviving senior members of the Nazi hierarchy at the Nuremburg War Crimes Tribunal after Second World War. He had been involved with the Special Operations Executive after he returned to the British Isles from Colditz and retained links with MI6 ever since. Within the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern

Ireland he had been, and was still, regarded by many as something of a loner, not really a team man and in some respects a political lightweight, but everybody who was actually in the government knew that he was a key member of the UAUK and had the attentive ear of his protégé, Margaret Hilda Thatcher.

Iain was Iain Norman Macleod, the fifty-year-old 'brain' of the post cataclysm Conservative Party. At the time of the October War he had been Party Chairman and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Since the formation of the UAUK he had made the post of Minister of Information his and resumed his pre-war role as Leader of the – newly reconvened – House of Commons. A brilliant, moody, irascible man of deep convictions he and Airey Neave had become their Party Leader's and their Prime Minister's, most vociferous and eloquently devoted public supporters and proponents. To the Angry Widow's detractors, they were Cassius and Brutus to her Caesar; to the Party faithful and to countless men and women in the street they were the indefatigable twin spokesmen for the new '*one nation* Unity Administration of the United Kingdom'.

Not only was Pat Harding-Grayson made of indefinably 'sterner stuff' than her husband – whose greatest weakness had always been his tendency to resort to the cerebral, rather than the emotional in times of direst peril – she was also a profoundly political animal with a lifelong understanding of how the game of politics was played. This meant that while she was confident that with people like Willie Whitelaw, Airey Neave and Iain Macleod at her back – assuming nothing else went catastrophically wrong in the next few days and weeks - her friend Margaret Thatcher would, if she still wanted to survive, survive the Maltese disaster. But who did Jim Callaghan, the leader of the rump of the splintered Labour and Co-operative Party have to guard his back?

"What about you with your people, Jim?" She asked.

Her husband frowned at her, mystified by her question to his friend.

"Ah," James Callaghan murmured, meeting Pat Harding-Grayson's concerned grey eyes in a moment replete with new respect. "Now that's a question, isn't it?"

Chapter 20

02:20 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
USS Berkeley (DDG-15), Entering Grand Harbour, Malta

Commander Peter Christopher was practically out on his feet by the time the handset was pressed into his hands. He found himself alone in the Captain's Stateroom of the guided missile destroyer. He did not trouble to hide his irritation – he was too tired to be angry – to be called away from supervising the preparations for the transfer of his wounded to the barges and launches waiting for the USS Berkeley to tie up, bow and stern, to the emergency destroyer buoys in Kalkara Creek beneath the low cliffs upon which Royal Naval Hospital Bighi had stood for over a hundred years.

"Christopher speaking," he grunted. All that was keeping him going was strong black coffee and the two 'pep pills' the commanding officer of the USS Berkeley had persuaded his ship's surgeon to prescribe him a couple of hours ago. His twisted and savagely aching right knee and ankle were heavily strapped up, his cuts and abrasions cleansed and bandaged, one or two of his deeper nicks and gashes stitched but he badly needed a bath or shower and the crisp clean new US Navy uniform his hosts had provided did not really fit him. But then nothing would feel right about anything for a long time he guessed, not after he had lost his ship.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting, sir," a prim and proper young woman's voice apologised at the other end of the hissing, squeaking scrambled connection, "the First Sea Lord has been informed that the secure connection has been established."

Peter Christopher's exhaustion and bloody mindedness lifted briefly; but only briefly. By the time Sir David Luce, the professional head of the Royal Navy's cultured, evenly modulated voice broke into the tired spiral of his melancholy his mood had soured somewhat.

"I was told that you were wounded, Peter?"

The use of his Christian name completely disorientated the last commanding officer of the Battle class destroyer HMS Talavera. Peter had

only spoken to the First Sea Lord on one previous occasion, shortly after his graduation from Dartmouth.

'I am sure you will do your family proud, young man,' the lean, urbane man with the immaculate manners and courtly air had said, shaking his hand before turning back to continue his conversation with Peter's father.

"Er, nothing very serious, sir. I probably look a bit of sight for sore eyes. But nothing to complain about; nothing compared to some of the poor fellows we are about to transfer to RNH Bighi."

Damn it! I did not intend to come across as a sulky brat!

"I apologise for the timing of this conversation, Peter," the older man assured him calmly, severely. "I wouldn't have placed this call if this interview could have waited for the morning."

"No, sorry, sir," Peter said instantly, a little ashamed of himself. The Head of the Navy had put a call through to *him*. In the aftermath of a battle the First Sea Lord could pay *his* men and *he* not greater compliment, especially at a time like this when he would have World on his back demanding to know what had gone wrong at Malta. "I'm not entirely myself, sir. Please forgive me."

"I completely understand, Peter," the older man said paternally. "You must be feeling dreadful at the moment?"

The younger man desperately wanted to deny it.

"Half my people are dead, missing or seriously wounded, sir." In fact, only three of his ten senior officers– Miles Weiss, Alan Hannay and his Canadian Navigator, Dermot O'Reilly – had survived the afternoon's action and like himself, all three fell into the category of 'walking wounded requiring hospitalization'. He took a deep breath. He needed to say what *needed* to be said. "You should know that my father put a call through to Talavera while we were alongside in the Grand Harbour provisioning and ammunitioning the ship in the minutes before the bombardment commenced, sir."

"Yes," the First Sea Lord acknowledged. "What did he tell you to do, Peter?"

"He told me to '*cut my lines and go*', sir."

Peter Christopher thought he heard the other man chuckle; he might have been imagining it.

"Sir?"

“My old friend probably hoped you’d run for the open sea,” Sir David Luce explained, his tone tinged with proud sadness, “but he knew you well enough to know that whatever he told you to do that you would steam towards the sound of guns at top speed, Peter.”

The younger man said nothing, a little choked. He had just been paid a very high tribute by the man whom, in the Royal Navy was if not God, then *His* trusted right-hand man.

He swallowed hard.

“I ordered the Yarmouth to draw the enemy’s fire during Talavera’s torpedo run, sir,” he confessed, very nearly choking on the words. “I don’t know what happened to her.”

“Yarmouth ran herself aground in St Paul’s Bay,” he was informed. ‘Local fishermen and boats from the USS Charles F. Adams rescued approximately half her crew. Several of the most seriously wounded survivors have since been airlifted to the USS Independence for treatment in her well-appointed sick bay.”

Peter Christopher drew what comfort he could from this; he had ordered Yarmouth’s captain – a full commander to his ‘acting-commander’ and by any standard a man who was actually his superior – to draw the enemy’s fire knowing he was almost certainly signing both their death sentences.

“Be content that Talavera and Yarmouth acquitted themselves in accordance with the finest traditions of the Service, Peter,” the older man assured him.

The timbre of the First Sea Lord’s voice changed, forewarning Peter of sombre news to come.

“There has been no official announcement as yet,” Sir David Luce prefaced sombrely. “However, it is my sad duty to have to inform you that your father died from wounds sustained defending his headquarters in the Citadel at Mdina at around thirteen-fifty hours yesterday afternoon. His loss is an immeasurable loss to the Service and to the nation. I am sorry it was not possible for me to give you this sad news face to face.”

Peter stared into space.

It did not sink in for several seconds.

“I am given to believe,” the older man continued, “that your father’s last words concerned the great pride he felt in you and your achievements in life and in the Service.” He paused, let this hang in the air. “I know it will be of

little comfort now but I think it is important for you to know that at the time of his death your father was aware that Talavera's actions had already turned the battle for Malta decisively in favour of British forces."

Peter knew he ought to feel something, anything. Instead there was only a void, a numb absence of emotions.

"Thirteen-fifty hours or thereabouts was about when the Talavera went down, sir," he said blankly. The coldness spread through his soul in those moments. Not like a curse, more like a fog that blunted the hard edges of his psyche, killing anger and regret, curbing any urge towards retribution or the assignation of blame.

Peter Christopher did not recollect the First Sea Lord making his excuses and the line going dead. He held the handset to his ear for so long after the call had finished that his right arm went numb.

There was a knocking at the cabin door.

Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann stuck his gnarled head into the stateroom.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the older man grimaced. "The Yanks were getting worried. You didn't answer their knocking. They didn't want to trouble you," HMS Talavera's former Master at Arms shrugged apologetically, "so they asked me to check if you were okay, like..."

Peter stared at him, blinking blindly as if he had just awoken from a hypnotic trance.

Habit, duty and reality snapped back into cruel sharp focus.

He dropped the handset back into its cradle and got to his feet, straightening his sleeves, carelessly running a hand through his tousled fair hair. His palm brushed recently inserted sutures.

"Thank you, Mr McCann," he sniffed, seeking and finding the strength to act the part that *his* men had every right to expect him to play. He looked the old seaman in the eye. "I have just learned that my father died of his wounds at about the same time Talavera went down yesterday afternoon."

The Master at Arms had pushed the door fully open.

He stiffened to attention.

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. He was a fine man, sir," he said soberly. "Sir Julian was the finest captain I ever sailed with," he added, and then with a suggestion of a frown, added, "well, until that shindig at Lampedusa. If you'll excuse my impertinence, sir."

Peter Christopher had never been one to easily accept a compliment.

It was when his mentor and the destroyer's commanding officer, Captain David Penberthy, had been cut down in the first minutes of the vicious inshore fire fight to subdue the defenders of the island of Lampedusa in January that he had first assumed command of HMS Talavera.

Involuntarily he ran a hand through his hair again.

He felt naked without his cap.

"My place is on deck," he decided. "Lead on, Mr McCann."

Kalkara Creek was lit by a battery of blazing arc lamps that instantly destroyed the night vision of anybody so unwise as to look into the burning orbs of near and distant light. The fishing village on the hillside around the Creek was similarly illuminated as, to Peter's surprise, were several areas of Valletta across the cold waters of the Grand Harbour. A lot of people had been buried in the rubble of collapsed buildings; and the rescuers would not rest until the last bodies had been recovered.

He tried not to think about Marija.

A small tug was industriously nudging the sharp, elegant prow of the USS Berkeley onto the forward emergency destroyer buoy. The ship seemed to be ridiculously close inshore, surrounded by small boats, their dark silhouettes dancing on waters reflecting the shore lights.

"I told you to get into the first boat?" Peter reminded Alan Hannay. His newly acquired Supply Officer and Purser had been his father's marvellously efficient and ever-present Flag Lieutenant until he had induced Peter to request his services to fill a vacancy in Talavera's Wardroom after the Lampedusa action. His father had thought highly of the Alan; who in turn had been devoted to him.

"There are chaps in a much worse state than me, sir."

Peter looked around to see check who was in earshot.

He lowered his voice.

"My father was killed in the fighting at the Citadel yesterday," he confided. "Probably best to keep that under your hat until there is a proper public announcement."

"Oh, I see." Alan Hannay's voice was crushed, a murmur of regret that was in no way fabricated. "God, I don't..."

Peter patted the other man's arm

"Chin up," he whispered. "The chaps will be watching us, Alan.

Especially as Miles is a little the worse for wear at the moment."

Miles Weiss, HMS Talavera's executive officer, was one of the stretcher cases waiting to transfer to RNH Bighi; badly concussed the USS Berkeley's surgeon speculated, he was unable to stand unaided and any attempt to move prompted disabling nausea.

"Yes, sir. Oh, this is a bloody business..."

Peter took the other man's elbow, made eye contact.

Alan Hannay nodded, straightened, set his face against the world.

"People are looking to us," he said quietly.

"That's the ticket."

The two men limped and stumbled into the pool of brilliant light below the bridge of the guided missile destroyer where the stretcher cases were being readied with infinite, almost tender care to be slowly lowered into the waiting boats. Many of the wounded were attended by two or more American seamen; several held saline or plasma infusion bags aloft while the USS Berkeley's surgeon moved from man to man, checking, fussing as if he was caring for his own children.

Peter Christopher patted hands, shoulders, leaned down painfully to murmur reassuring words. He yearned to step into the shadows, to shed a tear for the dead. But that, like vengeance, was a thing that would have to wait for another time and another place.

Chapter 21

02:30 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Emergency Command Centre of the Military Governor of Malta, Marsa Creek

The two redcaps who had driven Rachel through the chaos of the night from the Citadel into and out of great banks of choking acrid smoke, down burning streets and past a dozen roadblocks manned by trigger-happy Maltese Local Defence Volunteers and exhausted British soldiers, seamen and airmen, had escorted her – since it was apparent she was no longer under arrest - directly into the shabby office at the end of the old, rusting seaplane hangar.

"Leave us please," Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French directed the Redcaps without raising his voice, briefly looking up from the maps strewn across the room's one significant piece of furniture, a workbench. He was flanked by several senior officers.

One asked: "Shall we make ourselves scarce for a few minutes, sir?"

"Yes, if you would. Find Miss Pullman a chair please, she looks all in. And would somebody find her a hot drink." He eyed the woman's chaffed red and puffy wrists with irritated dismay before looking her in the eye and quirking an apologetic grimace.

Rachel had obediently settled in the hard wooden chair scraped across the floor for her use. The door to the room, which must once have been the old hangar's former flight office, clicked shut behind her.

Dan French hauled himself to his feet and came around his desk. He pulled up a second chair and sat immediately before his guest so close that they could converse in low tones. He leaned towards her, rubbed his brow and made a conscious effort to look Rachel in the eye.

She had never met the man in whose hands her life – quite literally – now lay. She had no idea if Julian Christopher had ever mentioned her mission on Malta, or even the existence of somebody remotely like her. Communications with England would be difficult right now; nothing she said could be checked for many hours, perhaps days and she had no real feel for

how much trouble she might be in. Life on Malta was cheap if one was identified as a traitor. What had happened yesterday could not have happened without the collusion of a significant number of enemy fifth columnists, agent provocateurs, spies and *traitors* having stabbed the British and the Maltese people in the back. In Mdina while she had been down in the bowels of the Citadel she had caught snatches of conversation among the weary Redcaps, soldiers and Malta Local Defence Volunteer (MLDV) men guarding the prisoners in the cells around her. The British had their blood up in the aftermath of battle the previous day; and stories about drumhead courts, summary executions and gruesome 'rough justice' were already in general circulation.

Air Vice-Marshal French was a handsome man of slightly above average height, his hair was short, well-groomed and his uniform, although creased and specked with dust and ash, was neat, trim like the man himself. He sported a neatly trimmed moustache. His eyes, green grey, were thoughtful and betrayed no sign of the anger or shock that he must still have been experiencing.

The woman looked the Acting Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on the Maltese Archipelago in the eye and was surprised to find an absence of hostility, and little or no sign of obvious mistrust. Having never been this close to the former Lancaster pilot; she now noticed the suggestion of grey at his temples and the worry lines he usually hid with a winning smile. A smile specifically designed to suggest to people who did not know him very well that he had not a single care in the world.

Rachel returned his intent scrutiny.

She knew that Daniel French was popular with his men and was respected if not necessarily well-liked by the leaders of the two largest Maltese political parties, the Labour Party and the Nationalists. He had established a reputation for dealing fairly with local people; his was a calm head, a firm hand on the tiller as he stood on the burning deck.

"I apologise for your incarceration, Miss Pullman," he declared, eyeing her bruised and swollen bare wrists again for a moment before resuming his scrutiny of her face.

With the matted dry blood in her hair and a puffy left eye – she had walked into something during her killing spree without noticing it – she looked as if she had been in the ring with a prize fighter.

Incongruously, at this moment this troubled her more than somewhat.

She hated to look a mess when she was in the company of an interesting man. The airman had been Julian Christopher's deputy but he had never been in the Fighting Admiral's shadow.

"My name is not Clara Pullman," she confessed, quirking a rueful smile.

"No?" The man waited. He had a million and one other horribly pressing things to do but he waited patiently for her to continue.

Grace under pressure.

"My name is Rachel Angelika Piotrowska," she told him. Involuntarily, she again half-smiled: "My mother and father always called me their little *Angel*. As a girl I was always *Angelika*." Having opened her mouth, she found it hard to stop talking. "*Rachel* was for my father's mother. His family never approved of my mother. Too *Russki*, you see; despite her being half-Jewish. There's no such thing as being half-Russki; or half-Jewish. Or at least not where I was born, my mother always had too many old-fashioned airs and graces. Or that's what everybody said." She forced herself to shut up. "I'm talking too much."

The man shrugged, in no hurry to betray his own agenda.

"What happened to your parents?"

"My father was a political journalist so the Soviets took him away one day and I never saw him again. My mother was one of over a hundred women and children driven into a church in Lodz which the Nazis set fire to. Some of the kids jumped from the first-floor windows to escape the flames. The Germans bayoneted them to death. Leastways, that was what I think happened. I'd escaped the ghetto by then so I only know what people told me months later. It took me several years to accept that I was never going to see my father or my mother again."

Dan French arched an eyebrow.

He said nothing, which must have been hard for him.

Rachel sighed, shuddered involuntarily.

"I have worked for the British since 1947," she said flatly, too exhausted and too beaten down to lie. "The last time I spoke to the Director General of MI6 in Lisbon in December I told him I was finished. But he persuaded me to come back to Malta," she shrugged, blinked back a stray tear before she collected her wits anew. "I knew it would end badly. Arkady had got into my head, you see. Everything got too personal and well, I couldn't be who

and what I was supposed to be any more. That was why Julian Christopher had his own people watching Arkady. He knew he couldn't trust me. I couldn't run away, of course. Where can you run on Malta? So, I ran away inside my head. I really was a nurse once," another shrug of her shoulders, a sniff and she forced herself to sit upright, "so I tried to be one again."

"You had no inkling that what happened yesterday was going to happen?"

She shook her head.

"No. I think Arkady knew he was blown. Sending him back here to reel in his own network was too much even for a monster to bear. It would have been kinder almost to have taken him back to England, pumped him full of truth serum or whatever Dick White's inquisitors use these days, and quietly put a bullet through his head when it was all over. Kinder, and a lot less *problematic*," she concluded resignedly.

"For whom?"

"For everybody." Rachel had wondered again what Julian Christopher had told his friend about her. "You knew about Arkady?"

The man nodded.

"But not me?"

"No, you were something of a conundrum. Obviously, I took it as read that you were a spook," Dan French conceded, "but otherwise I knew nothing about you. Who will vouch for you, Miss Piotrowska?"

Rachel smiled; she could not stop herself smiling.

The man who found himself in command of all British and Commonwealth Forces on Malta held up a tired hand. He had just asked one of the least intelligent questions he had ever asked in his whole life. She would not or could not answer his question and he had known it before he opened his mouth.

"Okay," he murmured. "Let me be frank about this, Miss Piotrowska; my security people want to crawl all over you, your life and your career. They tell me I can't afford to wait until secure communications are restored to England. They failed to keep Rykov under control," he vented a disgruntled snort, "and they are looking for somebody to blame. Things being what they are I need you to give me a reason to let you walk out of this room a free woman. More than that I need to know that I can trust you. I must know what happened in the period immediately prior to your arrest. I

have heard garbled stories about your, er, exploits, but I'd like to hear your version."

Rachel very nearly giggled. It must have seemed hysterical, manic but she did not care. The balance of her mind, her sanity, was every bit as perturbed, disturbed as it ought to have been by the things she had done yesterday.

Why pretend otherwise?

"When I was thirteen," she prefaced, involuntarily making an apologetic spreading gesture with her hands, "I killed Fascists; with a knife mostly but once I threw a bomb into a crowded mess room. The only Germans who got out alive were on fire from head to toe. I had a gun but I let them burn. Killing a Fascist with a gun was nothing; I got more satisfaction using a knife. If I couldn't cut their throats or stab them through the lung or heart I twisted the blade in their guts. What with one thing and another after the war I never really 'got on' with other young people of my own age."

Dan French nodded his face a grim mask.

"After the Germans caught me I ended up at Ravensbrück. I was there were the Soviets 'liberated' the camp. I killed the first two Red Army soldiers who raped me," Rachel added, very much as an afterthought. "That was before I realised that killing everybody who raped me was going to be, well, dumb really. There were about two million Red Army soldiers in Germany at the time. If I spent all my time killing Russians I'd starve to death. So, I stopped killing Russians." Once more she smiled thinly at the silent, handsome man who had the power to click his fingers and to have her taken outside and shot. "For a while."

Still the man said nothing, waiting patiently as if he knew she was beyond threats, beyond fear and that she had already realised that he was not the sort of man who was going to have the Redcaps beat any kind of truth out of her.

"Sorry, yesterday," Rachel murmured.

Why do I feel foolish?

"When Margo Seiffert was murdered," she went on, consciously trying to pull herself together, "it was like a switch clicking in my head. I killed as many Russians as I could," she explained, as if it was the most rational thing. "I'd forgotten how easy it was to kill people. Especially, people who deserve it. I enjoyed it so much I nearly forgot that the only thing which would really

make me feel any better was killing Arkady Pavlovich Rykov. It wasn't as if I didn't know where he was likely to be."

"And you killed him?"

"Yes. It was like putting down a wild dog."

"Why didn't you kill the second Soviet officer in the room?"

Rachel Angelika Piotrowska looked at the Acting Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on Malta and realised with a prick of shock that he understood *nothing*.

"Because he was never any threat to me."

Her sophistry was completely lost on the Englishman. A flash of muted vexation flickered in his level gaze.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Sorry. The second man *isn't* a Soviet officer. Well, not a real one, anyway. The Soviets must have given him a uniform when they landed, or he might have had one ready for when they landed. I don't know which." She was making very little sense so she spelled it out for the Englishman. "He wasn't one of the parachutists because he was already on Malta when the attack began."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because he speaks bad *Moskva* Russian," she declared, "*and* he is Maltese."

"You're positive about this?"

"I met him the first time Arkady Rykov and I were in Malta. That was just before Admiral Christopher arrived on the archipelago and the big American bombing raid. Well, I say I 'met him', really it was more a case of 'seeing him' once from across the street, and another time from the other side of a crowded bar while I was supposed to be 'minding Arkady's back'."

This obviously confused Dan French.

"I was Arkady's lover and 'agent' but he would have killed me the moment I ceased to be useful to him. By the time we got to Malta in November he was starting to think about ending our partnership but he still needed somebody to ensure that nobody was taking an unhealthy interest in his activities. When, for example, he was meeting one of his agents..."

Rachel's voice had trailed off because she realised she had ignored one of the two questions the man badly wanted her to answer. The time for deceit and deception was over; after yesterday her cover was 'blown' to smithereens even if, for a moment, she had had it within her to pick up the scattered traces

of her previous life; a life that in truth, she had been running away from long before that Soviet trooper had murdered Margo Seiffert.

“Sorry, sorry,” she whispered. “The second man in the room when I killed Arkady Rykov is, was – I thought he was dead before I found him in that office in the Citadel – a Maltese citizen. His picture was in the *Times of Malta* two or three months ago,” she said, struggling to get to the point. “You know; when HMS Torquay was sabotaged in the Grand Harbour, remember?” She still honestly did not know why *she* had to tell him *this*.

Dan French’s eyes widened a fraction.

The most powerful man on the Maltese Archipelago was in a quandary.

Something screamed at him that he did not want to hear what he was about to hear and yet, he had to know *everything*.

“Who is he?”

The woman’s shoulders sagged.

“He is Marija Calleja-Christopher’s eldest brother,” she murmured, feeling like she had stabbed her new-found sister Marija in the back, “he is Samuel Calleja.”

Chapter 22

03:50 Hours (Local)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Sa'dabad Palace, Tehran

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the forty-four-year-old Shah of Iran stifled a yawn and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He sat up and listened for some seconds to the mounting thrumming drone of many, many aircraft engines high in the skies over the Sa'dabad Palace.

Mohammed Reza had ascended to the Peacock Throne on 16th September 1941 when an Anglo-Soviet invasion had forced his father, the first monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty to abdicate. A ruthless and coldly pragmatic man brought up from infancy in a palace environment populated with scheming, duplicitous and positively mendacious characters that would not have been out of place in a Medici or a Byzantine court, he saw threats and plots in every shadow.

Why is my air force flying over the capital of the nation this night?

He rose to his feet and padded to the great tall windows of his bed chamber. Presently he was outside on the balcony, gazing into the darkness of the heavens. Here and there a star winked faintly through a gap in the overcast and a cool breeze blew down from the mountains north of the city.

The sky seemed alive with distant noise.

Like usurpers throughout history the Pahlavi dynasty was intensely sensitive about its legitimacy. Beneath the appearance of absolute command, of regal certitude and unquestioned authority, a crippling underlying sense of nameless insecurity touched every aspect of Mohammed Reza's regime. His father, an army officer, had seized the throne in a coup in the 1920s and his son could never forget that he had been installed as a tame 'place man' by the British and the Russians; just another pawn in the 'great game'. It mattered not that he was the inheritor of the monarchy of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, or that he perched at the apex of a lineage stretching back over two millennia; nor did it matter that among his numerous titles and honorifics he boasted that he was *Āryāmehr*, the 'Light of the Aryans', and *Bozorg*

Arteshtārān, the ancient ‘Chief of the Warriors’.

The problem was that there was no actual Pahlavi blood line connecting him to Cyrus the Great or any other Persian imperial dynasty, and even after more than two decades on the throne the Shah’s grip on power was anything but assured. The reality of his situation had been brought home to him over a decade ago. After Iran’s first democratic government had been elected it had turned on him and nationalised British and American oil interests in the country, whereupon the same western ‘idealists’ and ‘statesmen’ who had pressured him into accepting and implementing so-called ‘democratic reforms’ had ruthlessly conspired with him to crush his nation’s ill-starred experiment with *representative democracy*. Ever since then in the eyes of many of his people, he had been no more than a Western puppet.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had never forgotten the lessons of the long drawn out excruciatingly painful and humiliating *Abadan Crisis* of 1951 to 1954. In the intervening years he had *always* striven to avoid a repetition of that conflict. Every time he thought, read or heard the name ‘Abadan’ it reminded him that oil was both his kingdom’s strength and its horribly vulnerable Achilles heel.

The potential wealth of Iran’s massive oilfields – until recently thought to be mainly in the south but now known to also stretch across the northern border into Kurdish Iraq and the former Soviet Republics of the Trans-Caucasus – might one day give him a trump card at the international table. Many of his advisors believed that the October War was a God-given second opportunity to successful re-nationalise the oilfields and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s huge refinery complex at Abadan. They were fools; whatever else had changed in the post-war World the Royal Navy still bestrode the seas.

Abadan was like a running sore on the conscience of the kingdom; a wound that ought to have been lanced years ago. Nevertheless, Mohammed Reza was nothing if not a cautious man and he was wise enough to understand that in the aftermath of the October War – in the long run - history was on his side.

It was just a question of having the patience to play that *long game* and to wait for the so-called ‘victors’ of the recent war to turn inward and surrender to *him*, without a fight what was rightfully *his*.

The British had built a giant refinery complex at Abadan, a forty-two-

mile-long island bounded on the east by the Bahmanshir outlet of the Karun River and on the west by the Arvand River, part of the Shatt al-Arab, a waterway formed by the confluence of the Euphrates and the Tigris at al-Qurnah some eighty miles to the north-west. Some two dozen miles across at its widest point Abadan was both an Iranian provincial capital and – in fact, if not in strict legal terms, possession being nine-tenths of the law - a British Imperial Protectorate, strategically placed at the head of the Persian Gulf.

The current situation, as restored after the unpleasantness of the early 1950s, was one based on concessions made to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in Mohammed Reza's father's time. Mohammad Mosaddegh, the kingdom's first elected Prime Minister had damned those concessions as being 'immoral as well as illegal' but that had cut no ice in post-World War II London. Clement Atlee and later a re-elected Winston Churchill had complacently clung to the illusion that Iranian oil was actually *British oil* on the grounds that it was the British who had discovered it, it was the British who had developed the substantial infrastructure required to extract and transport it to Abadan, and on that island, it was the British who had built the largest oil refinery on the planet. By 1951 Abadan was Great Britain's biggest and by far its most valuable overseas asset and basically, for commercial, strategic and profoundly political reasons it was unthinkable that one day it might simply be appropriated by a bunch of foreigners. Moreover, there was always the fear that if Britain allowed Iran to get away with 'stealing' Abadan it would set an appalling precedent, and that thereafter 'nationalists' everywhere 'could abrogate British concessions with impunity.'

Mohammad Mosaddegh had dreamed of using the wealth generated by Iran's oil, and the vast profits of the Abadan refineries to fight poverty and to educate the Iranian people; in Britain in 1951 the outgoing Labour Government and the incoming Conservative Government had viewed the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry as straightforward 'theft'. Moreover, fearing a long-term interruption to the flow of Arabian oil to the fast rebuilding war-ravaged industries of Western Europe and to the booming American post-war economy, Britain and America were alarmed that Iran might 'go rogue'. Immediately there was talk of a Soviet occupation 'by the back door'. To the Western superpowers it was axiomatic that the gratuitous 'theft' of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's property could not be allowed to stand unchallenged.

In the event exactly what Mohammed Reza had feared would happen, happened.

Firstly, after the British and most of the American workers at Abadan had been expelled from Iran it proved impossible to recruit skilled engineers and technicians to maintain and to safely operate even a small proportion of the oil fields, or the Abadan refinery complex.

Secondly, oil production slumped disastrously and serious accidents became common. Anybody who had eyes could see that in a handful of years the Iranian oil industry would be in ruins.

Thirdly, the Royal Navy blockaded the Persian Gulf and in July 1952 an Italian registered tanker, the Rose Mary, was intercepted and obliged to dock at Aden because the Royal Navy deemed the ship's cargo to be 'stolen goods'.

Thereafter, there were no more oil exports from Iran, people started to starve in the backstreets of Tehran, previously suppressed religious tensions began to re-surface and the people around the Shah started to panic. As always happens in such situations there were rumours of coups, palace revolts and an end to the Pahlavi dynasty.

Had it not been for the timely overthrow of Mosaddegh's *elected* government on the 19th August 1953, by a second coup d'état – the first had failed forcing the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to flee to Rome - organised in London and Langley Virginia, the Shah's days would have been numbered.

As was common in those years the British and the Americans, those two indefatigable pillars of freedom and democracy, invariably took two or three attempts to mount a successful coup d'état. MI6 and the Central Intelligence Agency had bought the wrong people the first time around and Operation Ajax, the name they had given the debacle, had had to be mounted a second time. The second attempt was better funded and carried out mindful of the errors and sloppy planning which had been the downfall of its earlier flawed incarnation. Second time around the right people had been bought and the CIA had made it worth Mohammad Reza's while – in hard currency - to play along.

Of course, things had had to be finessed the following year; the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) had ceased, on paper, to be a British fiefdom, instead nominally falling under the control of an international consortium. Iran had emerged from the negotiations with a deal that guaranteed it twenty-

five percent of the *profits* of the ‘consortium’ as opposed to its pre-crisis share of twenty percent of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s *declared* profits. However, control of the Abadan ‘investment’ still rested with its main shareholder, British Petroleum and its partner, Royal Dutch Shell which together retained fifty-four percent of the ordinary shares in AIOC. Given that European and American oil companies operating in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf commonly shared the profits of their drilling and refining operation on a fifty-fifty basis with their hosts; to the Shah of Iran the deal still left a bitter taste in the mouth ten years later.

In the eighteen months since the October War the British, latterly with a garrison reinforced by troops and a handful of aircraft from Australia and New Zealand had tightened their grip on Abadan. Despite other commitments the British still kept several warships – at least two destroyers or frigates, several minesweepers and patrol craft, and probably submarines - in the Persian Gulf operating out of their base at Aden. Recently the Shah had received reports suggesting that the British had installed long-range Bloodhound anti-aircraft missiles and unloaded a consignment of modern battle tanks at Abadan; but these were the sort of reports he had learned to treat with caution. Given the *difficulties* the British had lately experienced in the Mediterranean the notion that they had scarce modern equipment and armour to spare to reinforce a garrison located in the heart of nominally *friendly territory* was faintly preposterous.

This said, he did not discount the possibility that the British had become aware of the re-positioning of the bulk of his front-line ground and air force units in the southern provinces of the kingdom, *just in case a situation developed in which the former imperial overlords might be persuaded that it was in their best interests to depart Abadan.* Besides, with the Soviet Union wrecked from end to end; what profit was there in leaving the bulk of his forever restless Army and Air Force twiddling its collective thumbs guarding the mountain passes to the Trans-Caucasus?

It was better by far to keep his generals busy in the south; recent history was replete with evidence that idleness only encouraged them to discuss new conspiracies against the Pahlavi Dynasty.

The Sa’dabad Palace was some miles north of the centre of Tehran, located in the hills overlooking the city. Between the compound and the northern limits of the capital a forest was coming into spring leaf and at dawn

the view was often spectacular.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sighed in disgust. Once awakened as he had been by *his* Air Force's *exercise* over Tehran he knew he would be unable to get back to sleep. He contemplated summoning one of the ladies of the court; but he was too restless, not in the mood for sex.

Surely somebody on his staff would have forewarned him of a big exercise anywhere in the vicinity of the capital?

His secret police – the SAVAK – had been set up with advice, guidance and ongoing technical support from the Americans and very discreetly, by the Israelis in 1957. The October War had been a signal for a major expansion of the *Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar,* the Organization of Intelligence and National Security. In troubled times a monarch can trust no man. He had given SAVAK its head; in the kingdom of Iran enemies of the state, dissidents and troublemakers should expect no mercy.

SAVAK would surely have warned him if there was a serious threat of an imminent coup d'état?

Moreover, SAVAK would have routinely reported any planned military exercise, display or demonstration within fifty miles of the capital.

And yet many aircraft were still circling high over the city.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi marched to the nearest phone.

"Wake up the Palace Guard and put me through to the Military Governor of the Tehran Region!"

That was when the usurper's blood running in the veins of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, suddenly began to run cold.

Even as he was in the process of slamming down the telephone handset the first sirens began to wail like distant auguries of doom in the cool spring air and he heard the first distant explosions.

Chapter 23

03:59 Hours (Local)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Astara, Azerbaijan

Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian fought back the temptation to look again at his wristwatch. His staff had laid out the big maps of Northern Iran on two rickety trestle tables in the grubby rather squalid little hall that from the road had looked completely derelict the previous afternoon when he had arrived at the front. The border crossing into Iran was less than three hundred metres from where he now stood, gazing thoughtfully at the topography of the terrain over which he was about to launch two great armoured hammer blows.

The ground over which the 3rd Caucasus Tank Army and the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army had to advance was *impossible*. Manoeuvre would be restricted to a handful of high valleys; and progress would be crucifyingly slow as soon as the forward spearheads started to climb the foothills of the Alborz Mountains on the way to Tabriz and Ardabil. If anybody in the Iranian Army or Air Force realised what was happening the narrow mountain valleys and passes would be choked with the wreckage of his armoured spearheads within hours and the Soviet Union's last great throw of the dice would be the death rattle of the old Red Army.

Not that he believed for a moment that anybody in Tehran would believe what was happening even if they discovered it; it was too incredible. If Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian had studied the borders of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with the specific intention of identifying the worst place on Earth to launch a massive armoured thrust – the mountains of Afghanistan excluded - he was looking at it now. This said he comforted himself with the knowledge that if the USSR had attempted to mount an attack on this scale anywhere else – say, across the Anatolian littoral of Turkey, or through Bulgaria and Romania towards the Balkans, or even across the radioactive firestorm-ravaged wasteland of central Europe – the British and the Americans would have surely identified the preparations at an

early stage and destroyed his two tank armies as they massed for the attack. A handful of Minutemen or Polaris strikes would have obliterated the Soviet Union's last two intact armies and then, well, the Cuban Missiles War really would have been over not just for a generation but for perhaps a hundred years.

Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian was not by nature one of life's gamblers. To the contrary the fifty-eight-year-old veteran tank commander born to poor Armenian farmers in the village of Chardakhlu was a man who took little on trust and believed that meticulous planning and preparation was the secret of success in war. Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian – he preferred the Armenian style to the Russian translation of his birth names, *Amazasp Khachaturovich Babadzhanyan* – was also the kind of soldier who thought that people who talked about knowing the 'secret' of success on the battlefield were either charlatans or idiots, or both.

He was a warrior who had a knack of emerging from each successive battle with an enhanced reputation and increased professional kudos from his peers. He was the sort of soldier another soldier wanted at his side in combat; a man they could trust to defend his front, his flank or his back to the death. In the Finno-Soviet Winter War of 1939-40 – which was an unmitigated disastrous for the Red Army – he had distinguished himself to such effect that he was subsequently promoted to the command of the 751st Rifle Regiment, based in the Northern Caucasus Military District. Later when the Nazis invaded the Mother Country he was sent to Smolensk to command the 395th Regiment of the 127th Rifle Division, where his unit was involved in a series of savage rear-guard actions before taking part in a brief, ultimately futile counter attack. In early September 1941 the 395th Regiment had participated in another counter attack, this time against the German 4th Army south of Smolensk and was the first Soviet unit to re-enter the city of Yelnya. Sent to refit and rest his regiment in the Ukraine, Babadzhanian was soon back in the thick of the fighting again, this time heavily engaging the Wehrmacht invaders while Kursk was evacuated ahead of the seemingly all-conquering panzers. In action after desperate action throughout 1942 he had showed a flair for attacking the enemy where he least expected and a talent for exploiting the merest sniff of any advantage gained, fighting always during this period against greatly superior numerical enemy forces. By September of that year he was in command of the 3rd Mechanised Brigade of

the Third Mechanised Corps; in 1943 he commanded the 20th Tank Brigade at the Battle of Kursk – the greatest clash of armour in history – and although wounded he had recovered to play his part in practically every major battle and campaign the Red Army fought along the long bloody road that had ended in the ruins of Berlin in April 1945. By the end of the Great Patriotic War he was an acknowledge master of tank warfare in an army full of veteran 'tankers'.

In November 1956, it had been to Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian that Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev had turned to crush to the Hungarian uprising.

However, as Babadzhanian surveyed the map of the mountainous terrain of Northern Iraq it gave the commander of the 'Great Push to the South' little satisfaction to know that second only to his immediate superior, Marshal of the Soviet Union and Defence Minister of the USSR, Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, he was universally regarded as the finest living exponent of mechanised warfare in the Red Army. Hannibal had only had to transport a few elephants across the Pyrenees; in comparison his own task was positively Herculean!

What made things even worse was that because of time constraints and uncertainties about the combat readiness, mobility and availability of the mechanised infantry, airborne and Ministry of Interior police troops detached to put down the Red Dawn insurgency in Turkey, Greece and Romania, and the need to keep the strategic goals and specific military objectives of the forthcoming endeavour, *Operation Nakazyvat* – Operation Chastise - secret there had been no time or scope to war game the movement plans, or any of the critical stresses those plans would inflict on the Army Group South's logistics train, below the level of Corps commander. Moreover, the results of the handful of Staff paper 'war games' that had been 'fought' had not been encouraging. Of necessity Operation Nakazyvat had too many competing moving parts, and every assumption about the fighting power of the units involved and the supply chain which would eventually stretch all the way back to the Urals had had to be hedged around with countless complex caveats.

The icing on the cake impossibly late in the day had been the Central Committee's endorsement of the imbecilic 'Malta adventure'. Babadzhanian had been livid when he had learned what was envisaged and regardless of the

short-term success or failure of the lunatic enterprise in the Central Mediterranean – which was more likely to stir up a hornets' nest in the mid to long term than to deny the British and the Americans Cyprus as a base of operations against his exposed right flank – undertaking the operation had delayed his offensive by a further two weeks and robbed him of over two thousand invaluable and irreplaceable highly trained Spetsnaz and airborne assault troops and as many as one hundred and forty vital transport aircraft. Of the twenty-nine thousand men initially detached to fight 'somebody else's fires' in the west, less than a third had so far been returned to him in good combat order meaning that significant elements of the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army, responsible for taking Ardabil would – if the Iranians got their act together at some stage - probably now have to be permanently detached to police his lines of communication and to provide at least a 'picket line' guard for the impossibly long exposed southern flank of his advance.

The purity of his strategic vision which had once been so clinically simple, so marvellously unadorned with superfluous and distracting requirements had been shamelessly watered down and hamstrung, while leaving its original goals unaltered.

Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian would have lost sleep worrying but there was nothing he could do about it now. He had a job to do and he intended to get on with it. In the final moments before the opening artillery barrage he steeled himself for the trials to come, hardened his heart and resolved that whatever happened, his tanks would one day reach the warm blue waters of the Persian Gulf.

The map of Northern Iran described the obstacles in his path perfectly.

First there was the towering barrier of the Alborz Mountains curving around the southern Caspian Sea from the Soviet border all the way to Tehran and beyond far into the eastern deserts of Iran towards distant Afghanistan. A single tank corps, or perhaps two, from either of his armoured armies could hold the line of those mountains forever and a day against all comers. Which was good to know but he actually needed those corps to drive west south west from their first targets, Tabriz and Ardabil, onward across the high plateau on the other side of the Alborz Mountains and burst through the narrow passes of the even more formidable obstacle of the Zagros Mountains which guarding Iran's western border with neighbouring Iraq. The Zagros Mountains stretched from Anatolia to the Persian Gulf and only when his

tanks had crossed them and swept down onto the plains of the head waters and tributaries of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers could the real ‘drive to the sea’ commence.

Several meddling fools in Chelyabinsk – the current seat of the collective leadership of the Party and the State - had tried to mandate a drive south straight across the rocky plateau of central Iraq. Fortunately, Vasily Chuikov had put the idiots right before Babadzhanian had got wind of the scheming behind his back. Yes, it would be better to just cross just one mountain range. Yes, crossing the Zagros range was likely to be expensive in terms of men and machinery. But, and it was a big but, since the object of the exercise was to invest and if at all possible, capture Basra and more importantly Abadan Island, both of which lay on the *western* side of the Zagros Mountains it ought to have been obvious even to the most brainless Party apparatchiks in Chelyabinsk that those mountains needed to be crossed at some stage!

Had they no understanding of the tenets of blitzkrieg?

What did the numbskulls think he meant when he talked about waging a ‘lightning war’ in the preamble to his operational overview?

There could be no ‘lighting war’ on the barren wastes of the rocky central plateau of Iran!

What if something went wrong?

Advancing with the Zagros Mountains to his right and the Alborz Mountains at his back his forces could easily be destroyed in detail by British and American air strikes or die a death of a thousand tiny cuts inflicted by remnants of the Iranian Army and local guerrillas!

How could the people in Chelyabinsk not see that by crossing onto the floodplains of the great rivers of the ancient world – thereby utilising the best available ground for his tanks and the hundreds, thousands of vehicles which carried the ammunition, fuel and food needed to sustain a ‘lightning war’ – and by putting the major topographical obstacles behind the invasion force at the point when it was at its most coherent, freshest and most optimistic, rather than later when it had already been fighting for its life at the end of a dangerously tenuous supply chair for at least a month and probably longer, was not a fundamentally sound military plan?

Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian glanced at his watch again.

04:07 Hours.

Not long now.

In many ways he was privately a little surprised that *his* plan for the 'push to the sea' had survived so remarkably intact. Much of that would have been Chuikov's doing. He and the Marshal had had their differences over the years and there were still times when the rascally old street fighter treated him like a novice; but they had become a good team in the last year. So much so that they almost, but not quite, trusted each other.

In a few seconds the question of whether he trusted his immediate superior would be academic. He and Vasily Ivanovich had swept up all the chips on the table and staked them on a single outrageous gamble. If they won their bet on fate the Mother Country might yet survive the coming years, international socialism might yet live on in the World and the 'great game' would continue. If they lost their wager with fate; most likely they lost everything; and future generations would learn about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a footnote to history and the 'great game' would be over.

It very nearly beggared belief that Operation Nakazyvat was about to be unleashed *before* the Yankees and the British had reacted; incredibly, it was now likely that the West still had no real idea what was about to happen, no inkling that ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of human civilization, was once more to be the nexus of history.

The floor trembled beneath Colonel General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's feet, the near derelict building shook and a moment later the concussion of the first salvoes of the intense fifteen-minute artillery barrage heralding the opening phase of Operation Nakazyvat filled the night.

Around the map tables men straightened, smiled, and relaxed.

Less than a kilometre away the first salvo of Katyusha multi-barrelled rocket launchers exploded into violent life. Immediately, other launchers began to send their rockets screaming into the night sky. Many of the launchers gathered for Operation Nakazyvat were later model 'Stalin's Organs' from the era of the Great Patriotic War stockpiled immediately after the fall of Berlin; but right now, the roar of salvo after salvo hurtling from the tubes of the Katyushas sounded like music to Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's ears.

The waiting was over.

Chapter 24

02:49 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Emergency Command Centre of the Military Governor of Malta, Marsa Creek

Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French, the Acting Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on the Maltese Archipelago stood up, and watched the Redcaps escorting Rachel Angelika Piotrowska from his presence.

What a remarkable woman!

'You've told me who you are and what happened yesterday in Mdina,' he had said, after she had dropped the bombshell that Samuel Calleja was still alive in a cell beneath the Citadel at Mdina. 'But you haven't really told me very much about who you work for or what you were doing working with Arkady Rykov?'

'I never *worked with or for* Arkady Pavlovich Rykov,' the woman had retorted. 'Dick White sent me to Istanbul to liquidate him in July 1962. Rykov was responsible, or so we thought at the time, for the torture and murder of several SIS agents in Turkey. I didn't catch up with him until a few days after the October War. He was in a hospital cot at Incirlik Air Force Base at the time; semi-conscious, babbling names and places. I made connections and decided not to cut his throat that night. A few days later I was ordered to 'play him'; which is more or less what I've been doing for most of the last eighteen months.'

'Dick White?' He had asked. *Like an idiot!*

The woman had nodded.

'He will confirm all of this?' Dan French had followed up.

'Maybe,' she had offered, not really caring either way.

'The radar and communications of the archipelago were sabotaged in the early hours of yesterday morning? Was that...'

'No,' she had shaken her head emphatically. 'That was not Arkady's work. Like I said I think he knew he was *blown* when we were sent back to

Malta after Dick went through the motions of conducting a *de-briefing* session in Lisbon in December.'

Rachel Angelika Piotrowska had smiled, she had actually smiled.

'The sabotage was probably the work of Soviet sleeper agents and specialist demolition operatives landed by submarines in the last few days.'

'Rykov had no knowledge of the invasion?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. He'd probably have killed me if he had. I was a loose end, you see.'

'But Rykov and Samuel Calleja took part in the assault on the Headquarters complex at Mdina?'

'They must have got into the Citadel wearing British uniforms and carrying British papers. I have no idea how they came to be with Admiral Christopher in his office when I arrived on the scene.'

'Why exactly did you *arrive on the scene*, Miss Piotrowska?'

'To kill Arkady Pavlovich Rykov.'

The woman had not elaborated.

'Am I still under arrest?' She had inquired.

'No,' he had sighed. 'No, that was all an unfortunate misunderstanding. Things were a little confused in Mdina.' He had hesitated, contemplated his options. 'The security people are opening up Fort Ricasoli as a holding centre for captured Russian officers and NCOs. Suspected Maltese and other agents or collaborators are being processed at the Joint Interrogation Centre at Fort Rinella. I won't have MI6 or the Redcaps behaving like the Gestapo on my watch. Can I rely on you to be my eyes and ears?"

The woman had nodded.

That was a couple of minutes ago and the exhausted Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on Malta – command of the forces committed to Operation Grantham rested in the hands of Rear-Admiral Nigel Grenville, Sir Julian Christopher's veteran right hand man throughout Operation Manna, and the victor of the second Battle of Trafalgar off the Spanish coast in December – had made the mistake of allowing his thoughts to wander.

There was a persistent rapping at his half-open door.

Dan French snapped back into the here and now.

"Come!"

Dan French slumped into his chair and looked up into the flushed face of

his Senior Communications Officer, a seasoned Squadron leader of about his own age who was never known to invest much apparent energy, enthusiasm or excitement in anything other than cricket. Normally the dourest of men his eyes positively glittered with anticipation, and oddly, joy...

A smudged signal pad was thrust towards the C-in-C.

“That Turkish destroyer that surrendered to HMS Alliance, sir!” The newcomer exclaimed. He was barely able to contain himself. Dan French was briefly afraid the poor fellow was going to break into a celebratory jig.

With a frown he accepted the pad. These days he needed his reading glasses to cope with small print – his ‘readers’ as he jokingly referred to them, were somewhere under the rubble of his office at RAF Luqa - and in his frustration he shoved it back at his subordinate.

“Just read damned thing please!”

“Oh, right you are, sir.” The other man took a deep breath. “Message reads...”

Dan French waved for him to bypass the standard preamble to all transmissions.

“IMMEDIATE MOST SECRET STOP P417 TO CINC FLEET MALTA COPIED TO FLAG OFFICER SUBMARINES STOP TURKISH D351 CAPTURED WITH FULL SET OF CURRENT CODE BOOKS AND ENCIPHERING EQUIPMENT STOP TURKISH SIGNALS OFFICER AND STAFF COOPERATING FULLY WITH PRIZE CREW STOP ETA MALTA ZERO FOUR ZERO HOURS LOCAL STOP MESSAGE ENDS”

Dan French felt the hairs start to tingle and stand up on the back of his neck.

“P Four-One-Seven?”

“HMS Alliance, sir.”

“Give me that pad!” The Acting C-in-C demanded crisply. “Are there any other copies of this signal on Malta?”

“Er, no, sir.”

“How many of your people saw the plain text version of the original cipher?”

“One man other than myself, sir.”

“Reliable man?”

“Yes, sir.”

The electricity was sparking up and down the Acting Commander-in-

Chief's spine like lightning now. If the captured Turkish destroyer really did possess a full set of code books, encryption procedures *and* its full electronic ciphering suite, the possibilities were limitless. Even if the enemy changed *all* his codes and encryption protocols in five minutes time the people at Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, and at Langley in Virginia would be able to piece together exactly how the attack on Malta had been: one, made possible; and two, executed in detail. There was no knowing what other priceless enemy intelligence might be wrung from previously intercepted traffic, or how critically important this capture might be in the future.

We might just have won the war!

If that turned out to be the case then the nightmares of the last day *might* actually have been for something after all. However, the forty-eight-year-old Second World War Bomber Command pilot whose wife and daughter had been vaporized in the October War would never take anything that *mattered*, or might *matter*, on trust ever again. The whole Cuban Missiles Crisis farrago could never have happened if otherwise intelligent, worldly, family men like him had not mistakenly taken it for granted that everybody knew – at some fundamental cognitive level – that nobody could conceivably *win* a nuclear war. Yet the cataclysm had fallen upon the Northern Hemisphere anyway.

The man who was presently in effect, God, in the Maltese Archipelago hurried tuned his mind to operate in small, sequential steps. First things first was a thing too many alleged military geniuses tended to forget when the going got sticky.

First, maintain secrecy. If the enemy got wind of this cryptographic gold mine which *might* be priceless – the suspected treasure *might* turn out to be fool's gold not the real thing – and the future value of the cache would plummet overnight.

Second, communicate the possible coup to his superiors in England. He would leave it up to them to deal with the Americans; he had enough problems of his own.

Third, safeguard the treasure. Specifically, recover it from the Turkish destroyer and discreetly salt it away in a place of safety pending instructions from the Chiefs of Staff.

Four, worry about one, two and three above before wasting time thinking about all the ways the potential intelligence bonanza would, in an ideal

world, be utilised to prosecute the rest of the war.

The phone on his desk rang.

"French," he intoned briskly.

"The USS Berkeley has now anchored in Kalkara Creek. The Captain of the Berkeley hopes to start the offloading of Talavera's survivors and wounded within the next few minutes, sir."

Dan French breathed the latest in an endless stream of sighs of relief.

"How many of Talavera's people does the Berkeley have onboard?"

"There is no precise head count, sir. All we know is that there are about a hundred survivors of whom some dozen are critically or very seriously injured and some forty to fifty men who are less seriously wounded requiring hospitalization or immediate medical attention including all four surviving officers of lieutenant rank or above. All of the latter including Commander Christopher are described as being in effect, 'walking wounded', sir."

HMS Talavera had had a complement of around two hundred and fifty men. A number of her crew members had been left ashore by the speed of her departure from port; and the suddenness of this departure had prevented a handful of dockyard workers from disembarking. Nobody actually knew how many men had been onboard the destroyer when she and the frigate Yarmouth had engaged the battle cruiser Yavuz, the fifteen-thousand-ton Russian cruiser the Admiral Kutuzov, a third cruiser approaching from the north-east and the two big ships' numerous escorts, each of whom would have – on paper - been a match for either Talavera or the Yarmouth in a straight ship to ship fight.

The figures he had just heard indicated that as many as one hundred and forty of HMS Talavera's men had perished in the desperate action members of Dan French's staff were already calling the 'Battle of Malta'. HMS Yarmouth's final butcher's bill was likely to be lower than Talavera's numerically but proportionately as high. Yarmouth, the more modern ship had had a smaller crew and had stayed afloat long enough to be run aground in St Paul's Bay, several miles up the east coast of the main island.

It was a miracle anybody from either ship had come out of the Battle of Malta alive.

"Very good," Dan French acknowledged, dully. "Please inform me when secure local communications have been established with the USS Berkeley. I wish to personally pass on my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to

her commanding officer, and," he tried to sound formally severe, "and to speak with Commander Christopher."

He replaced the receiver.

The positions in which the Yavuz, the Admiral Kutuzov and the Talavera had sunk were marked on the maps on his situation table. The notations formed a roughly equilateral triangle some three miles on each side with its nearest co-ordinate, Talavera's last resting place on the sea bed some nine-and-a-half miles almost due east of the entrance to Marsamxett Anchorage, with the nearest coast being the rocky tip of Tigne Point, Sliema.

Chapter 25

04:17 Hours
USS Berkeley (DDG-15)
Kalkara Creek, Grand Harbour, Malta

Peter Christopher had sent Alan Hannay ahead of him in the boat taking HMS Talavera's concussed and somewhat delirious former Executive Officer, Miles Weiss and two stretcher cases across the Creek to Royal Naval Hospital Bighi. Poor Miles could not stand up unaided and he hardly knew where he was from one moment to the next.

Atop the cliffs overlooking Kalkara Creek the Doric columns of Royal Naval Hospital Bighi were illuminated in the headlamps of vehicles parked on the cliff edge. Before the First World War a stone shaft had been built at the foot of the cliffs below the hospital to accommodate a bed lift direct from the stone jetty, thus avoiding the need to cart sick and wounded men over the uneven Kalkara roads up to the main hospital. As Peter moved among the men waiting on stretchers on the deck of the American destroyer, lighting cigarettes and chatting in hushed, comforting tones about nothing in particular as commanding officers have done to reassure their sick and injured men down the ages, his gaze repeatedly strayed to the jetty some thirty or forty yards distant. Arc lights threw a cruel white light across the stretcher parties queuing to load their charges onto the bed lift. Several nurses fussed over their new patients. Occasionally, one or other of the women spared a moment to glance towards the big guided missile destroyer moored to the buoys in the Creek. Maddeningly in the darkness and the glare of the lights no matter how hard he squinted at the faraway figures on the quay he was unable to make out any real details.

He wanted to know, needed to know and to see with his own eyes, that one of the nurses on the shore was Marija.

Thick banks of smoke still fell into the void of the Grand Harbour, roiling down off the fires burning in Valletta, Birgu-Vittoriosa, Senglea and a score of other places. There was the stench of burning bunker oil in that smoke, the grit of pulverised sandstone and the sting of bone dry hardwoods,

teak and oak, and of earth reduced to dust.

Peter suddenly became aware that one of the nurses on the jetty had stood up, shielded her eyes from the glare and dazzle of the arc lamps, and was staring at the USS Berkeley.

He gazed across the water, glassy and millpond calm glittering like a mirror now the sound and fury of the previous day was spent and the madness was over at least for now.

He hauled himself to his feet and hopped and stumbled to the rail where he tottered uncertainly for a second.

A big American seaman took his arm and steadied him.

Peter stared at the woman silhouetted in the glare of the arc lights.

Marija...

He ached to shout her name but he knew she was too far away for his temporarily ruined voice to carry.

So, he waved.

And after a momentary delay *she* waved back.

And then like a mirage she was gone, called to be with one of Talavera's wounded.

"Somebody you know, sir?" The hulking American, his teeth flashing white against the blackness of his skin, inquired in a kindly, familiar way no leading rate in the Royal Navy would dare, let alone think of employing in the company of or heaven forbid, actually risk employing to address a three-ringer.

"Yes, I think so." Peter Christopher shook his head, spoke hoarsely. "Yes," he echoed, the weight of the World descending anew upon his aching shoulders. "I think so." He looked the other man in the eye, grimacing. "Thank you for catching my arm. My wife," he nodded to towards the jetty, "would have worried if I'd gone over the side."

Without warning the Tannoy blared.

"NOW HEAR THIS! NOW HEAR THIS!"

A bell started ringing continuously.

On shore the ululating wail of air raid sirens began to wash towards Kalkara Creek from somewhere beyond neighbouring Dockyard Creek. Within seconds the sirens were shrieking like banshees across the water in Valletta.

"We've got to get you and your guys below deck, sir!"

The men on stretchers were carried with care and constantly apologetic noises into the shelter afforded by the bridge superstructure and the amidships deck houses and arranged in corridors and vacated messes. A boyish Lieutenant junior grade conveyed the destroyer's captain's invitation for Peter to join him in the Berkeley's CIC – Command Information Centre – but the offer was politely declined. Peter would have been under his counterpart's feet in the CIC and he did not want to be separated from his wounded men.

The sound of the air raid sirens was muted within the ship.

A few minutes after the Berkeley had closed up at action stations the sirens fell silent.

"NOW HEAR THIS! NOW HEAR THIS!"

The destroyer's commanding officer's voice drawled from the bulkhead speakers.

"The air defence plot is currently painting no hostile aircraft or threats within one hundred miles of Malta. The alert was probably a false alarm but the ship will remain closed up at Air Defence Stations for another thirty – repeat three-zero – minutes just to be on the safe side. That is all."

Peter had lowered himself, painfully, to the deck beside an injured engine room artificer. The other man was of approximately his own age and he grinned conspiratorially at his commanding officer.

"The Yanks don't know they're born, sir," he observed sardonically.

Peter would have patted the ERA's arm in agreement had not the poor fellow's arms and most of his face been swathed in moist bandages protecting flash seared flesh that would be terribly scarred for the rest of his life. The ERA's name was Dobson, Raymond Dobson, and he was married with a baby boy who had been born a fortnight after Talavera had sailed from Portsmouth to join the Ark Royal Battle Group in the Bay of Biscay in November. Like Peter he had survived the Battle of Finisterre, the fight off Lampedusa, and yesterday's action...

"Neither did we until we learned the hard way, Ray," he grimaced. "Neither did we."

He must have dozed off because the next thing he was aware of was a man timidly shaking his shoulder.

"It's time for you to go ashore, sir."

It was still dark when he emerged onto the deck of the destroyer to be

greeted by an RAF Flight-Lieutenant with a thick, bloody bandage wrapped inelegantly around his brow. The other man came to a shambling approximation of *attention* and threw a typically lackadaisical, sloppy 'air force' salute.

Peter Christopher returned the salute – he liked to think with a little crisper aplomb, but somehow, he doubted his salute had been any more military than the RAF man's – with a sinking heart. Something told him that he was not going to be allowed the luxury of going ashore to search for his wife quite yet.

"Air Vice-Marshal French's compliments, sir," the bandaged Flight-Lieutenant explained, "but would you be so good to attend him at his emergency command centre at your earliest convenience, sir?"

The flier – he wore wings above his left breast pocket – was swaying on his feet, not from the slight motion of the USS Berkeley in the sheltered waters of Kalkara Creek; rather, from his exhaustion and probably the lingering effects of his head wound.

Bidding his farewells, restating his heartfelt thanks to the commanding officer of the American guided missile destroyer, and requesting that a message be sent to Miles Weiss at RNH Bighi that he had been summoned to an 'interview with the C-in-C', he followed the RAF man down the gangway to the waiting launch.

He had not told anybody other than Spider McCann that his father was dead. In the aftermath of yesterday's battle, it was not for him to broadcast the news. Moral was a tender thing after any battle, especially a battle lost.

The eastern sky was lightening from obsidian black to dark hues of grey, and the last stars were winking out as the sun rose towards the twilight horizon as the launch – actually a somewhat knocked about whaler similar to his old captain's barge on the Talavera – chugged around St Angelo Point and west across the neck of Dockyard Creek. A mist of smoke hung over the water of the inner creeks, flotsam and oil, rafts of shattered cork, wood and here and there small buoys and waterlogged rubber fenders bobbed in the black water of the Grand Harbour. The saluting battery on the Valletta ramparts was briefly glimpsed between the lingering fogs of war.

Peter Christopher stood in the confined space between the small low forward and aft deckhouses of the whaler silently preoccupied with the cost of a battle lost as the first pre-dawn greyness fell across Malta. There must

have been mornings like this after big night air raids by the Germans and Italians during the Second World War siege of the archipelago; mornings like this one but not so dreadful, nor so poignant with despair. Malta was more than just a fortress or a safe harbour to the post World War II Royal Navy; it was a symbol of everything that made the Service what it was. The blood of countless Navy men was etched and stained into the fabric of the archipelago; these waters were sacred, hallowed ground. If Malta had fallen in 1941 or 1942 there would have been no El Alamein, Rommel would not have been beaten back from the gates of Cairo and the Suez Canal, the war would have been lost and he might have grown up speaking German. Two decades ago Malta had been briefly the most heavily bombed place on planet Earth and yet British and Commonwealth arms had prevailed because the Mediterranean Fleet would have paid any price to save it.

"That was a brave thing you did yesterday, sir," the wounded RAF man said quietly in the cold half-light. "A damnably brave thing!"

Peter Christopher brushed this aside.

"I gather Yarmouth was run aground?" He asked, his voiced hollowed out with exhaustion.

"That other American destroyer, the John Adams, she shepherded Yarmouth onto the beach in St Paul's Bay, sir. The locals went out in fishing boats and such like to take off her people..."

HMS Talavera's former commanding officer vented a new sigh of relief. He had *ordered* Yarmouth to draw the enemy's fire while Talavera raced in to launch her torpedoes; he had *known* at the time that he was issuing the under-gunned frigate's death warrant.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"Yes." Peter Christopher was half-a-head taller than his escort. "Yes, thank you," he added absently, quirking a curious eyebrow at the bloody bandana around the other man's brow. "You look like you've been in the wars, too, old man?"

"Oh, this?" The RAF man grinned crookedly, raising a hand gingerly to his head. "We had a field day shooting down the second wave of transports that came over the islands. Well, until we ran out of ammo and fuel, that is. All the runways hereabouts were cratered to buggery by then. I ejected straight into a pack of the blighters. Last thing I remember was falling through dozens of parachute canopies before I woke up in a crater at Hal Far

with a cracked skull!”

Neither man spoke for a minute or so as the whaler slowly proceeded deeper into the anchorage.

“Air Vice-Marshal French has moved his command centre to the old seaplane station at Marsa Creek, sir. The hangars aren’t ideal but I think it was a question of finding somewhere with intact telephone lines to the outside world which hadn’t been completely flattened by that blasted Turkish battlecruiser!”

Peter Christopher had been staring at the darkened wharves below Corradino heights where less than twenty-four hours ago Talavera had been ammunitioning and provisioning ship when the balloon had gone up.

‘Cut your lines and go, Peter...’

Chapter 26

06:50 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Royal Naval Hospital Bighi, Malta

The tall blue-eyed, flaxen-haired youthful American naval officer had found the nutmeg-haired, slender young woman in the blood-stained pale blue nursing smock at the cliff top wall in front of the Doric-columned shell-scarred main building of the hospital complex.

Marija was staring down into Kalkara Creek, apparently transfixed by the shape and form of the big guided missile destroyer gradually emerging out of the shadows with the onrushing dawn. The USS Berkeley looked like something out of one of her little brother, Joe's, boyhood comics. With its boxy superstructure, its harsh edges, lattice masts festooned with a myriad of radar sensors, dishes and aerials, rounded gun turrets fore and aft, and the tall pylons of what could only be the launchers for her Tartar surface-to-air missiles she was the shape of things to come; and yet yesterday's battle had been fought and by and largely won by two smaller, older and infinitely – on paper – less formidable British ships. It was all very confusing.

Marija's family had *always* been a 'dockyard family'; her father was a senior Under Manager at the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta, her elder brother Samuel had been a foreman, and Joe was an electrician. Her earliest memories of sitting at the dinner table with her father and siblings had been of the talk of ships, the sea and of the strengths and weaknesses of British naval architecture, radar, sonar, guns, torpedoes and latterly, missiles. All things considered she was something of a connoisseur of the ships, engineering, mechanical, electrical and weaponry systems of the post-World War II Royal Navy. Now as she stared in wondrous fascinated curiosity at the USS Berkeley - a veritable apparition of applied scientific shipbuilding design the like of which was almost entirely new to her uncannily knowledgeable eye - she silently marvelled at the shape of things to come.

The American coughed, softly so as to not risk alarming the woman.

Marija turned.

“I was admiring your fine ship, Lieutenant,” she half-smiled.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Marija gave him a seraphically quizzical look.

“My husband has been called away,” she said simply before the newcomer had had a chance to open his mouth again.

“Er, yes, ma’am. How did you know?”

“Because he would have been standing where you are standing now if he had not been ‘called away’, Lieutenant,” Marija explained, her rueful serenity completely disorientating the young American. Her terrors had fled away when she had recognised the tall figure of her husband gazing towards her at the rail of the USS Berkeley two hours ago. She looked away, back down at the long menacing lines of the USS Berkeley. “They say your Captain took your ship alongside HMS Talavera as she sank?”

“Yeah, I guess he did...”

“That was very brave. One day I will thank him personally for saving the life of my husband,” Marija declared solemnly. She had come up to the cliff top to be alone for a few minutes to reflect on the knowledge that against all expectations the man she had loved half her young life had really survived. She had wanted to believe it when the first of the wounded men on the jetty below Bighi had told her that Peter lived. She had started to actually believe it when Alan Hannay, very nearly unrecognisable beneath his bandages had staggered up to her and blurted out the news. She had finally believed it when Chief Petty Officer McCann – a small man whom she knew to be a veritable legend in his own lifetime in the Mediterranean Fleet – had paternally taken her aside and assured her that ‘the Skipper is a little worse for wear but he’ll better for laying eyes on you, I’ll wager!’

Marija had almost fainted with astonishment when, dazzled by the brilliant arc lights, she had practically walked into her little brother, Joe. Joe had looked horribly sorry for himself and he had yelped in pain as she had tried to hug him. Joe’s right forearm was in an ultra-modern-looking tubular metal and fabric splint; but he had looked as if he had been beaten up by a gang of drunken matelots in a Valletta backstreet and left for dead.

‘Marvellous!’ The red-headed, stocky Petty Officer who had been guiding Marija’s brother towards the bed lift had complained. Jack Griffin had looked almost as bad as Joe had, the difference was that this was not the first time he had been badly knocked about and he was immensely smug

about having actually survived the previous day's adventure. 'This little so and so gets a hug from a beautiful girl and all I get is pointed to where I'm supposed to queue for the bloody lift!'

Marija had allowed Jack Griffin to renew his protective grip on her brother's undamaged left arm. She had wanted to ask how Joe had come to be onboard HMS Talavera but she had been called away and had not seen either Joe or his unlikely guardian again since.

It was so strange to think that a little more than a day ago she had been in Peter's arms; and that since then the World had gone mad.

At the height of the bombardment from the sea Marija had been pierced by a dagger of terrible loss. She had feared she had lost Peter, now she knew she had lost somebody else close to her. There were no working telephone lines at Bighi, and one glance across the waters of the Grand Harbour at the fires still burning in Valletta and beyond, told her that everywhere was chaos, the roads were blocked and that there was no knowing who had lived and who had died in yesterday's nightmare. Yet somebody she loved had died. This she knew with horrible certainty. Not her husband. Not her little brother Joe, by any standards the most improbable hero of yesterday's great naval battle. But if not Peter or Joe, then whom? Her parents, any one of the nurses she had trained and worked with in Mdina for these last ten years? Or Margo...

No, Margo Seiffert was indestructible!

The young American naval lieutenant was still standing before her.

"And," Marija murmured with a fond shake of her head, "I will also thank your Captain for saving my idiotic little brother, also."

This clearly perplexed the young American.

"It is complicated, Lieutenant," she explained. She had no idea what Joe had been doing onboard the Talavera. No doubt this was another thing she would discover in due course. "Forgive me, I am a tired. I don't usually babble this way."

"I must get back to my ship, ma'am."

"Yes. Thank you."

Marija viewed the rapidly retreating back of the messenger.

I wonder if my sister Rosa has let go of poor Alan yet?

Her sister-in-law had squealed with uncharacteristically anguished relief and delight when Lieutenant Alan Hannay had limped unsteadily up the steps

onto the Kalkara Creek jetty. Still hobbling painfully from the effects of her own recent injuries Rosa had limped to greet Talavera's battered Supply Officer. The pair of them had been a sight to behold in the unforgiving loom of the arc lights. They had looked at each other as if they had no idea what to do next; and had carried on looking at each other like two hopelessly embarrassed teenagers right up until the moment they had spontaneously melted into each other's arms. The men on the stretchers queued to take their turn on the bed lift to the top of the cliff had spontaneously raised a ragged cheer.

Marija decided she ought to go back inside.

She allowed herself one last look out to sea beyond the darkly silhouetted Grand Harbour breakwaters where the USS Iowa patrolled like some distant giant grey sentinel. Even two miles out to sea with her long low deadly lines blurred by the dawn haze the great ship broadcast power and reassurance; a living statement wrought in tempered steel that the United States of America was now, irrevocably, in the fight. Many Maltese had questioned if the Americans had the heart for the new war after the fate which had befallen the USS Enterprise and the USS Long Beach. The massive nuclear-powered super carrier had been set ablaze by the thermonuclear airburst which had wrecked her consort from end to end, and but for the heroic assistance of HMS Scorpion and HMS Talavera, the Enterprise's fires might have consumed her too. Now, looking at the battleship prowling the approaches to the Grand Harbour there could be no doubt that henceforth the United States Navy and the Royal Navy would fight side by side, come what may.

Marija shivered and involuntarily rested the palm of her right hand over her abdomen. Her long-time mentor and friend, Dr Margo Seiffert had gently chided her when in adolescent she had hesitantly confessed her occasional 'presentiments' and 'feelings' about things that were about to happen or had already happened but that she had yet to learn of. In time Margo had let her 'intuitions' go unremarked, in the last year or two, ever since the October War in fact, she had greeted Marija's 'premonitions' and 'predictions' with resignation, and a quiet, vaguely maternal pride.

When next she was alone with Margo she would share her news.

Her first child would be a girl...

"They said I'd find you out here!" Called Surgeon Lieutenant Michael Stephens. He came to the cliff top wall and lit up a cigarette. Much to

Margo Seiffert's disgust the young doctor's illustrious uncle, the pioneering orthopaedic surgeon Captain Reginald Stephens had never quite managed to quit the 'perfidious weed', as she contemptuously called tobacco. It seemed that the nephew was, like his uncle, also a martyr to the 'weed'.

Marija recognised the uncle in the nephew. Michael Stephens was compactly built and already a little fleshy, with a complexion that would easily turn florid. Like his uncle, there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye and his voice carried a threat of sudden, inconsequential mirth. He was a man who enjoyed life and fully intended to carry on enjoying it whatever obstacles were placed in his path.

"You remind me very much of your uncle," she told him.

"He was quite a character they say?"

Marija frowned. "Did you ever meet him?"

"Only a few times as a kid when he came back to England on leave in the late forties. My father was killed in the war; out in the Far East. I didn't find out until some months after his death that Uncle Reggie had been supporting my mother and me all those years. I'd probably never have got into medical school without his pulling strings and stumping up my living costs. You must have got to know him quite well?"

"Yes," she smiled. "He was a very happy man. He felt bad about putting me in metal cages after some of my operations. He would sit by my bed in the night when I was afraid. It was easy to forget the demons that hide in the darkness when he was holding my hand..."

Marija's words trailed away into the cool morning airs.

She had not intended to say what she had said; she barely comprehended how those words had escaped her lips or from whence, deep inside her, they had emerged.

The man leaned forward, looking out to sea as he rested his elbows on the wall.

"Uncle Reggie wrote me a letter every fortnight. *Every fortnight* for the last five or six years before he died. He wanted to know what I was up to, sometimes he took me to task for my numerous failings but not very often. Mostly, he wrote about Malta," Michael Stephens shrugged, "and you and Dr Seiffert."

Involuntarily, Marija shivered at his mention of Margo's name.

She said nothing, not trusting herself to speak.

She thought about her mother and father, her friends in Mdina and drew comfort from picturing their faces and hearing their voices in her head.

But Margo’s name only invoked a pang of aching guilt, and inconsolable loss...

Chapter 27

06:05 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Merton College, Oxford

William Whitelaw had returned to his rooms at New College – ‘new’ in Oxford terms was a relative thing, the college having been founded in 1379 by William of Wykeham and its full name being *The Warden and Scholars of St Mary's College of Winchester in Oxford*, the ‘new’ simply differentiating it from a nearby neighbour which was at that time also known as St Mary’s but in later centuries became known as Oriel College – to snatch a couple of hours sleep, and to wash and shave before returning to confer with his staff at the offices of the Ministry of Defence.

Merton College like half-a-dozen others had suspended lectures to accommodate the rushed, and increasingly chaotic move of the administrative centre of government from Cheltenham to Oxford. By the autumn the University would, hopefully, begin to get back to normal but this pre-supposed that the ambitious first phase of works in and around the city was completed on schedule. Presently, the main ministries and the Parliamentary bureaucracy were being hosted by individual colleges, while schemes to erect prefabricated housing and administrative compounds outside the old city had as yet barely broken ground. Within the city buildings were being converted at breakneck speed, bomb shelters sunk into the ground and plans being forged to construct new roads to the north and south, and the west out to RAF Brize Norton. Workers were pouring in from all over the United Kingdom transforming sleepy Oxford into a militarized boom town.

The University community was in a daze.

The vision of a ‘new Oxford’, a new dedicated capital city at the very heart of England was of course, Margaret Thatcher’s. What had started as an exercise in democratic renewal – reconvening Parliament in the city – had in the last month assumed a momentum of its own, rather like the proverbial genie released from its long captivity. Less charitable souls in the city spoke of a Pandora’s Box having been opened.

In retrospect it was self-evident that Cheltenham, the first home of the post-cataclysm emergency government - the United Kingdom Interim Emergency Administration - simply did not fit the bill for a future long-term national capital. Whereas, Oxford with is central geographical position, history and the existing University infrastructure automatically suggested itself as *the* obvious candidate. In any event the 'governmental settlement' of Oxford implicitly recognised the reality that the reconstruction of London would be a generation long project which was unlikely to be completed within the life spans of any of the immediate survivors of the cataclysm.

It was still dark when the Defence Secretary walked unannounced into his private office and greeted his three senior military advisors; General Sir Richard Amyatt Hull, Air Marshal Sir Christopher Hartley and the First Sea Lord and Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Sir David Luce.

"Please forgive the tardiness of my appearance," William Whitelaw apologised. He was five minutes late, his departure from New College having been delayed by a telephone call from the Prime Minister. The dire news from Dublin was now particularly exercising Margaret Thatcher's mind and he had had to patiently explain to her the reasons why he did not think asking the BBC to broadcast a threat of 'massive retaliation' was at this time, in any way *helpful*.

"Tell me about these blasted Redeyes?" He demanded jovially. There were very few occasions when a gloomy approach to problems, regardless of their intractability, was appropriate in Willie Whitelaw's book.

Fifty-one-year-old Air Marshal Sir Christopher Hartley smiled grimly. He had not known his political master long but he recognised a kindred spirit when he encountered one. Elevated to his current post out of the blue when the former Chief of the Air Staff had been sent to Philadelphia in the capacity of the UAUK's 'Military Legate to President Kennedy'; he had brought a 'can do' fresh perspective to the RAF. Educated at Eton College, Balliol and King's College Cambridge, he had taken part in zoological expeditions to Sarawak, Spitsbergen and Greenland before becoming a master at Eton in 1937. The son of a distinguished Army officer, Brigadier Sir Harold Hartley he had joined the RAF Volunteer reserve in 1938 and flown night fighters during the Second World War. Prior to the October War he had been Air Officer Commanding 12 Group, Fighter Command. Even in middle age he remained a tall, strongly built man never happier than when he was out in the

country, shooting or walking. He had been a breath of fresh air when he joined the other two Chiefs of Staff soon after Margaret Thatcher's elevation to the premiership.

"To be frank," he declared, spreading his hands, "the reason the US Army is reluctant to accept Redeyes into service is because they don't know if the dammed things work, Minister. Now," he grimaced, "the things may work, they may even be deadly. They may be damp squibs, we simply don't know. Nonetheless, I think we have to take the threat extremely seriously because if these Redeyes are half as unpleasant as the manufacturers, General Dynamics, say they are we have a big problem."

The Secretary of State for defence was impassive.

The Chief of the Air Staff continued his briefing.

"The Redeye shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile is approximated four feet eight inches long, it weighs about thirty pounds in its pre-launch configuration, and homes onto its target by locking onto the heat generated by the tailpipe of a jet engine. It has an effective range of about four miles, and during its flight reaches a maximum velocity of about one thousand two hundred miles per hour. The weapon is designed to shoot down aircraft which have just completed a dive bombing attack or a low-level strafing run, or aircraft which are either taking off or landing. It presents no threat to high-flying military or commercial aircraft at normal cruising altitudes. I have already issued orders to beef up existing defences and patrols at key airfields. However," he looked to his colleagues and his political master with suddenly thoughtful, concerned eyes. "We simply do not have enough men to spare to put out a ten-mile secure perimeter cordon around all our important air bases."

"Which bases are you prioritising, Christopher?" General Hull asked.

"Brize Norton, Cheltenham and the three main V-Bomber bases, Conningsby, Scampton and Wyton."

"Thank you," William Whitelaw declared softly, wanting to move on. The IRA's mischief making was a *political* problem and he needed to be discussing more pressing *military* matters with the Chiefs of Staff ahead of that day's War Cabinet meetings.

"First Sea Lord," he inquired, turning to Admiral Sir David Luce. "Is there any further information about the situation in the South Atlantic?"

"No, sir. We believe the ice patrol ship Protector is maintaining radio

silence to avoid detection and contact with superior Argentine naval forces somewhere in the vicinity of South Georgia."

"What naval assets do we have in the South Atlantic at present, Sir David?"

"Two destroyers at Simon's Town," the First Sea Lord responded. "The Caesar and the Delight, both engaged on working up exercises prior to relieving the guard ships based at Singapore and Hong Kong. Miscellaneous other small units; patrol boats and two minesweepers, the Hexton and the Shavington are based at the Cape. Otherwise, our only available surface assets are in Gibraltar and Australasia."

"What about submarines?"

Sir David Luce hesitated.

At the time of the October War twenty-one advanced but still conventionally powered new attack submarines - of the Porpoise and later Oberon classes - had been under construction or had come into service in the previous two years. Of these vessels fifteen had thus far been commissioned into the fleet; all fifteen had been held back in home waters and eleven were currently fully operational. The new boats, although lacking the underwater endurance of the nuclear-powered HMS Dreadnought, were all capable – unlike earlier British diesel-electric submarines - of relatively high underwater speeds and able to stay continuously submerged for periods of many days, or weeks if necessary. The boats were so advanced that while the brand new and to all intents 'experimental' first nuclear-powered submarine in the fleet, the Dreadnought, had been winning her spurs in the Atlantic and subsequently in the Mediterranean, the Admiralty had fought tooth and nail to keep the capabilities of the Oberons and the Porpoises under wraps in the case the nightmare scenario of a war with the United States actually befell the United Kingdom.

The new boats were fully capable of operating independently for several weeks at a time along the Eastern seaboard of North America; they were very quiet – quieter than any US Navy nuclear boat – and worked up to a very high pitch of combat efficiency. Used en masse the available Oberons and Porpoises would present a threat to any major naval force which attempted to operate in the North Atlantic; or become the nemesis of any commercial shipping which attempted to ply its trade in that ocean. If war with America had come last December the new submarines would have been the United

Kingdom's one last throw of the dice, always assuming the Americans had not triggered a new nuclear war. But that was then and this was now.

"In the event that Oberons and Porpoises are deployed in the South Atlantic fuelling and depot ships would need to be pre-positioned, Minister. My Staff has been working up a detailed operational proposal for the Cabinet's attention since yesterday evening."

William Whitelaw arched an eyebrow.

"My assumption," the First Sea Lord continued laconically, "would be that our boats would enforce an exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands and blockade Argentinean ports until such time as the regime in Buenos Aires comes to its senses."

The Secretary of State for Defence nodded.

"And these vessels are equal to that task?"

"Yes, sir." David Luce could see the politician's mind clicking through the possibilities; and that he was also asking himself why the Navy had been holding this apparent ace up its sleeve these last few months.

"Our American allies know about these submarines?"

"Yes, sir. Since our relations with the Kennedy Administration have been normalised a disclosure of our full naval capabilities has been made to Ambassador Brenckmann. Needless to say, his own principals have been less forthcoming," the First Sea Lord added, "but then we are the ones who have been asking for American assistance, rather than vice versa. That said the United States Navy does not share the Royal Navy's faith in the capabilities of the Oberons and the Porpoises. They worship nuclear reactors to the exclusion of good old-fashioned tried, tested and well-honed ways." He was going to finish at that point; had a second thought. "When Dreadnought was working up in the early autumn last year she was repeatedly 'heard' and nominally 'destroyed' by two separate Oberon class boats. Dreadnought never knew she was under attack until the Oberons pinged her with active sonar to confirm the 'exercise' kill. Dreadnought is no noisier than any of the American nuclear boats and equally agile. In fact, the reason we have dispensed with the American machinery set installed in the Dreadnought in all future nuclear-powered boats is that those 'war games' off the Hebrides last year confirmed exactly how disconcertingly noisy Dreadnought was in comparison with our newest conventionally powered Oberons and Porpoises."

“Most illuminating,” William Whitelaw’s smile was saturnine. The Navy had not told his post-October War predecessor, Jim Callaghan or him any of this, other than in the most general, generic of terms.

The news about the Oberons ‘sinking’ the Dreadnought – supposedly the most dangerous weapon in the Royal Navy’s arsenal – in ‘exercises’ last year was nothing short of a revelation.

He decided not to make a big thing of being kept in the dark for so long.

“I shall look forward to presenting your paper to Cabinet in due course, Sir David.” He sighed. “Now, Malta, gentlemen...”

Chapter 28

07:58 Hours (Local)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Sa'dabad Palace, Tehran, Iran

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, Light of the Aryans and Head of the Warriors accompanied by a dwindling coterie of frightened and outnumbered loyal bodyguards was desperately attempting to escape from the Sa'dabad Palace. The Palace had been built during his father's reign before the Second World War; and the only the reason Mohammad Reza was still alive was that it had been constructed on the site of an earlier building within a complex constructed by the Qajar dynasty in the 19th century. The relatively lightly armed attacking Soviet paratroopers had had to clear the interlinked compounds of the palace room by room.

Somebody had found the 'Light of the Aryans' an anonymous battledress jacket and a bowl-shaped American style steel helmet. A Browning 9-millimetre pistol had been pressed into his trembling hands.

Stinging sweat ran into the 'Head of the Warriors' eyes and he struggled to catch his breath.

First there had been explosions in the heart of Tehran some miles away. Then the rattle of small arms fire had erupted nearby, and fires had begun to burn in the city. More and bigger explosions had jarred the ground like the small earthquakes most Iranians took for granted as a fact of everyday life.

The Sa'dabad Palace's communications room had intercepted a stream of voice and Morse transmissions – the latter mainly broadcast in the clear – describing reports of attacks on Government offices, foreign embassies and hotels. Much of the traffic had ceased after the Tehran Central Telephone Exchange had been blown up. Everywhere the invaders went they killed and destroyed, set demolition charges, cut telephone and power lines, started fires and moved on. Large areas of Tehran had gone dark long before the dawn revealed a cityscape rapidly disappearing beneath a funereal pall of dirty grey smoke. In the south massive oil storage tanks belched a great pillar of inky black into the clean morning air funnelling down from the mountains to the

north. There had been panic in the streets, with every road out of the capital clogged by terrified people attempting to reach the safety of the surrounding countryside.

Mohammad Reza flinched, involuntarily cowering into the shadows as a long, deafeningly loud burst of automatic gunfire reverberated down nearby corridors.

“Grenades!” A man near to him shouted.

Moments later the basement storeroom into which the Shah of Iran and his surviving bodyguards had been driven was filled with acrid, choking smoke as pulverised plaster and brick dust rained down.

Mohammad Reza felt himself being picked up by strong arms.

His ears rang, he was spitting dirt.

He later realised his bodyguards must have half pushed him through the skylight window of the underground room by the time the second batch of grenades rolled into their midst.

There was sudden agonising pain in his legs.

Iron hands grabbed his arms and the collar of his battledress and dragged him across the dusty ground.

He must have fainted...

When he regained consciousness, he had no idea how long he had lain on the dirt underneath the boughs of the large Juniper tree in the cloistered courtyard behind the main palace. A sycophantic courtier – he had had a lot of those – had once regaled him with the particular character of this tree.

Juniperus excelsa polycarpus, commonly known as the *Persian juniper* sometimes grew to twenty metres in height. A subspecies of the *Greek juniper* common through the eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Turkey, Syria, the Lebanon and the Caucasus, *Juniperus excelsa polycarpus* was found throughout the mountains of Iran all the way to north western Pakistan...

The sharp point of a bayonet attached to a Kalashnikov AK-47 pricked the *Light of the Aryans’s* throat.

An urgent interrogative was barked at the man on the ground.

Mohammad Reza’s colloquial Russian was of the colloquial Moskva kind and the question had been grunted in what sounded like a Georgian dialect shot through with bastardised half-recognisable standard Russian words.

“I don’t speak Russian,” the man on the ground muttered hoarsely in

English.

Another man had joined the first.

He kicked the Shah of Iran's left foot and spat an order.

"I am the Shah of..."

The newcomer squatted down on his haunches.

"I know who you are, you stupid bastard," he said in clumsy Farsi, the language of the *Light of the Aryans's* own people. "A real man would have stood and fought!"

"Who are you?" The Shah demanded feebly.

The other man ignored the question. He got up and walked away leaving the wounded man lying on the cold ground in the shade of the big Juniper tree.

The Shah of Iran's lower legs had become numb and he shivered.

"Let a couple of his whores look at his legs!" Shouted the man who had previously spoken to Mohammad Reza. His Farsi was coarse, like an artisan's. "We're going to need to get the bastard up on his feet if we're going to do this thing properly."

Latterly, the *Light of the Aryans* had greedily indulged his predilection for European women. Although he often found the company of western women irritating; their tendency towards independent thought and their irrational reluctance to invariably bend to his will or spontaneous sexual predilections was unseemly; corporeally, it made them *interesting* and occasionally *fascinating*. Of course, he was never seen in public with any women other than members of the Royal Family, and even in court circles the presence of the willowy pale skinned women who came and went from his various palaces was never officially acknowledged. The prerogatives of the *Head of Warriors* were his and his alone. Inevitably, there was the risk that some of the expensive European *harem* women he *invited* to reside at the Sa'dabad complex and at the other royal palaces were American or British agents but that was of little consequence. In his experiences a discreet mistress was invaluable in opening and maintaining channels of communications with friends and potential enemies alike.

Before the October War he had found one such precious woman and insofar as he harboured any real affection and respect for any 'western whore'; sometimes he found himself thinking of her, wishing and aching, to lie with her one more time. SAVAK had told him she worked for the

Americans, his contact with the Mossad had said she was a ‘British stooge’; the CIA had repeatedly warned him that she was a KGB ‘plant’.

“What will happen to us?” The woman kneeling at Mohammad Reza’s shoulder asked in a plaintive, panicky whisper in English. Another woman, standing behind her was snivelling.

“Nothing!” He grunted. “I am the Shah!” He tried to move his legs and sit up, instantly collapsing back onto the ground in agony, involuntarily biting his tongue.

Booted feet crunched heavily across the courtyard.

“We’ll have to tie the bastard to the tree trunk!”

Mohammed Reza registered the remark with the genuine disinterest of a man too deeply preoccupied with his personal world of pain to worry about what was happening around him.

“It’s too dark under the fucking tree!” Somebody objected angrily in a Moskva Russian accent that the helpless *Light of the Aryans* belated translated through the successive waves of pain.

“Put him over by the wall, then!”

“He’ll just fall over, sir?”

“His whores will have to hold him up!”

“What do we do with the rest of the tarts, sir?”

“Tell the boys they can do whatever they want with them!”

Mohammad Reza gasped and screamed in pain as strong hands raised him off the ground and started to drag him, much in the fashion of a sack of coal, across the courtyard.

One of the women protested.

SLAP!

She started crying.

SLAP!

It was only several minutes after he had been unceremoniously dumped in the pool of bright early morning sunshine at the base of the eastern wall of the courtyard wall that the Shah of Iran dazedly attempted to make sense of what was going on around him.

He wrinkled his nose.

I fouled myself...

Three of his *whores*, young western women in their twenties, who had been his guests this last week in the Sa’dabad Palace and had been due to

depart after the weekend, were sitting on the dirt near him. Two were hugging each other, all three were whimpering pathetically.

In the middle of the courtyard a group of big men in camouflage battledress fatigues, each festooned with bandoliers of grenades and webbing bulging with fresh magazines for the Ak-47s or the long sniper rifles slung over their shoulders, were clustered around what appeared to be an unwieldy steel tripod.

He listened to women screaming in the near distance.

The Russians were raping *his* women...

Just like they had when they had invaded his country back in 1941; everywhere the Russians went they raped and looted. Old, young it made no difference; friend or foe an enemy's women always became Russian whores...

Two of the soldiers were manhandling an old-fashioned movie camera onto the mounting at the top of the tripod.

And then the Shah of Iran understood what his fate was to be.

If he had not already voided his bowels he would have then...

Chapter 29

08:29 Hours (Local)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Astara, Azerbaijan

Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov stomped into the dingy command centre in the southernmost border settlement of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Astara was so far south and so close to the border with Iran that the town, the establishment of which long pre-dated the invention of the USSR, had straddled the border within living memory. Iranian Astara, just below that modern border, now lay in ruins as the leading elements of the 2nd Siberian Mechanised Army poured south through it and over it towards the Alborz Mountains. The constant rumbling roar of hundreds of engines filled the command centre.

Colonel-General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian stood to attention and saluted the Defence Minister of the Soviet Union. Vasily Chuikov's prize fighter's evilly cherubic gnarled face cracked into a grin that was very nearly ear to ear as he casually acknowledged the Commander of Army Group South's salute.

He stared hard at the freshly positioned markers and arrows on the rickety plotting table in the middle of the room.

"We achieved complete surprise, Comrade Marshal," Babadzhanian reported brusquely. "It seems that the diversionary airborne operation against Tehran was only lightly opposed and that all major objectives within the city have been taken. Amphibious operations along the Caspian coast south of the border have been unopposed and 5th Guards Tank Division is already well down the road to Talesh. Early indications are that our landing forces have established a secure beach head at Banda Anzali with negligible losses. The Navy says its gunboats have destroyed a number of small Iranian patrol craft. The advance of 5th Guards Tank Division down the coast road is being supported by several vessels carrying Katyushas." His hand swept inland. "Airborne forces seem to have secured our lines of advance on Ardabil," he hesitated, and added, "but there is no word yet about how successful the

paratroopers were securing key points around the city itself."

Vasily Chuikov grunted like a musk ox with a stone lodged in its hoof.

Ardabil was only fifty kilometres from where the two old soldiers now stood but if the city was not taken within the next twenty-four hours Operation Nakazyvat might easily bog down in the mountains. Babadzhanian's original operational plan was to take both Ardabil and Tabriz – the latter over four hundred circuitous kilometres by road, and the best part of three hundred across narrow, treacherous passes only negotiable by vehicles travelling in single file – by airborne force majeure. However, the 'mopping up' operations against Krasnaya Zarya zealots in Romania and the Balkans, and the sacrificial spoiling attack on Malta had robbed him of over thirty percent of his total available Spetsnaz and paratroopers, and just under forty percent of his available 'air lift' capability. Hence, Tabriz would have to be taken *after* the survivors of the Ardabil and Tehran operations had been recovered, and had been given time to regroup and re-equip. At one time an alternative plan bypassing Tabriz had been seriously mooted but Babadzhanian had stood firm; he simply could not afford to leave a major enemy city – potentially the base for an Iranian counter attack – lying unsuppressed across his lines of communication.

"No serious resistance at any point along the border?" Vasily Chuikov inquired cheerfully. The other two members of the collective leadership had specifically 'requested' - nobody in the post-war Soviet Union was in a position to 'order' the Mother Country's most decorated and most illustrious warrior to do anything he did not want to do - not to leave Soviet territory. Chastened by the experience of what had happened to him the last time he had left the holy soil of the Mother Country to visit Bucharest, Chuikov had reluctantly acquiesced. Besides, Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian would probably have him shot if he attempted to meddle directly in the affairs of Army Group South.

Babadzhanian's armies had operated under a number of different names prior to the start of the campaign; now 3rd Caucasus Tank Army and the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army and all attached Red Air Force and Navy forces committed to Operation Nakazyvat came under the umbrella of *Army Group South*.

Smoke and mirrors, *Maskirovska* had served its purpose; the first great blows had been struck and complete surprise achieved.

“No serious resistance yet,” the other man replied. Although he was the younger man by only half-a-dozen years in age, in looks he might have been ten to fifteen years Chuikov’s junior. “What is the news from Malta and Cyprus, Comrade Marshal?”

“Admiral Gorshkov seems to have caught the British and the Yankees with their pants down around their ankles at Malta,” Chuikov chortled wickedly. “Reports were still coming in when my plane landed.” He turned sombre. “As for Cyprus, well, that’s going as well as expected. The British have come ashore in force in the west and the south. If we hadn’t withdrawn our MiGs and our best people from the island we’d have lost them all by now. Unless the British decide to fall back on Malta – which they probably won’t - they’ll over-run the whole island in a week or two.”

Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian sighed, unable to veil his vexation.

“So, what you are saying is that we pissed away all those ships and paratroopers at Malta for nothing?”

Chuikov thumped his subordinate on the back.

“We shall see. If we really have caught the British and the Americans ‘asleep at the wheel’ as our western friends say, who can say what will happen to the morale of our enemies’ civilian populations...”

Low overhead several jet fighter bombers screamed south.

In the near distance the thrumming of many, many helicopter rotors approached from the north; all the while the clanking, revving, roaring engines of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and wheeled vehicles of every size and description rolled past the command centre.

Maskirovska.

Smoke and mirrors; *dym i zerkala*.

Neither of the old soldiers had really believed they would get away with launching Operation Nakazyvat – *Operation Chastise*, the ‘push south to the sea’ – without the enemy discovering its true objectives long before the Red Army was ready to pull the trigger. Nevertheless, thus far all the early indications were that the subtle Russian art of *Maskirovska* had worked its charms to perfection. The long-term effects of the surprise attack on the British island fortress of Malta – albeit achieved at the cost of the sacrifice of irreplaceable ships and airborne troops, not to mention the inevitable *burning* of practically every intelligence asset the Soviet Union possessed in the Central Mediterranean – were as yet incalculable. What was not incalculable

was that Operation Nakazyvat had commenced unmolested by the British or the Americans, and apparently, completely surprised the rag tag Iranian forces protecting the Shah's long rocky northern borders with Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Intelligence reports from within Iran had indicated the Shah had moved his best units, including two new Centurion-equipped Tank regiments from the north to the south in recent months. Apparently, according to agents in Tehran, this was to 'intimidate the British at Abadan and the threaten Basra in Iraq'. The Shah was known to fiercely detest his Iraqi neighbours and to constantly fret about every new concentration of troops in Basra Province opposite Abadan Island. It seemed Baghdad and Tehran had been far too preoccupied watching each other to notice the danger gathering in the north.

"I expected at least token resistance on 3rd Caucasus Tank Army's right wing," Babadzhanian admitted. The four Tank Corps of that Army had been split into two widely separated semi-independent commands. On the far right of the line two corps would drive down the road to Marand north of Tabriz from jumping off points at Nakhchavin and Julfa on the Armenian-Iranian border, taking advantage of the relatively good going before seizing the northern approaches to Tabriz. Joined by two corps coming over the mountains it was hoped that resistance in the city would be swiftly extinguished. The massed tank corps of both the 3rd Caucasus Tank Army and the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army would then be funnelled through the passes of the Zagros Mountains down onto the rocky floodplains of the great rivers of the near east, the Tigris and the Euphrates. Powerful divisional strength columns would immediately spread out across Kurdish northern Iraq, investing and subduing the cities of Mosul, Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah, with the capture of this latter city signalling the true beginning of the push to the south.

Sulaymaniyah was the key to northern Iraq. Guarded by mountain ranges on all sides - the Azmer, Goyija and the Qaiwan ranges in the north and east, by Baranan Mountain in the south and the Tasluja Hills in the west and watered by the River Tanjaro, a tributary of the distant Tigris, Babadzhanian regarded Sulaymaniyah as the natural anchor, the pivot of the envisaged headlong blitzkrieg he had designed to sweep all before it without pausing to draw breath until Basra and Abadan were in his hands and his tanks were parked on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf.

His greatest fear was that either the British or the Americans would grasp the significance of Sulaymaniyah in time to somehow, in some way, sufficiently bolster the notoriously corrupt and inept Iraqi Army so as to enable a blocking force to be positioned around or within the city, or worse, barring the approaches to Baghdad to the south.

The operational plan for Operation Nakazyvat mandated the capture of Sulaymaniyah not later than D+25. If the armoured spearheads of *both* his Tank Armies were not rolling south by D+26 there would be no reasonable expectation of investing Abadan by D+45, or of securing a significant defensive presence along the northern shore of the Persian Gulf not later than D+55.

The calendar was his worst enemy.

The British and the Americans were not fools; sooner or later they would wake up to the threat to the oilfields of the Middle East and the inevitable total disintegration of their dreams of World hegemony. When they did finally 'wake up' it was not beyond the bounds of possibility and imagination that they might conceivably contrive to place sufficient firepower in his path to slow him down, or even to stop him dead in his tracks short of his objectives. Everything depended upon the shock and the speed of the offensive; and upon how quickly beleaguered Iran and Iraq's partially estranged former Imperial masters reacted.

"I still think we should have gone after the top men in Baghdad too," Vasily Chuikov remarked philosophically.

Babadzhanian shook his head. "Chop off one Iraqi leader's head and another man will immediately step into his place, Comrade Marshal. If we get unlucky the new man might actually have some rudimentary grasp of military tactics!"

Chuikov guffawed asthmatically and jammed a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. An aide-de-camp rushed forward and a match flashed in the relative gloom of the makeshift command centre. The great man briefly disappeared behind a cloud of foul-smelling tobacco smoke.

"Never mind. We shall just have to settle for the head of the 'Light of the Aryans', I suppose!"

Babadzhanian's normally impassive face dissolved into a short-lived half-smile. The Tehran 'demonstration' had been taken over and reworked so often by the Combined Red Army Security Directorate that it was

unrecognisable as that initially specified in his initial draft proposals for Operation Nakazyvat. He had had in mind a small scale airborne raid designed to terrorise the populous, assassinate key military and civilian administrators and to disrupt Iranian radio and television broadcasting stations. His modest concept had been transformed into a no holds barred attempt to ‘decapitate the Iranian state and to undermine its cohesion and fighting spirit to such an extent that it was incapable of mounting ongoing organised resistance against the Soviet forces operating in its northern provinces’.

Babadzhanian would probably – in most if not all cases – have baulked at the extremity of the terroristic actions which both sides now countenanced as *standard operating practice*. Before the October War he might even have been receptive to esoteric notions of ‘the rules of war’. But ‘before the October War’ was a different time, that World no longer existed and in the Mother Country, the well of pity had run dry.

Chapter 30

11:20 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford

The city had awakened to an overcast and coldly rainy day. The rain pattered persistently against the windows, periodically thrummed hard on rooftops, overflowed blocked drains and formed puddles on roads and pavements unmaintained and unrepaired since the October War. It was so gloomy that every office and house with a functioning connection to the electricity network had lights turned on and heaters plugged in, and the unusual spring load on the overstressed grid was causing light bulbs to flicker constantly and now and again, whole sections of the city to go dark as transformers or generators shorted out.

Inside the cloistered corridors and halls of Corpus Christi College, the new home of the Cabinet Office of the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom there was a pervasive smell of dampness and the chill lingered in the fabric of the ancient buildings.

Walter Brenckmann, the Ambassador of the Unites States of America to the court of Blenheim Palace had listened to Margaret Thatcher's harangue for several minutes before his patience began to fray at the edges. Eventually, he decided that the point had been reached when the only diplomatic option left to him was to make his excuses and to leave the room.

If that was he could get a word in edgewise!

In any event he had come to the conclusion that *diplomatic* manoeuvring was unlikely to cut much ice with the British Prime Minister. He did not actually disagree with her central thesis that the Maltese Archipelago should *not*, under any circumstances, have been left undefended. Where he disagreed with the lady was over her preoccupation with rehashing, over and over again from every possible angle, where the underlying culpability for the disaster lay.

He held up a hand and waited.

"Yes, what is it, Ambassador?" Margaret Thatcher demanded. The

Angry Widow was at her angriest. Notwithstanding she had not slept for over thirty hours she was breathing fire, flushed with the glow of battle and she was looking for a dragon to slay.

Walter Brenckmann had not thought it was a very good idea for him to sit in on a meeting of the Angry Widow's War Cabinet. However, Margaret Thatcher had insisted and now he was seated between Airey Neave and Iain Macleod, directly opposite James Callaghan who was sitting in the chair next to the Prime Minister's *empty* chair while she paced and well, ranted...

Sir Henry Tomlinson, the greying Cabinet Secretary and Head of what now constituted the rump of the pre-war Home Civil Service sat at the left hand of his Prime Minister. Or rather, he would have if she had not keep jumping up and walking away. Next to him and figuratively slightly apart from everybody else in the room, and obviously a little despondent, the Foreign Secretary had thus far sat out the 'meeting' in unbroken silence. At times he had he hardly seemed to be paying attention to his surroundings, let alone interacting with his colleagues. The final member of the hastily convened emergency 'cabinet' was the Chief of the Defence Staff, the First Sea Lord. Normally the most urbane and courteous of men, Admiral Sir David Luce's blood pressure was visibly building towards a violent eruption.

"We are fighting a war, Prime Minister," Walter Brenckmann said coolly. "Many of us around the table have seen a great deal of action and therefore, understand and accept that in combat things sometimes go wrong..."

"Oh, for goodness sake. I'm not interested in old soldier's homilies!"

"Prime Minister," the First Sea Lord said, grinding the words out via tightly clenched teeth.

Margaret Thatcher swung on him but although she opened her mouth to issue an angry rebuke she said nothing. There was one man – perhaps, also one woman – in England without whose loyalty and support no Prime Minister could govern in this much altered post-cataclysm far from United Kingdom. That man was Sir David Luce; and the woman was Queen Elizabeth II.

"Julian Christopher was my oldest friend in the Service," the First Sea Lord continued. "That he found himself in the position he found himself in was not a failure of military judgement; it was a failure of political imagination and co-ordination. Yes, it is perfectly true to assert that had the

operations of United States Navy units in the Central Mediterranean been effectively dovetailed with our own activities yesterday's disaster might not have happened, or at least it might have been substantially mitigated. However, it is not true to assert that the United States Navy is solely responsible for *our* misfortunes. Frankly, madam," Sir David Luce concluded, "what transpired yesterday at Malta will happen again somewhere else sooner or later unless *your* Government starts to listen to the *professional* military advice of the Chiefs of Staff."

Walter Brenckmann suspected for a moment, but only a moment, that he had just witnessed the first step in a particularly British coup d'état. However, the First Sea Lord was swift to disabuse him of his mistake.

"Admiral Detweiller was undoubtedly ill-advised in removing his powerful modern flotilla from Maltese waters, coincidentally, unknown to him at exactly the worst possible moment. That said his actions were entirely explicable. He wished to exercise his ships in preparation for joining the United States Sixth Fleet. The fact that Admiral Christopher acquiesced without protest for fear of prompting an Anglo-American diplomatic furore was equally explicable in a situation in which each man sat in a separate and independent chain of command. There was a reason why Churchill and Roosevelt appointed a man like Dwight Eisenhower as *Supreme Commander* of Allied Forces first in the Mediterranean and then in overall command of the D-Day Landings, and other *Supreme Commanders* in every other major theatre of the 1945 war, and post-war that NATO adopted exactly the same practice. The reason was that broadly speaking, *that* system of command *worked*. Even as we speak there is still no *Supreme Commander* of all allied forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of operations." He sighed and shook his head. "*Or anywhere else* despite the nonsense one is hearing coming out of Philadelphia on the subject!"

The Prime Minister glared at the head of the Royal Navy.

Around the table brave men blanched, uncertain as to how the woman, much younger by many years than any other member of the assembled War Cabinet, was going to react.

Walter Brenckmann had tried and failed to persuade Margaret Thatcher to take the rapidly developing public relations fiasco over reports that Sir David Luce had been appointed – independently by the UAUK – *Supreme Commander in the Mediterranean* seriously. She was convinced that it was a

‘storm in a teacup’ and that the British Ambassador, Lord Franks would ‘sort it out’.

“Who pray do *you recommend*,” the Prime Minister inquired, “that *I recommend* to the President of the United States of America to fill that august position, Sir David?”

The First Sea Lord visibly winced at the dismissive tone of the woman who until thirty-six hours ago every man around the table had honestly believed was the saviour of their nation.

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson, since December the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland coughed.

“If I might say a few words please, Margaret?”

All eyes turned to the brilliant man who had been Sir Alec Douglas Home’s - his predecessor’s - post-October War Permanent Secretary and the real power behind the throne at the Foreign Office during the year after the war. Attempting to rebuild a foreign policy after so many of the countries previously friendly to the United Kingdom’s interests had been destroyed by its closest ally, in a World in which every single old certainty had been extinguished overnight was a profoundly messy business. It was a testament to his talents that relations with the Commonwealth had been buttressed so swiftly and effectively in the months after the war as to allow the putting together of the Operation Manna convoys. Those convoys, masterminded by Julian Christopher and diplomatically facilitated by his sure hand, had saved the nation from starvation, wrack and ruin in recent months. Arguably, the relationship he had already built in the last three months with Dean Rusk’s successor at the American Department of State, J. William Fulbright, had done as much to cement the growing US-British rapprochement as had Margaret Thatcher’s ability to ‘connect’ – publicly at least - with President Kennedy.

The Prime Minister resumed her seat at the table.

“Carry on please, Tom.”

The man made an effort to sit up straight in his chair and to shrug off the terrible cloying weariness which fogged his mind. Alcohol, melancholy and a predisposition to tell his political masters the truth – as he saw it – had relegated him to an obscure sinecure within his department in the two years before the October War. The alcohol and the melancholy had also caused his wife, Pat to divorce him in despair. His decline had torpedoed a meteoric

career which might one day have concluded in his winning the job currently filled by his oldest surviving friend in Christendom, Henry Tomlinson.

"The time has come," he prefaced, whimsically self-deprecating, "the Walrus said, to talk of many things. Of shoes and ships and sealing-wax." He quirked a tired grimace in memory of a time when he still remembered how to laugh. He wondered what Lewis Carroll would have made of the age in which they now lived? "And of cabbages and kings, and why the sea is boiling hot; and whether pigs have wings."

Margaret Thatcher was suddenly less angry, her steely blue eyes less accusative, less cobalt hard.

"Tom, are you quite yourself?"

"No, Margaret," he replied gently. "I am not and forgive me for saying this, neither are *you*," he continued before she could slap him down for his impertinence, "and at a time like this it is very important that you know that your friends are on your side."

The silence was threatening.

Presently, Margaret Thatcher pursed her lips, squared her shoulders and with the briefest of sniffs, fixed her friend in her sights.

"The thoughts of the Walrus and the Carpenter aside, Foreign Secretary," she said with the severity of a disappointed schoolmistress, "what other thoughts would you care to share with us this morning?"

Tom Harding-Grayson sucked his teeth as he collected his ideas.

"Yesterday, I was preoccupied with the fate of South Georgia, the South Sandwich Islands and the Falkland Islands thousands of miles away in the South Atlantic. I am still perturbed on account of those distant, windswept rocks and their few tens and hundreds of people. But somehow, the annexation of those places rather pales into insignificance in comparison with the national humiliation and tragedy which has befallen us in the Central Mediterranean. This said my greatest fear is that in retrospect we may look back on events in the South Atlantic and the Mediterranean as singular disasters in a global train of irreversible setbacks the seeds of which may already be in motion."

The First Sea Lord stirred.

"My Staff is worried about the reports coming out of Tehran," Sir David Luce remarked neutrally. "And then there are the reports of troop concentrations in the Caucasus."

“Surely,” Airey Neave offered, “Operation Grantham has got off to a good start? Our troops went ashore practically unopposed on Cyprus, I understood?”

Sir David Luce nodded but held his peace, returning the floor to the Foreign Secretary.

“Before Christmas,” Tom Harding-Grayson reminded his colleagues, “we very nearly went to war with the USA and Italy, and we did actually go to war with Spain almost entirely on account of various parties *hearing* one thing and *understanding* another. Then later we were achingly slow to recognise the threat posed by Red Dawn in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and Turkey. Frankly, we still don’t know the half of what the old Soviet regime was up to creating a monster like Krasnaya Zarya. Now we have had to throw everything we’ve got at Cyprus to regain at least one secure base of operations in the Eastern Mediterranean; on the grounds that it is an essential prerequisite of a future Anglo-American campaign to restore civilisation and decency to Crete, the Aegean and the eastern littoral of Anatolia. In itself, that is a task which might be the work of a generation, assuming we ever take it on in the first place.” His rheumy grey eyes tracked around the faces of his friends and colleagues.

The ticking of a clock on the wall behind him sounded unnaturally loud.

“So, to recap. Yesterday,” Tom Harding-Grayson continued reflectively, “I was worried about the South Atlantic, and now in the wake of the disaster which has befallen us at Malta, I am suddenly worried about what might be going on in the mountains of the trans-Caucasus and elsewhere. And ever since I heard the first news of the Battle of Malta I have been asking myself where the next blow will fall?”

James Callaghan stirred.

“And have you come to any conclusions, Tom?”

“Yes and no,” the Foreign Secretary prevaricated. “But I keep asking myself what we could do now – if we could actually do anything at all, that is – if we were faced tomorrow by a re-run of the Abadan Crisis of a decade ago?”

Chapter 31

12:20 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Emergency Command Centre of the Military Governor of Malta, Marsa Creek

Duminku, or as the British knew him ‘Dom’ - a diminutive of his Anglicized name Dominic - Mintoff involuntarily broke stride as he was ushered out of the ramshackle temporary office of the Acting Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on Malta. His waiting bodyguards – hulking men most of whom had deserted him at the height of the bombardment the previous day, a fact he was unlikely to forget in a hurry – very nearly fell over each other as their leader halted.

Dom Mintoff gazed at the bloody, battered angular frame of the young man in the ill-fitting borrowed United States Navy uniform dozing, his handsome head lolling, in the chair outside the C-in-C’s makeshift office in the old seaplane hangar.

A lump came reluctantly to his throat as he briefly contemplated what that exhausted; ridiculously youthful destroyer captain had done the previous afternoon. The Americans would have rescued Malta sooner or later but the two small British ships which had suicidally hurled themselves at the great enemy fleet had by their valour and courage saved countless lives across the Maltese Archipelago. By their actions they had cut short the agony, probably by hours; once the shelling had stopped the surviving Soviet parachutists had surrendered in droves, knowing that Malta would not, could not possibly fall. The killing had ended; and hundreds, more likely thousands of *his* – Dom Mintoff’s – people were still alive on this new day because of the selfless bravery of *that* bruised and no doubt, traumatised young officer and his men.

It was a rare, albeit brief, moment of personal humility for the leader of the Maltese Labour Party, a man not overly prone to introspection or known to ever freely give the British the benefit of the doubt.

The forty-seven-year former Rhodes Scholar at Hertford College,

Oxford, had half-expected to be arrested when the soldiers had arrived at his house. After the October War during the regime of Admiral Sir Julian Christopher's predecessor he had been arrested several times and spent many frustrating months locked out of the political process. By profession an architect and journalist, Dom Mintoff was the kind of man who was never going to forgive that ignominy. Anybody who knew him understood that holding grudges and never forgetting a slight was in his blood. He had actually been Prime Minister of the colony for three years in the 1950s, and until the October War had been itching to be the first Premier of an independent Maltese Archipelago. But for the war Malta might, even now be preparing for its Independence Day. Unlike other leading Maltese politicians Dom Mintoff was never, ever going to be cowed by or in any way supplicant to the colonial power. Notwithstanding, he had wondered if his summons to the British headquarters was the prelude to another spell under detention, or perhaps, worse.

Dom Mintoff hesitated, tempted to rouse the sleeping naval officer.

If ever there was an Englishman whose right hand he might shake without worrying about who was watching, it was this man.

However, the moment passed.

Another time perhaps?

The Leader of the Maltese Labour Party's recent 'interview' had given him a great deal to ponder.

'Thank you for coming over, Mr Mintoff,' Air Vice-Marshal French had said, coming around his desk and taking the suspicious Maltese's hand. The Acting C-in-C was one of those infuriating Englishmen with whom it was inordinately hard to take offence with or to, no matter that he was an unwelcome foreign interloper, an imperial overlord foisted upon the Maltese Archipelago by a cruel accident of history.

French had been punctiliously correct, even friendly, on *all* their previous meetings despite Mintoff's calculated attempts to rile him.

'May I introduce Vice Admiral Clarey, the Commander of the United States Sixth Fleet,' the Englishman went on, turning to the balding middle aged American naval officer who had risen from his chair when the Labour Party Leader had entered the room.

Mintoff shook hands with the American whose uniform, unlike that of his British comrade, was immaculately clean and freshly pressed.

Mintoff's associates had been excluded and the two senior officers' staffers had left the room. The Maltese Labour Party leader was waved to take a seat, and Air Vice-Marshal French and Admiral Clarey had retaken seats behind the C-in-C's map-strewn desk. The three men had viewed each other like wrestlers circling, attempting to spot the best death grip.

'I've asked *my* people,' Dan French said, breaking the sudden tension, 'to make sure that *your* people get coffee. Hopefully, they'll bring some in for us in a minute.' He sobered. 'You will have heard the rumours about what happened at Mdina. It is my sad duty to inform you that Admiral Sir Julian Christopher died of wounds sustained defending his headquarters. The garrison of Mdina suffered approximately seventy percent casualties in yesterday's action before eventually repelling the Soviet invaders. Further, I regret to have to inform you that Mr Borg, the leader of the Maltese Nationalist Party, may be among the dead. He was known to be attending a meeting in Rabat with other senior colleagues. We don't know the full details yet but it seems paratroopers broke in and murdered,' he hesitated, 'everybody. At the height of the battle we believe that several pre-positioned 'hit squads' targeted other leading Maltese political and business leaders. I fear that many prominent citizens will have been killed or injured.' The Englishman pursed his lips, sighed. 'Please take my words at face value Mr Mintoff,' he requested quietly, 'I mean what I say when I tell you that it was with no little relief that I learned of your survival unscathed.'

Dom Mintoff had guffawed uncomfortably, unable to take the sentiments at face value. His thoughts were still reeling from confirmation of the news of the death of Sir Julian Christopher and all that it portended for the future of the archipelago and possibly, his own liberty.

Dan French did not linger over this apparent rebuff.

'Admiral Clarey and I have agreed to co-operate fully in the rescue and relief operation now getting into full swing across the archipelago. For your information Anglo-American operations in the Eastern Mediterranean will proceed as planned. In the meantime, the United States Sixth Fleet's ships and aircraft have thrown a protective screen around the archipelago. Until the main runway at Luqa is repaired – that will be sometime in the next twelve to eighteen hours – Admiral Clarey's helicopters will continue to ferry personnel and equipment onto Malta, and to transfer seriously injured servicemen and civilians onto ships off shore, several of which have

advanced medical facilities including modern operating theatres. Admiral Clarey has sent all the medically trained officers and men who can be spared ashore, and supplied armed naval details to support British, Commonwealth and local Maltese forces in maintaining order on the streets and to facilitate the ongoing rescue operations.'

Dom Mintoff was genuinely astonished that he was being told this. Any of it. He had been a thorn in the side of the British for years. In the 1950s he had been an advocate of Malta's 'integration' into the Empire but when this had been spurned, become an equally outspoken advocate of independence at any price. Now he was suddenly being treated as an *ally* and he honestly did not know how to react.

Vice Admiral Clarey cleared his throat. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted and forestalled by a light knocking at the door.

An elderly Maltese woman had entered bearing a metal tray and several chipped mugs.

'Thank you, Mrs Bonnici,' Dan French smiled, rising to his feet and helping the old woman place the tray on the maps on his desk. 'That's most kind of you,' he had added in Maltese. 'Thank you.'

The woman departed, clucking to herself without saying a word.

'Mrs Bonnici took shelter here when the bombardment began. She's been making tea and coffee ever since,' the Acting C-in-C confided to the leader of the Maltese Labour Party.

The coffee, black and strong, and tasted vile.

Admiral Clarey cleared his throat again.

'Air Vice-Marshal French is in command here, Mr Mintoff. The Sixth Fleet serves at his *command* until such time as things have returned to an even keel and the politicians in Oxford and Philadelphia have sorted out the chain of command.'

Dom Mintoff did not begin to comprehend why the American, who spoke in a clear, confident drawl redolent with authority and certitude, had told him that.

Exactly what point did he think he was making?

The Commander of the US Sixth Fleet swept aside all doubt the next moment.

'A lot of people on Malta, maybe some of the people close to you, went bad yesterday, Mr Mintoff. The enemy knew where to find important people,

civilians like your political opponents in the Nationalist Party, and senior off duty British personnel. *My* MPs – military policemen – and *my* Marines, and all the intelligence gathering facilities of *my* Fleet have been put at Air Vice-Marshal French's disposal to hunt down those traitors.'

Dom Mintoff recoiled at the implied threat behind those words.

Dan French sipped his coffee, wrinkling his nose.

'I apologise for the coffee, gentlemen. Mrs Bonnici is an absolute darling,' he observed, ruefully. "Nobody has the heart to tell her that her coffee is poisonous.' This said he fixed Dom Mintoff in an amiably intense gaze for some seconds. 'We very nearly lost the war yesterday, Mr Mintoff. Not the war we thought we'd been fighting these last few months but an altogether more,' he paused, pondered his words, '*unforgiving* one. We won't make that mistake again. Martial law will be in force across the Maltese Archipelago until further notice. I would rather work with you and whoever emerges to lead the Nationalists in the spirit of men of good will with the best interests of the people of Malta at heart, but,' his shoulders twitched apologetically, 'the time for half measures is over, Mr Mintoff. Within the rule of law, you are either with us or against us.'

It had been a curious *interview* and Mintoff had walked out of it honestly not knowing what to make of it. He felt like he had been read the riot act, except it was not that simple. For all his decency and English expressions of fair play he understood that Air Vice-Marshal French might at any time crack down hard. Behind the politely stated position, his stated preference for co-operation not coercion, he was the one holding a machine gun in his velvet-gloved hand.

So, when the Leader of the Maltese Labour Party looked at the fitfully dozing young naval officer; who by his courageous deeds had yesterday proven to be every inch his dead father's son Dom Mintoff could not help but wonder with whom the future lay.

While the war continued Malta would never be independent.

The islands of the archipelago would forever be weighed down by the dead hand of British – and now American – imperial might; and yet, to even contemplate actively fighting that colonial yoke was a counsel of despair.

Peter Christopher and his men had been prepared to die for the honour of their Queen and to save the lives of countless Maltese people. *His* people. Yesterday's titanic battle would one day be a thing of legend; a legend

inevitably attached to the powerful mythology of Malta's very own little princess, Marija Calleja-Christopher. Assuming, that was, she too had survived. The possibilities were deeply worrying to a man to whom politics was life, and life was politics.

Fate had decreed that the hero of the Battle of Malta was the husband of the young woman who had come to encapsulate the soul of the archipelago; the woman who somehow represented the best that Malta and the Maltese could be. A month ago, the wedding of the Fighting Admiral's son and the *Little Princess* had captured the imagination of practically every man, woman and child on Malta; it was as if the Maltese had suddenly inherited a Royal Family, a family around whom and behind *everybody* might gladly unite.

Dom Mintoff was nothing if not the shrewdest of political operators. He made mistakes, everybody made mistakes. But unlike his foes he always looked several steps ahead, like a driver focused not on the vehicle directly in front of him but the movements of the traffic in the far distance. Where one stood at present was incidental, the important thing was to understand where one wanted to go in the future. Politics was about ends and means; and understanding who a serious player was, and who was not.

The young naval officer sleeping on that chair would awake a Knight of the Realm, inheriting the Fighting Admiral's baronetcy. In the next few days the British would shower him with medals and accolades because that was what the British always did when they had suffered a crippling, humiliating defeat. It was a formula all British governments had slavishly followed since the Crimean War when an aristocratic imbecile had led the Light Brigade to immortal brave destruction down the *wrong* valley, to attack the *wrong* guns at the battle of Balaklava. And once they – *the British* - had acclaimed their new hero they would discover, to their ecstatic delight that their newly crowned Odysseus had already married his princess...

Dom Mintoff ought to have despised the young man sleeping in the chair in the derelict old seaplane hangar; despised him and his angelic wife but in a funny sort of way he was tempted to feel just a little bit sorry for them both. Whatever life they had imagined they would live, all that was history. Sooner or later they would belong to their adoring public, and after that, they would live forever in the spotlight of their former glories.

He suspected it would be an intolerable burden for the man sleeping in the chair; were it not for his little Princess of Malta...

Chapter 32

12:25 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Emergency Command Centre of the Military Governor of Malta, Marsa Creek

Peter Christopher awakened with a start that was quickly calmed by the woman's sympathetic smile. On his arrival at the old seaplane base abandoned and forgotten in the 1950s he had been mightily peeved to discover that the 'C-in-C was in conference', and that he would have to wait for his interview with his father's successor. He had dropped off to sleep almost immediately he settled on the bench outside the old flight office of the disused hangar. Notwithstanding the quiet hubbub all around him as people came and went, falling into small huddles then breaking up, the jarring of chairs, tables and the background static and the unnaturally metallic squawking of the hastily installed public address system, his exhaustion was such that he had slept, albeit fitfully until a gentle hand had rocked his shoulder.

He squinted at the woman who was holding out a mug of what smelled a little like hot chocolate towards him. He accepted the mug, nodding his thanks as he gathered his wits.

"You and I really must stop meeting this way, Miss Pullman," he observed dryly.

The woman's smile was sad.

The younger man recollected his first meeting with the attractive, charming blond in a harbour front taverna in Lisbon in what seemed like another lifetime. And later meeting her again in the inner courtyard of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women in Mdina when he had discovered the woman, whom he had taken for a spy in Lisbon, was already on friendly terms with Marija.

"My name is not Pullman," the woman stated mildly. "It is a long story. It will wait for another time. Hopefully, there will be another time."

The man was noticing the dried blood in her hair from a stitched wound that still oozed, the puffy discolouration around her right eye and the blood and filth on her creased and torn pale blue nursing auxiliary's smock. She saw his concern and sought to allay it.

"My scalp and my black eye apart the blood isn't mine," she explained.

Fully awakened now the man was struggling to work out which part of him hurt the most. His right leg was stiff and fire lanced up and down it from toe to knee, his rib cage felt as if somebody had been jumping up and down on it and every time he attempted to manoeuvre a new facial muscle another part of his face burned in protest. He was pleasantly surprised to discover his hot chocolate had been heavily laced with rum.

"I know my father is dead," he said simply, his face a mask of indifference. "Who else is dead?"

The woman hesitated.

"Margo Seiffert."

Peter Christopher's heart sank.

"Oh no..."

"She was shot going to help a Soviet trooper," the woman explained coldly. "There were a lot of casualties among your father's senior staff officers. The Soviets practically over-ran his Headquarters at one stage. The bastards killed everybody who got in their way; men, women, children. That was what they did everywhere they landed."

"Marija and Rosa Calleja were safe and well at Bighi last night," Peter returned, trading information.

The woman signed a visible sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness." She rubbed the threat tears from her eyes. "Marija's family in Sliema should have been all right assuming they got to the shelters before the bombardment switched to the area. From what people on the Acting C-in-C's staff say the Welsh Guards based at the Cambridge Barracks dispersed into Sliema and Gzira and made short work of the parachutists who came down in that area..."

"It is a mess," he agreed. "Marija's brother Joe was on Talavera during the action."

Her eyes widened, so he explained.

"We left harbour yesterday in such a hurry he got caught onboard. He's at Bighi now. A little worse for wear but he'll be okay."

The woman told him he real name.

“Rachel Angelika? Sounds Polish?” He queried.

She nodded.

“So, you were a spook after all?”

“Yes.”

Peter Christopher’s mind was not working at anywhere near full speed. He needed a few seconds to re-arrange his thoughts.

“Our side or theirs?” He asked quietly.

“Our side, I think but sometimes it is hard to tell.” Having agonised over how she was going to tell him what she had wanted to tell him for several hours, she blurted: “Your father knew you’d sunk those big ships before he died. His last words were ‘*The boy* and *his Talaveras* must have settled those bastards hash’ and he said that that I was to tell you how proud he was of you...”

It was a long time since Rachel had cried real tears; now the tears trickled and then poured down her cheeks.

Pausing only to place his half-drunk mug of heavily rum-laced chocolate on the floor, Peter Christopher staggered to his feet and cautiously wrapped the woman in his arms not knowing how much the embrace was likely to hurt either of them.

“Miss Piotrowska asked to speak to you before she went off with the security people,” Air Vice Marshal Daniel French, the Acting Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces on the Maltese Archipelago explained when HMS Talavera’s former commanding officer was eventually ushered into his drab, grubby room at the end of the decrepit old seaplane hangar.

Dan French was not alone.

A balding middle-aged man in a spotlessly crisp US Navy uniform stepped forward to shake the newcomer’s hand.

“Commander Christopher,” the Englishman announced, making the introductions, “this is Vice Admiral Clarey, C-in-C United States Sixth Fleet.”

Fifty-one-year-old Iowan-born Bernard Ambrose Clarey had been COMSUBPAC – Commander Submarine Force, US Pacific Fleet – at Pearl Harbour at the time of the October War. Two decades before he had won a Navy Cross for heroism serving on submarines in the war against the

Japanese and after a career of steady, predictable progression been plucked from the highest echelons of the Submarine Service to take command of the Independence Task Force at Gibraltar a little over a month ago, charged with permanently re-establishing the Sixth Fleet's writ in the Central Mediterranean.

The American had fixed the tall young destroyer captain with a steely gaze and was immediately struck by the *presence* of the son of the famous Fighting Admiral. Although he had never quite understood the concept of the British stiff upper lip; he suspected that the demeanour of the younger man was an object lesson in it. The kid had bottled up his emotions tight as a drum.

Peter Christopher began to straighten to his full height to attempt a passable imitation of a salute but the American stepped forward and stuck out a hand, which he shook in lieu of saluting.

At Dan French's suggestion the three men took seats.

"Presently," he said by way of bringing the meeting to order, "every available man is either filling in the holes in the runway at Luqa or laying down tarmac over the holes that have already been filled in. The moment the runway opens everybody and their dog Spot is going to want to come to Malta to begin the inquest, or more likely an inquisition into what went wrong."

The airman halted, thinking that the battered younger man sandwiched between the two most senior surviving allied officers in the Mediterranean might need a moment to get his bearings and come to terms with the implications of what he had just said.

He need not have worried.

"I don't know what happened, sir," Peter admitted. "Obviously, it would not have been possible for us to be as surprised by the arrival of the enemy fleet, as in fact we were, if something hadn't gone badly wrong with our early warning systems. I know that the whole system was comprehensively wrecked by the EMPs from those big air bursts back in February. That was why I thought we'd had two or three radar pickets patrolling fifty miles out to sea around the archipelago for most of the last couple of months. While Talavera was in dockyard hands I sent my radar men ashore to help the RAF and Army people trying to put the air defence net back together again. From their reports I gathered the whole thing was a bit like all the King's men

trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together after he'd fallen of that wall of his." Nobody interrupted him so he went on, his voice ringing dull with tiredness. "A lot of our best technical people sailed to Cyprus with the Operation Grantham task force; presumably in their absence the enemy somehow sabotaged our radar and communications net, sir. I honestly can't imagine there will be much profit in conducting an 'inquest' into that? After the December bombing and the February near misses the whole air early warning system was held together by pieces of string." He shrugged. "If you'll pardon my saying it..."

Vice Admiral Clarey chuckled and shook his head.

"A lot of mud is going to get thrown around in the next few days," he observed sagely, wondering as he spoke if the kid understood that nothing could now stop his face being splashed across every TV screen, Pathe movie reel and newspaper front page in the World. "A lot of people will be queuing up to hear what you've got to say about this, son."

The heat was slowly rising in Peter Christopher's bruised cheeks.

"What you mean is that the British and American governments will do their best to make my father the scapegoat for yesterday's," he caught himself before he said the first word that came into his head, contenting himself with, "*tragedy*."

The Commander of the United States Sixth Fleet was impressed by the fact that the young tyro had not phrased his words as any kind of question. He had simply *stated* the obvious.

"Commander," Dan French said grimly, "if that ever happens it will be over *my* dead body. We find ourselves in an invidious position in which our political masters have neglected to agree among themselves a chain of command in this theatre of operations. Your father, *my friend*, made the best of a bad deal and if somebody has to fall on his sword rest assured that it will be *me*." He glanced at Admiral Clarey. "However, in the meantime what we cannot afford is a new rift between *our* people and Admiral Clarey's people. For all we know yesterday's attack was only the first of many. We must be prepared for whatever is to come."

Peter Christopher looked from the airman to the American admiral.

He was his father's son and he knew his duty; and because he was his father's son he understood that nothing in his life would ever be so simple again. A few hours ago, he had stood on the bridge of his ship and made a

decision which, at the time, he had tacitly if not implicitly, expected would be the death of his ship and most, probably all, of his men. That decision had been straightforward, uncluttered with nuances, and utterly apolitical in every way.

Life or death; to live or to die.

He had done his duty; he had done the honourable thing.

His father had given him leave to save himself and his ship; knowing that he could no more run from a fight than renounce his recently made wedding vows to the woman he loved.

Cut your lines and go...

His father had actually meant '*engage the enemy more closely*'.

The Battle of Malta was over, now the battle to preserve the brittle Anglo-American alliance upon which the future of his country depended was about to begin.

Peter Christopher had not lost *his* ship and so many of *his* men just so that senior officers in the Mediterranean and far, far away might indulge in pointless recriminations and thus leave the door open to politicians on both sides of the Atlantic to manufacture an even more disastrous defeat to Allied arms.

He was his father's son and now was the time to prove it.

He looked Dan French in the eye.

"What do you *need* me to do, sir?"

Chapter 33

12:30 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
The Citadel, Mdina, Malta

The small convoy – two ambulances from Royal Naval Hospital Bighi escorted by a Land Rover carrying four Royal Marines equipped to fight and to win a small colonial war – crawled up the hill towards the Citadel as the clouds over the island parted, and suddenly, eye-wateringly bright sunshine bathed the hill top twin city of Rabat-Mdina.

Marija sat wedged between the Royal Navy Medical Orderly at the wheel of the first ambulance and Dr Michael Stephens. The drive from Kalkara to the centre of the island, a journey of some ten miles had taken over two hours and the sights she had seen in those two hours had very nearly broken her heart. So much that had been rebuilt since the Second World War had been destroyed and all along the road the dead were laid out in rows. There were bodies in strange grey and brown and green uniforms, stacks and piles of weapons outside the Citadel; nobody had bothered to spread blankets or sheets over these men and the flies were already swarming.

The convoy was waved through two roadblocks and across the bridge into the Citadel. Work parties of servicemen and civilians were still clearing rubble from the road inside the gate. The ambulance bumped and jolted over the debris. The ancient streets and alleyways of the Citadel of Mdina were narrow, difficult to negotiate at the best of times and with a horrible, sinking feeling Marija began to face up to what might await her at St Catherine's Hospital for Women.

'Mrs Christopher,' Dr Michael Stephens had asked awkwardly, approaching her earlier that morning. 'There's been no direct contact with medical services in Rabat or Mdina, we think all the telephone lines are down and at present operational radio traffic has absolute priority over all other communications, including medical affairs. I have been asked to lead a party to the Citadel. It occurred to me that as you are much more familiar with the

layout and know everybody who is anybody in that city, you might care to come along as my assistant?'

Marija was confident that her friend and mentor, Dr Margo Seiffert, the Medical Director of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women and designated future Head of the Medical Directorate of the Maltese Defence Force, would already have started to organise things in her inimitably feisty no-nonsense way as soon as the shooting had stopped the previous afternoon. Knowing Margo, she would have probably got to work long *before* the shooting stopped. But *knowing* that was not the same thing as knowing that Margo and her friends and fellow nurses in the Citadel had come through their ordeal unharmed.

"We're going to have to go forward on foot," Michael Stephens declared. A building had partially collapsed into the street ahead and fallen masonry blocked any further progress. He jumped down from the cab of the ambulance.

Marija squirmed across the seats, hesitating in the door while she briefly contemplated how exactly she was going to persuade her stiff, sore and aching bones to carry her down to the road in such a way as to not leave her in an undignified and significantly *more* bruised heap on the ground.

"Please. Let me help you, Mrs Christopher."

Michael Stephens had realised that the young Maltese woman was physically flagging and now felt horribly guilty asking her to accompany his mission to Mdina. But he had needed somebody who knew the Citadel and would be capable of facilitating whatever needed to be done when they arrived, so he had asked her to come with his 'advanced guard' – other parties would be sent from Bighi and elsewhere when resources permitted - knowing that it was not remotely likely she would refuse him.

Given what Marija had been through as a child and throughout her adolescence he could only imagine how beaten and battered she must be feeling after more than twenty-four hours on her feet without sleep or any real respite, or any extended opportunity to rest her reconstructed lower body.

He extended his arms.

"I'll catch you," he promised with a broad smile that said, louder than any words that 'there is no need to be brave all the time'.

Marija stopped worrying about getting down to the ground with dignity and pretty much fell into the man's waiting arms. He caught her under her

arms, clung to her like she was an antique, immensely fragile urn and refused to let go of her until she had steadied on her feet. When he finally let go she swayed precariously for a moment and he grabbed her left elbow.

"The cobbles of the Citadel have always been a little bit of a trial," Marija confessed sheepishly. She ought to have got used to the men around her being overly protective; too easily convinced that she was some delicate flower when in her own mind she was anything but a *delicate* bloom. She had noticed how swiftly Peter flung his arms around her the instant he suspected she might lose her balance; one day she would have to talk to him about that but there was no hurry. Nothing was quite so sublimely perfect as being swept of her feet by her new husband...

No sooner had the doctor released her than he stuck out his right arm.

She took his hand, knowing that the way she felt – her lower back, pelvis and legs were *hurting* rather than aching – a single misstep would send her tumbling, most likely onto her face.

"Lead on!" The man invited, with forced cheerfulness.

The dead lay in long rows on the flagstones and cobbles of St Paul's Square before the blast-scarred towering facade of the Cathedral at its eastern end. The bodies of the invaders were casually strewn in a ragged line, those of British soldiers and Maltese civilians were arranged in neat, orderly lanes. Marija began to count the corpses, stopped because there were so many. The stench of death was already heavy in the air, unnaturally contained within the high walls of the buildings all around. Most of the windows in the square had been blown in or smashed; and bullet holes and sprays of shrapnel had defiled every frontage. Sawdust and dirt had been thrown haphazardly over the black, fly-blown puddles of congealing blood and viscera between which the members of the newly arrived medical party stepped.

The blue double doors of the St Catherine's Hospital for Women had been blown in, and off its hinges.

Forgetting her pains Marija shrugged off Michael Stephen's supporting hand and staggered into the gaping hole where the doors had been and lurched into the wrecked interior of what had once been the reception lobby of the hospital.

There she stood, her eyes slowly growing accustomed to the gloom.

"Marija!"

One, then two, and then a third woman emerged from the shadows.

“Marija!”

The women were suddenly hugging and sniffing back tears.

Others were emerging from the darkened hallway leading to the inner courtyard of the hospital; patients and more nurses in their pale blue smocks.

Marija began to search for Margo’s face.

“We knew you’d come!” One woman said and it set up a chorus.

“Where is Margo?” Marija asked eventually.

And the silence told her everything she needed to know.

Everything she needed to know and everything that she had known and sensed but stubbornly refused to believe many hours ago...

Chapter 34

12:35 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Married Quarters, Kalkara, Malta

‘I am discharging myself,’ Alan Hannay had half-informed, half-asked Lieutenant-Commander Miles Weiss, Talavera’s former Executive Officer. Of the two men the destroyer’s Supply Officer looked much the worse for wear but his injuries were largely superficial, whereas Miles Weiss kept blacking out – probably, doctors had concluded, the delayed results of a concussion sustained when an eleven-inch shell from the battle cruiser Yavuz had torn off the top of his gun director tower, and cut down Talavera’s great lattice foremast as if it was made of papier-mâché – so of the two men, he was the one with the stronger claim to be categorised as ‘walking wounded’.

Miles Weiss had been lying on a palliasse in the corridor of the old Zymotic Wing of the hospital solicitously attended at all times by an uninjured Talavera, a leading seaman from Spider McCann’s deck division.

‘Consider yourself discharged, old man,’ Talavera’s second-in-command had concurred, drunkenly forcing an ashen-faced grin.

Alan Hannay had explained that the reason he was ‘discharging himself’ from RNH Bighi, ‘which had plenty of much more deserving cases to take care of’ was specifically, to ‘escort’ Rosa Calleja back to her house in Kalkara.

‘Basically, to see if it is still there and so forth...’

Talavera’s Canadian Navigator Lieutenant Dermot O’Reilly, after Miles Weiss the senior surviving officer, and Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann the Master at Arms had organised most of Talavera’s unwounded survivors into work parties, while several of the destroyer’s lightly wounded had been put at the disposal of RNH Bighi for hospital portering, maintenance and general duties; while the ‘fit’ men being sent into Kalkara to assist the civilian authorities.

It was symptomatic of the chaos on Malta that nobody from

Headquarters Mediterranean Fleet had greeted Talavera's survivors on the jetty in Kalkara Creek, and that they had been left, broadly speaking, to their own devices in the intervening hours.

'In the absence of any orders to the contrary, I've asked Mr McCann to muster all able-bodied men outside the hospital at zero-nine-hundred tomorrow, Alan,' Miles Weiss informed his friend before he turned on his side and began to retch uncontrollably. 'Tell the Master what you are up to in case he needs to find you before roll call tomorrow morning,' Talavera's Executive Officer had added, gasping breathlessly after the dry-retching fit had passed.

Alan Hannay had patted his shoulder and departed.

'I feel guilty taking you away from your people,' Rosa had confessed as the limping, careworn couple stumbled haltingly out of the hospital gates.

Alan Hannay had had to stop several times, his gait becoming ever more shambling. Twice the couple encountered small work parties of Talaveras, clearing roads, sweeping away shattered glass, and once, kicking a football around with a group of local boys. It soon became apparent that Kalkara had escaped the bombardment relatively undamaged with only a handful of smaller calibre shells falling in the village.

The threat of morning rain had blown out to sea and the spring sunshine was already shimmering off the sandstone walls of the close-packed houses above Kalkara Creek. The man and the woman paused in their laboured progress to gaze down at the USS Berkeley, moored fore and aft seemingly half-filling the inner Creek. The big ships normally moored much farther out but the captain of the guided missile destroyer had conned her so close inshore that it was a miracle her bow had not touched the bottom in his determination to facilitate the speedy transfer ashore of Talavera's wounded. The Berkeley's surgeon and every qualified sick bay attendant onboard had disembarked with Talavera's wounded and been placed at the disposal of RNH Bighi.

In the strangely bright sunshine the waters of the Grand Harbour, fouled and despoiled with bunker oil and the foul flotsam of war, here and there turned azure, sparkling blue. Across the anchorage fires still burned in Valletta. Big shells had bitten several large chunks out of the once clean lines of the King George V Breakwater, the long northern sea wall guarding the Grand Harbour. Numerous small boats plied through the oily water,

while out to sea the menacing silhouette of the giant battleship USS Iowa slowly prowled the approaches to the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett Anchorage. High over the island the contrails of otherwise invisible jet fighters flying off the USS Independence criss-crossed the heavens, the thunder of their engines falling to earth as a mere whisper.

The small two-storey former Admiralty Dockyards of Malta house in which Rosa had lived her unhappy married life with her missing, latterly presumed dead husband seemed untouched at a distance. Rosa had been forced to relinquish the house after the Royal Navy took over the estate of the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta; because whether or not her husband, Marija's elder brother Samuel was dead or alive, he had undeniably and self-evidently 'ceased to work' in the docks and therefore his, and his family's right to a 'company house' was terminated. She would probably have been treated better if she had had any children but not much, because her estranged father had fatally undermined her 'rights of tenure' by informing the Navy that his daughter was 'welcome under his roof in Mosta'. Peter and Marija had saved her from that awful prospect by inviting her to 'camp' in the ground floor living room of the house. Knowing the house was falling vacant Marija had used her charm and status as the daughter-in-law of the C-in-C to 'jump the queue' and to claim the house. Rosa had been speechless when her sister had invited her to move in.

'Peter is a captain of a fleet destroyer, sister,' Marija had explained patiently, winningly as only she could, 'he will often be away and you will keep me company. If you don't come to stay with us I will be miserable.'

Rosa had not believed that for a single minute.

Marija was the most self-reliant, strongest person she had ever met and in hindsight it was exactly those qualities which had kept the two young women at arm's length during her marriage to Samuel; that and the distance which had already existed between the two elder Calleja siblings long before she had come onto the scene. Samuel had resented Marija. Marija was the 'chosen one', whereas he had always been in some non-specific way a 'disappointment' to his family. Marija was his father's 'little princess', and his younger brother Joe, his mother's 'baby, who could do no wrong' whilst he had been just 'Sam', the boring one who just got on with his job and who was never quite good enough...

At the time of Sam's disappearance and the surfacing of the unspeakable

lies implicating him in the sabotage of HMS Torquay it had been Marija - not a member of Rosa's own birth family - who had rushed to her bedside and implacably defended her from all comers after she had been badly injured in the explosion that had killed her good friend Lieutenant Jim Siddall. Jim Siddall had been Marija's guardian angel but Marija had never blamed Rosa for his death. Marija had been Rosa's strength, her true *sister*.

Rosa and her sister had fled the married quarters in such a hurry the previous day that they had left all the windows open; in retrospect this was what had probably prevented them being blown in. Farther down the road there was a small crater where a shell had scattered shrapnel for fifty yards in every direction and smashed countless windows.

"When the bombardment started," Rosa explained, clinging to Alan Hannay's hand like her life depended upon it as they stood surveying the house from the road, "we hid under the kitchen table. The big guns were shooting over Kalkara. At Luqa, at first, I think. Marija and I, we were both little when the Germans and the Italians bombed the islands during the siege so we knew what to do. As soon as we realised the big ships were not shooting at Kalkara we left the house and went up to the old shelters on the ridge above the village."

They went inside the house.

It was dusty everywhere but only one of the downstairs windows was damaged, its glass cracked diagonally. Upstairs two panes had blown out in the small, empty, second – child's - bedroom. Otherwise, the house was as Rosa had left it; breakfast plates and cutlery on the table, the sink full of cutlery to be cleaned, the beds unmade.

"I was afraid it would be much worse," Rosa admitted.

Alan Hannay felt light-headed.

The woman wrapped her arms around him and he groaned in apologetic discomfort.

"I'm sorry. I feel a tad faint, I think I ought to lie down," he muttered feebly.

Chapter 35

13:05 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford

The War Cabinet had adjourned for thirty minutes for tempers to cool, and for the participants to hurriedly familiarise themselves with the latest briefing bad news from the Mediterranean, to distractedly munch rubbery, tasteless SPAM sandwiches and to consume sourly restorative cups of tea before the Prime Minister tetchily reconvened proceedings.

"Do we know when Ambassador Brenckmann plans to return?" Margaret Thatcher inquired of Sir Henry Tomlinson, her Cabinet Secretary.

"No, Prime Minister. He gave me to understand that he was seeking intelligence updates and guidance from his Secretary of State."

Tom Harding-Grayson, the Foreign Secretary, coughed and every eye flicked towards him.

"We should not lose sight of the fact that we are not alone in our discomfort over matters in the Central Mediterranean and elsewhere," he observed. "It would be, in my humble opinion, a bad mistake to view the *setbacks* of the last twenty-four hours through a one-dimensional lens..."

Iain Macleod, Minister of Information, Leader of the House of Commons and Chairman of the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland – and incidentally, should Margaret Thatcher elect to stand down or fall victim to some untoward circumstance, like getting shot by a madman at a public meeting as had very nearly happened earlier that year in Cheltenham Town Hall – the man most likely to succeed to the leadership of the Party, snorted loudly.

"I still think we gave far too much credence to all that nonsense about a global Red Dawn conspiracy. Damn it, Tom. I don't doubt *Krasnaya Zarya* exists and is malignant in every conceivable way towards our cause, but really, what's the connection between the Falklands, the Battle for Malta, Operation Grantham – which so far as we know is going forward like a well-oiled machine with negligible casualties on our side – and a hotchpotch of

unsubstantiated and probably unverifiable reports about a coup in Tehran and alleged troop concentrations in the Caucasus?"

Airey Neave was unusually reflective when he spoke, mildly objecting to his old friend's scepticism. Although he rarely made any play of it he had formed connections with the intelligence services in the latter part of the 1945 war and never really ceased to dip his toe into those murky 'waters' in the years since. His acquisition of a reputation as being something of a loose cannon within the Party, and of being not entirely 'reliable' had been an excellent cover for all those 'confidential contacts' he had made over the years. Since the October War, he had shamelessly employed them to deflect evil from his protégé, Margaret Thatcher.

Airey Neave could not recollect the exact moment in those dreadful days just after the October War when he had fallen under the Angry Widow's thrall; but he had never doubted that throwing in his lot with her had been the *only* thing to do. There were probably those who imagined there was more to his attachment to Margaret than friendship and political pragmatism. There was nothing of that sort 'going on', of course although he had been somewhat knocked back when he realised that his friend was so wrapped up in her 'fighting admiral'.

After she had returned from her brief tryst on Malta the previous month to attend the marriage of the old sea dog's son and his little Maltese princess; Margaret had been walking on air and his every suspicion had been confirmed. He had been pleased and in an odd way, a little relieved. Every time he looked around the Cabinet table he wondered how many of the apparently tractable, loyal and obedient men surrounding his protégé really believed in her. How many of them would shrink away if the going got too tough? He would die for her; but what of the others? With Julian Christopher at her side Margaret might have been invincible. Now, who knew what the future held or even if the lady still had the heart to carry on?

"I'd like to hear what Tom has to say before I jump to any conclusions, Iain," indicated the man who had escaped from Colditz over twenty years ago. On this occasion he made no attempt to hide the fact that he was more in tune with the thoughts of the majority of the men around the table than his brilliant, sometimes irascible friend.

"By all means," Iain Macleod guffawed impatiently. Nobody could tell if his outbursts of pique and sharpness of tongue were on account of the thigh

wound – never really healed – he had sustained in France in 1940 or straightforward bad temper. Like many intellectuals he had never troubled to learn the subtle art of treating fools gladly, nor seen the wisdom inherent in avoiding systematically alienating practically every fool he encountered. His friends put this down to the pain from his old war wound and that he was known to suffer from ankylosing spondylitis, a spinal condition which exacerbated his limp and meant he was rarely free of pain. "Like the Prime Minister I think the first thing on the agenda ought to be communicating an ultimatum about resolving the issues with the chain of command..."

"There are *no* issues with the chain of command," William Whitelaw, the Secretary of Defence, interjected amiably. "That at least is my American counterpart's view. The Kennedy Administration has been adamant in its stance that American forces will remain under *American command and control*. They regard this as an article of faith. We can beat about the bush as long as we want but frankly, we just need to accept it and get on with things. The whole of Philadelphia is up in arms on account of a single piece of malicious disinformation about our alleged attitude to this question. We should simply invite President Kennedy to nominate an American Supreme Commander and get on with the business of fighting the war in the Mediterranean."

Margaret Thatcher scowled half-heartedly at her Defence Secretary.

Tom Harding-Grayson coughed again, loudly.

"While I was most interested to hear of Willie's proposal," he nodded to William Whitelaw, "to send a squadron of our most modern conventionally powered submarines down to the South Atlantic to persuade the Argentine to mend its ways, I don't think we ought to allow ourselves to be distracted from the main thing. The Mediterranean." He let this hang in the air for a few moments. "As in classical times the Mediterranean ties everything else together; the modern World lies to the west and the old to the east. The blocking of the Suez Canal at Ismailia already presents 'the West' with insuperable difficulties; everything that comes to us from the near east and Asia Minor must now travel thousands of miles around the Cape of Good Hope adding six to eight weeks to transit times. Overnight, the nuclear strike on Ismailia in February altered the strategic balance of the region because it made it impossible, for example, for us to speedily reinforce and re-equip our garrisons in Arabia and the Persian Gulf in the event of some unforeseen

threat arising in that area..."

"That's hardly likely, Tom," James Callaghan observed lugubriously. But he had said it more as a question than an outright objection.

"Ah, now that's the thing," Tom Harding-Grayson retorted mildly. "Back in the good old days when I was locked away in a Foreign Office room so far from away from Foreign Secretary that he and I lived and worked in practically separate time zones," he continued, very much in the manner of an exasperated schoolmaster addressing a bunch of cavorting teenagers in the middle of a lesson, "I was the bane of my then masters not just because I consistently advocated a relationship with the United States based on a rational understanding of our own national interest, but because I also had an irritating habit of positing worse case scenarios," he sighed, "several of which have now actually come to pass."

Margaret Thatcher gave her Foreign Secretary a very hard look.

"Yes, well this is hardly the time for reminding Cabinet that you 'told us so', Tom!"

The grey dapper, studious looking man seated to her right beyond the Deputy Prime Minister, James Callaghan, took this put down in his stride. He went on as if she had not opened her mouth.

"For the record I posited two relevant scenarios both of which would be disastrous not just to the long-term interests of this country, but to those of the United States also, Prime Minister. One of those scenarios was that of a nuclear war fought without meaningful operational planning and co-ordination between America and ourselves. Such a war happened and was fought in the way that it was fought because the United States looked – as it saw it - to its own national geopolitical strategic interests before those of its European Allies, of which we were only one among many and essentially, in the bigger picture, expendable. For what it is worth faced by an impossible situation in which he probably believed a massive Soviet first strike was imminent, in my opinion President Kennedy responded in the *only* rational way that he could have responded."

Nobody said a word.

"That is ancient history," Tom Harding-Grayson continued, blandly as if he was making polite conversation. "I don't claim to have predicted every aspect and consequence of the October War. Frankly, I was surprised the British Isles escaped so lightly and that so many of us were left alive to worry

about the future. Be that as it may, we are where we are. Presently, it is my *second* doomsday scenario which is exercising my mind, and I think, ought to be exercising the mind of everybody around this table."

Margaret Thatcher was viewing her friend with quivering impatience. She and the Foreign Secretary had been together at Balmoral Castle at the time of the attempted assassination of the Queen and her family. They had formed a strong bond of mutual respect in the aftermath of surviving the nightmare and ever since then they had seemed to be on similar wavelengths. Until now; presently, she was finding Tom Harding-Grayson's scholarly air of understated moral superiority very nearly intolerable and was asking herself if he really was as clever as he thought he was why had he not seen yesterday's catastrophe coming?

"Well, don't keep us in suspense, Tom!"

"Before I explain, Prime Minister," her friend returned, spreading his hands in apologetic supplication. "I confess that I put the particular doomsday scenario I am about to describe to bed, as it were, after the October War because at the time it seemed that the Soviet Union was a spent military force."

"The Soviet Union is a spent military force!" The Prime Minister snapped imperiously. Several of her colleagues flinched; the Foreign Secretary smiled self-deprecatingly and asked an inconvenient question.

"Ah, that's the thing, isn't it? Do we actually know that for a fact, Prime Minister?"

"Of course we do, Tom!"

Airey Neave sensed the temperature of the room chill another degree. In common with many of his old friends in intelligence circles he had been more than a little dubious about American claims of 'total victory' after the October War. Just because the Soviets had stopped fighting back after a few hours was not conclusive evidence of their inability to continue to fight. In the seventeen months since he had waited and waited, and finally given up waiting for the completeness of the Soviet annihilation to be confirmed. The West had sleep-walked into Armageddon once; now it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that history was about to repeat itself.

All eyes focussed on the handsome face of the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir David Luce the First Sea Lord.

"I don't know the answer to that question," he said dully. "A few months

ago, I would have, and in fact, frequently did give a conditional ‘yes’ in reply to the question of whether the Soviet Union was a militarily spent force. At that time, I would have been cautiously confident of the veracity of that reply at a strategic, if not a local, tactical level. However, in the last few weeks we have seen significant ‘former’ Soviet assets engaging with and inflicting heavy losses on our forces in the Mediterranean. Given this evidence, it is not that great a stretch of the imagination to envisage a situation in which other, as yet unidentified or unsuspected, ‘significant’ former Soviet military assets might survive elsewhere deep within the boundaries of the USSR. It may be also be the case that we have been mistaken in describing these assets as ‘former Soviet’ assets. It will be instructive to discover what may be learned from the large number of Russian parachutists and the small number of Turkish seamen thus far captured after the Battle of Malta. What we learn may materially alter our view of, for example, whether such a thing as the ‘Soviet Union’ actually still survives beyond the Ural Mountains or in the Trans-Caucasus.”

Margaret Thatcher’s angry eyes viewed her senior military advisor with atypical suspicion and mistrust.

“And you’ve just thought to tell me this now, Sir David?”

The First Sea Lord brushed past the accusative threat in her voice.

“It is my job to inform and advise you on the basis of what I know, and what I think *may* be true. It is not my job to advise you of every piece of intelligence community gossip, careless tittle-tattle and most likely, misinformation, that comes into the hands of my Staff, Prime Minister.”

“Um...”

Chapter 36

14:10 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Mdina, Malta

The bodies of the two Soviet paratroopers who had died in the courtyard of the hospital still lay where they had fallen. One had been dead before he crashed onto the unyielding flagstones of the yard, shot through the head and torso while he hung helplessly on his straps hundreds of feet above the Citadel. The second man had been the first – of many – invaders killed by Clara Pullman, at the beginning of her murderous rampage through Mdina the previous afternoon.

There were spent cartridge cases all over the courtyard.

Very little of what the others had told Marija made much sense. They said Clara had shouted something in Russian at the man she had killed in the courtyard before locking the others in the safety of the basement; and departing to roam the streets of the Citadel like an avenging angel before eventually giving herself up, at of all places, the British Headquarters.

The women had laid Margo Seiffert in the shade, covering her small, wiry bullet-riddled body with pure white blankets and lighting candles which now flickered all around her on the ground. Somebody had cleaned her face and brushed her hair. But for her deathly grey face she might have been sleeping.

Marija felt numb.

The women said that Admiral Christopher was dead, too...

Frighteningly, the women were convinced that if so many of the Russian invaders had not been drawn away from the hospital to hunt for Clara, they too would all be dead now.

As Marija knelt by her oldest and best friend in Christendom – her second mother in all but name – the tears rolled down her face and dripped onto the cold stones of the yard, splashing now and then on the shroud in which Margo's grieving nurses had wrapped her overnight.

The God in whom Marija had trusted to be merciful had allowed Margo, Peter's father and so many others to be consumed by the never-ending war. How had *He* let such evil walk upon the land? She had prayed to *Him* for the lives of her husband and their children as yet unborn; *He* had exacted a terrible price and the horrifying thing was that she had no idea how many others she loved had been sacrificed so that *her* selfish prayers might be answered.

The others had tried to comfort her as she sobbed.

Briefly, her grief was inconsolable.

The hopeless, irreconcilable loss shut her off from all sanity; from all remembrance of joy. Her grief was like a river in flood, a madness that she could not fight until its first overwhelming surge slackened and she again began to recognise that her sorrow was but a tiny drop in a vast ocean of misery.

What right do I have to drown myself in my sorrow when so many others have suffered so greatly that I can hardly begin to imagine their loss?

Marija bowed her head.

That Margo had never *believed* did not matter. She still *believed* so she would pray for her, wherever Margo's spirit now walked. Margo's life force still lived in St Catherine's Hospital for Women in Mdina where she had lived and worked for nearly two decades, within the hearts and memories of all those people whose lives she had touched and improved and in hundreds, perhaps thousands of cases, saved. Margo lived on in the children she had helped to bring into the World, in the lives of the scores of nurses she had trained; few of whom would ever have had the chance to practice the sacred art of nursing without Margo Seiffert's indefatigable never say die attitude to the obstacles that hamstrung so many lives less ordinary than the one that she had made for herself on Malta.

That Marija knew herself to have been blessed, infused with Margo's lust for life and her intuitive refusal to be talked out of always trying to do the *right thing*, she had no doubt.

That but for Margo Seiffert she would have grown up a very different person, possibly never discovered the love of a good and brave man, and never have amounted to anything but the faithful daughter of an anonymous Maltese family, likewise she had little doubt.

Margo had been her second mother; and for better or worse mothers

inevitably shape the women their daughters subsequently become in maturity.

It was because she was Margo Seiffert's spirit daughter that she wiped away her tears, dried her hands on her smock and with the help of two of the other women – both patiently waiting for her to overcome the first rush of her grief – she rose to her feet, and with a final sniff announced:

"I would like everybody who can be spared to come out in front of the hospital into St Paul's Square. I will address everybody in five minutes time."

This said she turned back to look down on Margo Seiffert's face one more time, wondering if she was doing the right thing. Very stiffly, she bent down and drew the edge of the blanket over her spirit mother's face.

Sleep well, my old friend.

Sleep well...

There were about twenty women waiting for her when she limped painfully out into the sunlight. Not all were pale blue-smocked auxiliary nurses, at least half were local women who helped out at the hospital a day or two a week, two were nuns from a convent in Rabat who devoted time each week to the good cause of St Catherine's Hospital for Women, another woman was a cleaner. More women and several patients leaned out of glassless first floor windows, literally hanging on Marija's every word.

"I shall miss Margo forever," she began, her words very nearly lost in the breeze swirling around the square. Her hair threatened to cover her face and she brushed it away.

Speak loudly!

"I shall miss Margo forever," she repeated, this time in her native Maltese, hoping she was succeeding in projecting her small voice far enough for the women in the windows to hear. She slipped back into English. "Margo often talked to me about what might happen to the hospital when she was no longer with us. I never really took it seriously because Margo seemed so indestructible." This last word she echoed in Maltese.

The first thing any local girl had to do to gain entrance to Margo's training regime was to learn to speak and write good English. 'Without a command of English, you cannot possibly have a good argument with a British doctor!' That had been Margo all over; the love of her life had been the most English of Englishmen but the *British* medical establishment of the archipelago had always been her greatest bugbear.

“Margo did not ever, so far as I know, want me to follow in her footsteps or in any way take over from her when she was gone. I don’t think that was what she dreamed for me and we never talked of such things. Whoever replaces Margo as *our* Medical Director must be willing and able to commit her life to the hospital. I disqualified myself from that role when I married an English naval officer; wherever my husband goes, so I go. Even if it means leaving the island of my birth and my family behind; that is the way of things.”

Marija looked around and up at the semi-circle of tired, worried faces.

“But that is for the future. The authorities will soon decide the fate of our hospital. Malta is under martial law and that means that sooner or later the British will appoint a new Director of our Hospital. Until then, for today at least, if it is your wish that I assume the role of acting Director, that is what I shall do!” She took a deep breath. “Is that your wish?”

Marija was almost bowled over with the relieved, smiling chorus of affirmation that greeted her offer.

Fresh tears tracked down her cheeks as the women of the St Catherine’s Hospital protectively ushered her back inside to begin her work.

Chapter 37

14:15 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
HMS Alliance, Lazaretto Creek, Malta

Lieutenant-Commander Francis Barrington waved to acknowledge the forward mooring crew's signal that the boat was secured to the emergency buoy. After nearly forty-eight hours without sleep, he groaned a silent sigh of relief. However, this sigh of relief had been as nothing to his gargantuan release of pent up angst when the big, mean-looking silhouette of the USS Mahan (DDG-42) had hauled into sight early that morning with a mighty white bone in her teeth.

The terrifyingly modern and warlike looking guided missile cruiser had slowed to a canter and – just for effect in case the Turkish crew of the old Second World War M-class fleet destroyer *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak* had had any second thoughts about surrendering without a fight – turned two slow, menacing circles around both the prize and its captor, HMS Alliance with its automatic quick firing five-inch gun trained on the Turks.

Relieved of her trophy Alliance had independently made her best speed for Malta.

It had not been practical, safe or wise to attempt to remove any of the Turkish destroyer's electronics suite or cipher equipment from her radio room; but Francis Barrington had had every code book and manual wrapped in waterproof seals, packed in cork containers to stop them sinking if they fell in the sea on the short boat ride back to the Alliance, and stowed below under armed guard in a corner of the control room where the priceless treasure had not left his or his Master at Arms's sight.

He looked across the Creek to where the big wrecked submarine depot ship HMS Maidstone had settled on the bottom in a stinking soup of her own leaking bunker oil. All of Maidstone's charges had been out at sea when the bombardment had commenced. The foremast of a minesweeper sunk on one side of the deep-water channel into Lazaretto Creek and the fire-scorched flank of the depot ship testified to the violence of the Battle of Malta and the

destructiveness of the salvoes which had screamed down into a mercifully empty Sliema Creek, and into the midst of the handful of small ships moored alongside the Maidstone.

The big depot ship had been hit by at least three armour-piercing six-inch calibre rounds, each of which had plunged into, through and out the other side of her before exploding. One of the shells had gone through several decks and exploded beneath her engineering spaces causing flooding so extensive that she had settled on the bottom within minutes. One of the other hits had demolished a landing craft moored alongside and started an oil fire which had gutted the forward third of the Maidstone. It was miracle that the huge, sitting target had only been hit by three large shells. Half of Manoel Island, hard hit in the American bombing raid in December looked like a Moonscape, and the streets around and leading down to Lazaretto and Msida Creek were bombsites now. The ruins still smouldered and the air still stank of burning.

To Francis Barrington who had been in Malta – and based in Lazaretto Creek - at the height of the World War Two siege over twenty years ago as a terrified sub-lieutenant, it seemed almost as if he had never been away. Two decades of renewal and rebuilding, of attempting to remake lives and to forget the nightmare of the early 1940s had been for nought. He had had nightmares for years after the war; now he was living those nightmares anew...

A launch wearing the Harbour Master's livery bumped gently against the bulge of the Alliance's pressure hull, and a man in a Commander's uniform jumped aboard, then another man in civvies.

"Permission to come aboard, sir!" The officer shouted perfunctorily.

"Permission granted!"

A minute later Francis Barrington and the two visitors were crammed, very much in the fashion of three sardines in a can designed for two in the Alliance's Captain's claustrophobic bolt hole of a cabin aft of the control room.

Francis Barrington's guests had come to take possession of his treasure.

Neither man seemed very grateful for his or his crew's endeavours or remotely interested in hearing the account of his capture of a destroyer on the high sea. A word of thanks would have been nice; even if he had not so much captured as simply received the surrender of the old Turkish destroyer.

He tried to make polite conversation with his guests.

“Funny old world,” he observed. “The last time I set eyes on the *Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak* was back in 1942 when she was being towed into Gibraltar after a U-boat had blown off her stern. Of course, back in those days she was HMS Marne. I can’t wait to go onboard her and have a good look around. I shouldn’t be surprised if you can still see the join where they welded her new stern on, what!”

The visitor in the commander’s uniform, a fleshy middle-aged man with a receding hairline and large florid hands that suggested he had never done an honest day’s work in his whole life, eyed Barrington with suspicion.

His civilian companion was obviously uncomfortable in small spaces and constantly glanced at the bulkhead inches above his head.

“Presumably, every member of your crew knows about what you transferred across from the destroyer?” The Commander asked brusquely.

“I should imagine so, sir.”

“Do they or don’t they, man?”

“I don’t know, sir. But,” Barrington shrugged, “everybody will know by now that we brought *something* important back onboard from the prize.”

The Commander pulled out a folded sheet of paper and started to read aloud.

“*Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet to Officer Commanding Her Majesty’s Submarine Alliance. Be advised that Alliance is hereby quarantined. Alliance will remain moored in Lazaretto Creek until further notice. All shore leave is cancelled until further notice. Officer Commanding Alliance may expect to be summoned ashore periodically but may not depart his command without an armed escort. Any man discovered to have communicated any information about the capture of sensitive materials from the Turkish Navy Ship Mareşal Fevzi Çakmak will be liable for prosecution under the Treachery Act (1940), The Official Secrets Act (1911, 1920 and 1939) and the War Emergency Powers Act (1962 and 1963).*”

Within minutes HMS Alliance’s treasure had been loaded onto the visitors’ launch and the submarine was officially ‘quarantined’.

Barrington climbed to the top of Alliance’s tall fin where he was shortly joined by his second-in-command, Lieutenant Michael Philpott.

“Heroes to lepers in five minutes flat, sir,” he complained cheerfully.

“How long do you think we’ll be sitting here twiddling our thumbs, sir?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Number One.”

“Sitting out here in the Creek will be hard for some of the men.”

“I know.” It would have been even worse if Alliance had not so recently joined the 2nd Submarine Squadron. Few men of her complement of five officers and fifty-six other ranks had personal connections to the island, girlfriends and the like. Nevertheless, it was not going to be much fun for anybody if Alliance’s quarantine lasted any length of time. It was one thing being cooped up onboard at sea on patrol; another entirely killing time in harbour without the possibility of a run ashore.

The younger man – Philpott was eighteen years Barrington’s junior – gazed thoughtfully at HMS Maidstone.

The Creek was rocky so the nine-thousand-ton depot ship had probably sprung several keel plates when she had settled on the bottom. Most of his personal kit – dress uniform and the like – was still in a locker somewhere on the slab-sided submarine depot ship. Moreover, it made him more than a little nervous to know that as there was only six or seven feet of water under the boat if there was another attack like yesterday’s, Alliance would not have the option of submerging to escape the incoming shells.

Francis Barrington was reading his mind.

“I think a repeat of yesterday’s excitement is the least of our worries, Michael.”

Chapter 38

13:20 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford, England

"My second doomsday scenario," Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson explained, professorially, "concerns Mesopotamia, specifically, Iran and Iraq," he half-smiled, "and of course, their oil fields and the largest oil refinery in the World on Abadan Island."

Margaret Thatcher's expression had turned thoughtful. Lack of sleep and the corrosive effect of her grief had left her feeling alone and threatened as she sensed the fault lines forming within the circle of her closest ministers and advisors. An enemy fleet had contrived to sail undetected to Malta and bombarded the archipelago for the best part of an hour unmolested by a garrison denuded of men, equipment, aircraft and ships currently involved – over a thousand miles away - in the biggest combined operation mounted by British forces since Suez to retake the island of Cyprus. But for the suicidal gallantry of the captains and the men of two small Royal Navy warships and the belated arrival of three powerful United States Navy vessels, an airborne assault on Malta might have overwhelmed the available local defence forces and achieved defensive lodgements on the main island. It was not inconceivable that Malta might even, briefly, have fallen into enemy hands.

All of which paled to nothing compared to the dreadful empty pit of loss and *despair* that threatened her capacity to *lead* her country at this time of crisis. Admiral Sir Julian Christopher, the Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations was dead, as were a long list of other senior officers and prominent Maltese political and civic leaders apparently pre-targeted by fifth columnists and Red Dawn assassins at the height of the airborne invasion. There was as yet no reliable count for either civilian or military casualties; but both counts were expected to be very high. Worse, as the bombardment from the sea had progressed the shelling, at first concentrated on the airfields of Luqa, Ta'Qali and Hal Far, and the Admiralty Dockyards in the creeks around the Grand

Harbour, had become indiscriminate, wreaking dreadful carnage and destruction across great swaths of Valletta, Sliema, Floriana, Birgu-Vittoriosa, Cospicua, Senglea and Paola. Malta's oil-fired main power station had been hit by several shells, island-wide telephone communications were down and several hospitals had been attacked, in some cases by squads of parachutists. 'Hit squads' had burst into the main civilian hospital and gunned down doctors, nurses and patients alike... It was unspeakable... If a small detachment of the Welsh Guards had not intervened there would have been a massacre.

What sort of people were they fighting?

It was as if her enemies were goading her to retaliate with nuclear weapons...

Margaret Thatcher squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to think *rationally*. She could not afford to let her *personal* emotions intrude on the decisions she had to take in the coming hours and days. Although the ships of Vice Admiral Bernard Clarey's newly constituted United States Sixth Fleet had thrown an impenetrable protective cordon of aircraft and warships around the Maltese Archipelago, and were offering all possible assistance to the authorities on land, Malta's agony was very nearly complete.

Julian Christopher was dead...

And now her Foreign Secretary was about to give the War Cabinet an impromptu history lesson which presumably had a wickedly apposite sting in its tail!

The bastards had murdered Julian Christopher!

Tom Harding-Grayson opened his mouth to continue but before he could speak again there was a sharp knock at the door and a flinty-eyed woman stalked into the room. The men around the table made to rise to their feet but the newcomer waved jerkily for them to sit down.

"I did not join the Government to be relegated to the side-lines the first time there was a crisis, Prime Minister!" The newcomer complained angrily.

Margaret Thatcher positively bristled.

"Nobody has *relegated* anybody to the side-lines, Mrs Castle," she retorted tartly. "Yesterday's events compelled me to call an emergency *War Cabinet* consisting of all those Cabinet Ministers in Oxford. I was given to understand that you were spending the weekend in your constituency in Blackburn?"

Fifty-three-year-old Barbara Anne Castle was a sparsely made, not over-large woman with auburn to ginger hair with a habit of leaning towards an opponent in debate as if she was leaning into a storm.

“Oh...”

“Pray take a sea,” the Prime Minister said icily. She did not like and never would like Barbara Castle. “The Foreign Secretary was about to conduct a tutorial.”

Tom Harding-Grayson took this unkind barb in his stride.

“I don’t know how much colleagues know about the murky histories of Iran and Iraq?”

“Assume we know nothing, Tom,” Margaret Thatcher growled sweetly.

“Iran first,” her friend prefaced, “I shall begin with a confession. You should all know that I was greatly involved in the dirty business that put the Shah back into power during the Abadan Crisis of the early years of the last decade. You will recollect that at the time we were so bankrupt that our economy depended almost entirely on oil from Abadan purchased, in effect, with Government guarantees to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company; so, when in 1951 the Iranians turned off the tap we were in something of a pickle. Other potential oil producers actually wanted us to pay for oil up front and frankly, we were in no position to do business with anybody on those terms in those days. We very nearly ran out of oil; remember the great smogs of London caused by everybody having to burn coal to keep warm during the winter? Remember how many people with bad chests that killed off and how impossible it was to carry on any kind of normal life in the city? Similar things happened in Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham last winter because oil shortages forced us to fall back on burning wood and coal to keep warm. Practically all our oil supply problems last year were caused by the dislocation to world shipping by the October War; there was never any shortage of oil. In fact, Abadan virtually closed down for four months last year at a time when we were – and of course – still are stringently rationing fuel. In the last three months tankers brought back under our control during the Operation Manna period have been reallocated to the Abadan run and week by week, month by month the fuel supply situation is easing and we are finally in a position to begin to build up a strategic reserve again. If we learned anything last year it was that we cannot rely on American largesse and the future availability of American registered tankers. I would also point

out that the ‘generous’ fuel supplies thus far delivered to these isles from the Gulf of Mexico roughly equates to a tad less than fifteen percent of our target requirements. Without Abadan we are in dire straits, and because of the war situation in the Mediterranean and the fact the Suez Canal remains blocked at Ismailia, in the foreseeable future all our oil must reach us via the long route around the Cape of Good Hope, a route which might potentially be threatened in the event of naval hostilities between ourselves and the Argentine.”

“We know all this, Tom,” Iain MacLeod complained testily.

“Yes,” the other man replied blankly, “but we forget it at our peril, Iain. The point I am trying to make is that Iran matters to us more than we like to admit; which is why I insist on harking back to the Abadan Crisis which was not finally resolved until 1954. We and the Americans hardly covered ourselves with glory in that episode. Nevertheless, we – the British and the Americans – successfully prised the oil of Iran out of the hands of the then legitimate, democratically elected Government of Iran under the leadership of Mohammad Mosaddegh, assuaged our wounded national pride and all in all, the whole dreadful business was subsequently viewed as a great success. As a result, British and Commonwealth forces still hold Abadan Island, the one jewel, actually, the last jewel left in the crown of the Empire. Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to be carried away. The important thing to remember about Iran is that one day it will be a regional superpower. Probably, *the* regional superpower of the Middle East. Not while the Shah is in charge, obviously. The man is a devious and mendacious fraud and an intellectual lightweight only kept in power by the CIA, his secret police and a coterie of corrupt and largely inept generals most of whom are even less cerebrally gifted than him. While the Pahlavi dynasty rules in Iran, the country will never escape its past, never modernise and sooner or later it will be torn apart by ethnic and sectarian strife. If the Shah was to be deposed and a strong government with the backing of the people of Iran not formed immediately, revolution would probably be inevitable. Because of the Pahlavi dynasty’s reign of terror there is currently no viable secular ‘opposition’ in Iran; only Mullahs and other Islamists who are by inclination inimical to our interests in their country and to our very way of life. What price our continued tenure of Abadan Island and our command of the Persian Gulf in the eventuality that the Shah falls?”

The Foreign Secretary looked around the table.

“So, when I hear reports about unrest in Tehran overnight and rumours of troop concentrations and movements in the Trans-Caucasus, I get very *nervous*. But enough of Iran; in many ways Iraq is an even more interesting case study.”

Tom Harding-Grayson was warming to his subject.

“Iraq is of course an artificial construct cobbled together at Versailles in 1919 out of several disparate provinces of the former Ottoman Empire. There is no such country as Iraq. The present ‘country’ is a mix of competing, largely anti-pathetic ethnic, religious, political communities and factions. Frankly, we, the British, have a lot to answer for in Iraq. During the period of our Mandate, which ended in 1932, we suppressed the Kurds in the north, mistakenly propped up despotic tribal Sunni chieftains at the expense of the essentially pro-nationalist growing urban - partly secular but most Shī’atu ’Alī, or as we in the West say, ‘Shia’ - polity in Baghdad and many of the other big cities, and went on treating Basra Province in the south as our own sovereign territory. In 1941 we and the Soviets invaded and occupied the whole country when we took a dislike to the ruling regime. The upshot of this was that after 1945 when Iraq joined the United Nations and became a founding member of the Arab League the ruling elite was pro-British. Why wouldn’t it be? We had after all installed a friendly branch of the Hashemite dynasty on the Iraqi throne without troubling to ascertain the feelings of its various ‘peoples’.”

The Foreign Secretary’s deprecatory irony was not lost on his colleagues.

“In any event, shortly after the end of the Second World War the Kurds of Northern Iraq – which is where the huge Kirkuk oilfields are – rose in rebellion against the government in Baghdad. When, eventually, the uprising had been crushed the rebels, led by a chap called Mustafa Barzani fled to Russia. In Iraq, the wheel invariably turns full circle and in retrospect it was astonishing that the misrule of the Hashemite dynasty – re-installed by us, the British in the 1940s – lasted as long as it did. Until as recently as 1958, if fact. Looking back, it sounds odd to say it, but Anthony Eden was correct in believing that there was only one ‘strong man’ in the Middle East, although he was grievously mistaken in thinking that particular ‘strong man’ was a latter-day analogue of Hitler or Mussolini. Gamal Abdul Nasser is neither, in my humble opinion. But I digress. Egypt and Iran, the former the kingdom of the Pharaohs and the latter the heir to the Persians of old, are and always

will be the great powers of the Middle and the Near East. Iran has the Shah, a straw man with delusions of grandeur; Egypt has Gamal Abdul Nasser, a man of vision and imagination who entertains, probably over-optimistically, dreams of a pan-Arabic union. Before the October War we and the Americans wasted a great deal of time, money and political capital that we could ill-afford courting the Shah of Iran at precisely the same time we were driving, through parsimony and ideological pedantry, Nasser into the Soviet camp."

"Tom, old man," Airey Neave interjected amiably, "this is all very interesting but do we really need to rehash ancient history?"

"Yes. I think we do," the Foreign Secretary replied, leaning towards his interlocutor, suddenly with an edge in his voice. "The point I am trying to make is that Iraq has been a fundamentally unstable entity since it was artificially created by drawing arbitrary lines on a map at Versailles in 1919. This has led to the current situation in which last year's coup – which none of us paid any attention to because we had other, more pressing matters on our hands - placed in power a fundamentally anti-Western regime intent on seizing back control of its oil wells. Fortuitously, it is currently too weak and too disunited to either defend itself from internal or external enemies, including Iran; but it is *only* the new regime's weakness has stopped Baghdad acting thus far against our small garrisons in Basra Province and Kuwait. If either Iran or Iraq acted against our oil interests in the region, the other would surely follow suit and shortly thereafter, well, I'm not entirely sure what we would do..."

The Chief of the Defence Staff cleared his throat.

"We have maintained a garrison of about a thousand men in Kuwait since 1961, Prime Minister," Admiral Sir David Luce reported. "Our garrisons in Basra province are token presences. As for our forces in and around Abadan, these have recently been reinforced by an Australian infantry battalion. A consignment of armoured vehicles – including a number of the latest Centurion tanks - was landed at Abadan shortly before the October War. Initially intended for the Iranian Army it is currently being activated by a cadre sent out from England. At the time of the war another, smaller batch of Conqueror tanks, originally destined for the Indian Army I think, was diverted to Aden. These units bring our total strength in the region, dispersed between about a dozen bases, to the equivalent of a somewhat under strength

mechanized division."

"Iraq," Tom Harding-Grayson went on, "has never recognised the sovereignty of Kuwait and most of the Iraqi Army and virtually all of its tanks are based in Basra Province. Half of those troops and tanks are positioned close to the border with Iran threatening Abadan Island and Khorramshahr; the rest are positioned within easy reach of the Kuwaiti border."

Impatience was mounting around the Cabinet table.

"What are you trying to tell us, Sir Thomas?" Barbara Castle inquired caustically.

The Foreign Secretary half-smiled.

"Given the paucity of our resources in the region, and the impossibility of substantially reinforcing those forces by sea in the near future due to the naval situation in the Mediterranean and the obstruction of the Suez Canal at Ismailia by vessels sunk by the *Krasnaya Zarya* nuclear strike on that unfortunate city," he explained slowly, taking care to annunciate clearly every word, "it seems to me that if either Iran or Iraq fall into revolution or civil war, or if Iraq elected to seize Kuwait, or Abadan in a bid to unite its disparate factions in a common cause against a hated foreign enemy, that we would be able to do very little to preserve our present strategic posture in the Persian Gulf, or to safeguard the oil fields and refineries in the region that are crucial to our economic and military viability and to our fast-diminishing long-term pretensions to be a major nation on the World stage."

Tom Harding-Grayson paused to let this grim thought sink in.

"However, that was not actually the doomsday scenario that so infuriated my elders and betters at the Foreign Office in the period before the October War, that they unanimously condemned me to indefinite internal exile. Prior to the October War both Iraq and Iran were no less unstable and unreliable than they are now; whereas post-war our resources and more importantly, those of the United States which might readily have been deployed to counter or at least ameliorate the worst effects of the case I have just outlined, were immeasurably greater." He half-smiled a very bleak smile. "Albeit, probably not equal to meeting and defeating a major, concerted Soviet attack on either or both of the two countries under discussion."

Margaret Thatcher glanced to Sir David Luce.

The First Sea Lord pursed his lips, shrugged.

“Scenarios in which massive Soviet forces attack Iran,” he commented, “and or negotiate free passage of its forces through Iraq to the northern shores of the Persian Gulf were frequently considered by planners before the October War, Prime Minister. It was a common war game scenario played out at staff colleges on both sides of the Atlantic. I think the general consensus in the 1950s was that Soviets probably realised such actions would risk a nuclear response.”

Airey Neave had sat back in his chair, made a pyramid of his fingers before him.

“Correct me if I am wrong, Tom,” he invited the Foreign Secretary, ‘but wasn’t it the dream of the Tsars to conquer the Near East so as to open up a corridor to a warm water port in the Indian Ocean?”

The other man nodded.

“In the nineteenth century our concerns centred around a Russian invasion south through what is now Pakistan, or possibly via northern Afghanistan. That was one of the reasons – almost lost among the plethora of stupid reasons - why we kept on fighting and losing all those dreadful Afghan Wars.”

“The Soviets can’t possibly have any massive armies left?” Barbara Castle objected.

“That,” Tom Harding-Grayson sighed, ‘is the thing, Mrs Castle. Given the state of Iran and Iraq at this time and our own thinly spread ‘defences’ in the region, a relatively modest invasion force might easily drive across Northern Iran down onto the floodplains of the Tigris and the Euphrates and motor, virtually unopposed all the way to the Persian Gulf.”

Chapter 39

15:25 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Fort Rinella, Malta

Samuel Calleja attempted to turn his head away from the blinding white light as his captors tore the black sack off his head. He was desperately thirsty, hungry, enfeebled and terrified and his broken left hand hurt abominably. He had vomited into the sack twice on the journey but nobody was about to clean him up. His captors forced him to sit on a metal chair; he was too weak to resist as they manacled his wrists behind his back.

"We meet at last," Major Denzil Williams said glumly, his words were slurred because his shattered lower jaw was still slowly knitting back together after his encounter with Samuel Calleja's KGB puppet master in January. He would carry the scars and feel the deep pains of that day to his grave, and as he looked at the frightened Red Dawn *terrorist* in the chair he ached to be able to inflict *harm* and *disfigurement* on him before he killed him. Greatly to his infuriated consternation his superiors had explicitly forbidden him to 'mistreat Samuel Calleja'.

It would not do for the little princess's big brother to get roughed up!

"You don't know me," the newly re-instated MI6 head of Station in Malta went on, his stare boring into the prisoner's face. "But if you don't tell me everything I want to know, well," he grinned a crookedly unfunny grin, "you won't like what happens next." He could not stop himself adding: "Particularly the part where my friends," he glanced to the big men ringing the man chained to the chair in the middle of the dungeon squirming in the dazzling arc lamp's beam, "get out the hammers and the drills."

If Samuel Calleja had not already voided his bowels he would have then.

Down in the caverns beneath the old Victorian fort which – boasting a single huge 100-hundred-ton muzzle loading Vickers Armstrong gun - had covered the south eastern approaches to the Grand Harbour until around 1905 and had been the home of an anti-aircraft battery during and just after the

1945 war, the air was always cool. During the Second World War these old cells and caves had been filled from floor to ceiling with ammunition. Now in the dank air condensation dripped coldly onto the floor.

"Cut off his clothes," Denzil Williams decided matter of factly. "I'll be back down later after I've had a cup of tea." He had already given orders that nobody was to speak to the prisoner except him. A couple of hours sitting naked in the cold with big ugly Redcaps giving him the silent treatment ought to ensure the traitor was in a more talkative mood. In the meantime, the senior Secret Intelligence Service Officer on the Maltese Archipelago wanted to know why that bitch Clara Pullman had not yet arrived at Fort Rinella.

After Arkady Pavlovich Rykov had very nearly beaten him to death at Mdina he had been sent back to Gibraltar to recuperate and basically, left twiddling his thumbs waiting to discover if he had a future in the Service. He had been a little surprised when nobody came out from England to debrief him. Actually, after a few weeks he had begun to wonder if the Service had forgotten he existed.

Each morning he had gone for a walk out to Europa Point, where on a clear day he could stare at the faint outline of the North African coast some sixteen miles away across the Straits of Gibraltar. He would wonder what was happening in the former French and Spanish colonies across the water; what dark threats lurked beyond the hazy horizon. With France half bomb-ravaged with rumours of regional provisional governments vying for power in Normandy, Gascony and Marseilles sporadically skirmishing around the frayed edges of their self-proclaimed territories, with Corsica in the hands of a military junta and members of former French colonial administrations holed up in the Caribbean with disaffected surviving admirals and generals plotting a return to the old country, what price renewal, reconstruction and rebirth? It was all so sad.

Denzil Williams had learned his trade in the intelligence game working with the Special Operations Executive in occupied France in 1944. His first wife had been a Parisian émigré who had dumped him for an insurance salesman in 1953; his second wife the widow of a French diplomat assassinated in Algeria. Juliette had loved living in London much more than she had ever loved him; their cramped little penthouse flat in Mayfair had become her nest and they would have remained happily married for ever and a day if the fucking World had not gone mad at the end of October 1962. On

the night of the war he had been in Lebanon talking to the sort of people the bigwigs back in London tried not to have any dealings with lest they got their hands dirty.

He had been in Beirut and Juliette had been, most likely, sleeping in her bed in Mayfair when the bombs went off over London. Like hundreds of thousands, ultimately millions of other Britons she had, he hoped, died without ever knowing a thing.

A little over a week ago a car had drawn up alongside him as he took his daily constitutional down to Europa Point. In years gone by he would never have fallen into such a regular, predictable routine because in years gone by he would have cared if he lived or died; but after two months on the beach in Gibraltar pondering the mistakes of his life and yearning once again to be with Juliette, whom he had adored and worshipped at first sight, if somebody had put a bullet in his brain at that moment he would not have complained.

'You're looking more your old self, Denzil,' Sir Richard 'Dick' Goldsmith White had declared. The tall, elegantly suited fifty-seven-year-old Head of the Secret Intelligence Service had looked drawn and tired which was not at all like him. The spymaster had been one of MI5's golden boys in Hitler's War. By 1953 he had been appointed Director General of the Security Service, the pinnacle of a stellar career. However, when in 1956 he became the first man to have been made Director General of successively MI5 and then MI6, his transfer was greeted with little enthusiasm by either organisation. MI5 and MI6 - the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service – were two competing clubs with entirely different memberships, traditions and practices and neither 'club' had much time for, or respect for the other.

'It must be serious if the DG himself is delivering the message,' Denzil Williams had observed sourly. Like many old SOE and MI6 hands he had never had much time for the MI5 'golden boy' who thought he knew their business better than they did. His recent painful experiences on Malta had done nothing to disabuse him of this belief.

Dick White's car had keep pace with the two men as they walked towards the lighthouse at the end of the point. It had been a fresh, overcast day with spits of rain in the damp, ozone-rich air. Out in the straits white horses had danced all the way from Europe to Africa. Algeciras Bay had seemed empty that morning, the big American carrier the USS Independence

and her task force having departed harbour the previous day.

‘Rykov has disappeared,’ the spymaster had said.

‘You lost him?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was careless.’

Dick White had hesitated before he defended his actions.

‘I told you not to interfere with my operation. Your goons almost killed Rykov before I had a chance to *play him*. I regret what happened to you in Malta but frankly, you are in no position to claim the high moral ground, Denzil.’

‘Presumably, you want me to go back to Malta to clean up the mess you’ve left behind,’ Denzil Williams had suggested, ‘sir?’

‘I want you to find Rykov, yes.’

‘And then what?’

‘Kill him. Obviously...’

‘Obviously,’ he had echoed, instantly feeling more cheerful and less suicidal.

‘What about his tart?’

Dick White had given him a very odd look.

‘She works for me,’ he had said flatly as if he was disappointed that the other man had not worked that out for himself.

‘Oh.’ Denzil Williams had been very nearly struck dumb by this revelation. He prided himself that he had recovered fast from his initial astonishment. ‘In that case why don’t you get her to do your dirty work?’

Dick White had not masked his irritation.

‘Because I learned a long time ago that only a fool gives an order he suspects might not be obeyed.’

Chapter 40

16:45 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Royal Naval Hospital, Bighi, Malta

Joe Calleja slowly returned to the land of the living and was a little confused to be greeted by the wry grin on the bruised, scratched and here and there, the handsomely mottled face of his English brother-in-law.

"I have it on very good authority that you are a copper-bottomed out-and-out hero, Joe," Peter Christopher said.

The words reached the Maltese dockyard electrician through a post-operative anaesthetic fog.

Joe looked at his right arm, now buried under a heavy plaster cast.

"I don't feel much like a hero," he confessed.

In the background there was a bronchial laugh.

"While we were waiting for you to wake up Petty Officer Griffin informed me that you were the brave fellow who actually pressed the buttons that put Talavera's fish in the water yesterday?"

"Oh, that," Joe muttered, wanting to go back to sleep. The bed he was lying in was seductively comfortable and all the pain of before was gone. "Marija was here this morning. She went off to Mdina, I think..."

"They told me," Peter Christopher assured him. Before he had left the emergency command centre at Marsa Creek the medics had wanted to fuss over him but he had shrugged off their attentions. He had a sore leg, the lingering discomfiture of miscellaneous bumps, knocks and abrasions. Where he had been nicked by shell fragments he had already been stitched up; and he needed to get back to *his* people in Kalkara.

Returning to RNH Bighi he had found apparent bedlam; the hospital was overwhelmed by the arrival of new wounded and injured. Every available space in the complex was occupied, local people from Kalkara and the families of the victims of the bombardment – having taken over the running of several wards – were constantly moving between patients on mattresses in

corridors and offices.

However, beneath the outward appearance of bedlam everywhere there was a calm, conscientious method. Canvas awnings had been erected outside to shelter the incoming stream of sick and the injured, and the traumatised lost souls who had been found walking in the rubble. If a man let the sights and sounds around him penetrate his defences he could easily be as heart-broken and hopeless as so many of the innocent victims of yesterday's atrocity.

"Apparently, Marija has gone off to St Catherine's Hospital," he explained.

"Do you know if my parents are okay?"

"I'm sure they're fine," the man in the bed was assured. "They would have had plenty of time to get down to the shelters. From what I can gather there was a detachment of Welsh Guards deployed throughout Sliema and Gzira and they made short work of the parachutists who came down in their neck of the woods."

Peter patted his brother-in-law's shoulder.

"You did brave deeds yesterday, brother," he added. "Whereas, this rascal," he jerked a rueful look in the direction of Petty Officer Jack Griffin to whom his newly acquired scars simply complemented the old, "and I were just doing our duty. What you did was, well, beyond the call and truly *heroic*."

Peter did not know if the man in the bed registered his words.

He patted Joe Calleja on the shoulder again.

He stood up, looked down on the somewhat shorter red-headed Petty Officer. Jack Griffin was built like a mobile brick wall with muscular arms that might have been modelled on those of *Popeye the sailor man*. Jack Griffin's left eye was closed to a bruised and bloodshot puffy slit and blood oozed persistently through bandages protecting hastily sutured wounds on his brow and at his throat. Notwithstanding, nothing short of a direct order was going to detach him from his Captain's side.

So that, after a brief explanation, was what Peter Christopher gave him.

"I have to return to Marsa Creek shortly. The Acting C-in-C wants to transmit Talavera's After-Action Report to England this evening. Mr Weiss looks like he's out for the count," he went on, trying not to sound overly concerned.

The doctors speculated that his friend's worsening concussion was actually a blast related injury which may have caused bleeding on the brain. He had been rushed into one of the three available operating theatres as soon as a table became free.

"In Mr Weiss's absence I need you to find Lieutenant Reilly. He is to meet me at the Kalkara jetty at seventeen-thirty hours."

Peter Christopher watched his self-appointed guardian angel trot off down the corridor. Jack Griffin had been a several times demoted Leading Electrical Artificer in his Radar and Electrical Division on the Talavera on the night of the October War. Griffin's bad reputation had come before him and Talavera's then Executive Officer, Hugo Montgommery, sadly killed at the Battle of Cape Finisterre in December, had practically given up on the man. Simply put, Jack Griffin was one of those men who got to be angry about *everything* when he drank too much, or when he had too much time to think about the many and varied ills of the World. He was also very bad at taking orders from people he did not like or respect, and despite a decade in the Royal Navy he had never really got used to the idea that the word 'discipline' applied to him, too.

'You seem to have got a bad name for yourself, Griffin?' Peter had asked him upon first acquaintance. In those pre-war days Talavera had been at Chatham running acceptance trials after her radical conversion from a World War Two fleet destroyer to a fast air detection escort designed to act as long-range air defence pickets for the fleet's big carriers, the Ark Royal, Eagle, Victorious and Hermes. When the ship had finally been handed over to the Navy by the Chatham Royal Naval Dockyard, her officers and men had been horrified by the abysmal standard of the work that had been carried out. Although the external fabric of the destroyer had been sound, the internal fitting out was so bad as to be positively dangerous having been completed with little or no reference to the authorised plans and schematics. The watertight integrity of the ship had been compromised by cableways knocked through bulkheads; and the new deck houses accommodating sophisticated radar and communications equipment, and the generators which powered these critical systems were prone to flooding in heavy weather. Peter's division had had to rewire and reroute over fifty percent of the Talavera's cableways, caulk and repair compromised bulkheads and modify the relays and switches governing the output of the new generators before sea trials

could commence.

And at the outset he had inherited Jack Griffin.

‘Never mind,’ he had told the man who had been the bane of his predecessors on half-a-dozen previous ships, ‘I’d give you a pep talk but that would probably go in one ear and out the other.’

It had been about then that Jack Griffin had begun to suspect he was not dealing with another green, well-meaning but essentially malleable young officer.

‘If you want to be chucked out onto Civvy Street,’ Peter had told him. ‘That’s fine. Just carry on the way you have been carrying on. Right now, the ship is a mess and I don’t have time to waste mucking around. Either you are on my side or you are not. A chap like you ought to be well on his way to his Chief’s stripes by now. So, that’s that for the pep talk. As of today, you have a clean slate with me. Make me regret it and your feet won’t touch the ground. You’ll be on the beach so soon you won’t know what hit you.’

Peter had stuck out his hand.

‘Make up your mind. That is the contract. Shall we shake on it?’

Jack Griffin had been so astonished that he had stuck out his hand without thinking. A contract was a contract and he had shaken on it. The October War had happened a few weeks later and the rest was history. He had felt *responsible* for the man who had been his divisional officer, who had later become his ship’s second-in-command, and latterly his Captain, ever since.

Peter Christopher had never been a man to over-analyse or deconstruct personal or service relationships; things were what they were and chemistry was an odd thing. He had always been happiest in the company of men who did not take things for granted, men who thought for themselves and had the courage to be accountable for their own good and bad decisions. *Characters* like Jack Griffin were worth their weight in gold, the heart and soul of any crew.

“Are you fit for duty, Jack?” He asked, man to man rather than three-ring Commander to his ship’s most newly promoted Petty Officer, as soon as Jack Griffin returned from delivering his message to Lieutenant Dermot O’Reilly.

“Aye, sir.”

“Good. In that case I have a couple more errands for you. First off I

need you to find the Master at Arms and ask him to report to me at his convenience." He thought carefully about the next 'errand'. "The telephone system is down across the island. So, I also need you to deliver a personal letter to my wife in Mdina. And if after she has read it she decides to return with you to Valletta, I want you to personally escort her. Things are a bit of a mess between here and Mdina so detail off a couple of fellows who know how to handle themselves to accompany you. In the event there's any trouble. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"I'll have the letter ready for you in about half-an-hour. You can set off then."

Peter Christopher watched Jack Griffin doubling away.

"That man is a maniac," Joe Calleja muttered from his hospital bed, but not without a tinge of admiration.

"Yes," his brother-in-law agreed. "Just thank God he's on our side!"

Finding a place where he could sit down and compose a note to Marija was a less than straightforward business. The occasion and the circumstances in which he was writing to his wife demanded something polished, endlessly perused and edited, re-edited and lovingly crafted but he had no time or energy for that.

In a few minutes he had to get back to Marsa Creek to write his report of HMS Talavera's role in the Battle of Malta. With Miles Weiss hors de combat he hoped Dermot O'Reilly, Talavera's navigator would be able to fill in gaps in his recollection of courses, speeds and the general sequence of things and to have the presence of mind and wit to correct any obvious mistakes or omissions. Sometime tomorrow the first flight into Luqa would bring journalists, men from the Ministry of Information, and several as yet unidentified VIPs all of whom he was, apparently, expected 'to humour'. He hoped that sometime in the next few hours somebody would find him a uniform which actually fitted him. Air Vice Marshal French's Chief of Staff had promised him 'all that will be sorted out'; but given the situation he had to be some kind of magician if he really believed that. Most of all Peter wanted to hold his wife in his arms; until he held Marija in his arms again nothing would convince him what he had gone through yesterday had been worth it.

Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann found him scribbling his missive to

Marija in an old storeroom.

Jack Griffin hovered at the Master at Arms's shoulder.

"If you would give us a couple of minutes, PO Griffin?" Peter put to the junior of the two men and the red-headed man made himself scarce. He turned to the older man. "I gather Lieutenant Hannay discharged himself from the hospital, Mr McCann?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a bench in one corner of the dusty room at the back of the old Zymotic – fever – wing of RNH Bighi. Peter waved his senior non-commissioned officer to take a seat.

"You look all in," he observed when the older man hesitated. "Sit down for a few minutes. Nobody will see you slacking in here, Master."

"No, sir," Spider McCann admitted, gratefully resting his battered and aching frame but in absolutely no way entirely comfortable sitting down in his Captain's presence.

"Mr Hannay," Peter explained, putting down his pen in mid-sentence. "Mr O'Reilly, you, Jack Griffin and the dozen fittest survivors from the crew will report to RAF Luqa not later than sixteen hundred hours tomorrow. A party from the Yarmouth is being mustered separately and will meet us all at the airfield. I've been promised fresh Blue No. 3, or No. 4 dress, I don't know which, for officers and men so we can all be kitted out presentably for the flight to England on Monday."

Spider McCann's eyebrows arched.

This told the younger man that he badly needed to organise his thoughts a little better.

"Ah, sorry, I should have mentioned that first really. We're all being flown back to Blighty to meet the Queen and I assume, the Prime Minister and sundry senior officers and worthies. There may not be room on the planes flying back to England for everybody but I've been assured by the C-in-C, Air Vice-Marshal French, that any Talaveras left behind will be offered a posting back in England in due course rather than being automatically reassigned to the Mediterranean Fleet's manning pool." He glanced down to the half-written letter on the edge of the rickety table at his elbow. "I'm writing to my wife to let her know what is going on. The powers that be have requested that she fly back to England with us but," he shrugged, "that will be up to her. I'm sending Jack Griffin to Mdina to find my wife and to

deliver the letter. I've ordered him to detail off a couple of our people to go with him." Forcing a smile, he continued: "Can I leave it to you to round up Mr Hannay, to select the men to accompany us back home, and to let the other chaps know what is going on, Master?"

"Aye, sir."

"Mr Reilly will be accompanying me back to HQ at Marsa Creek. Hopefully, he'll remember more about the twists and turns we put Talavera through after we cleared the Grand Harbour than I do!"

Spider McCann grinned.

Peter returned his grin.

"When we were charging towards those big ships yesterday everything seemed so simple. Now," he shrugged, "well, that was then I suppose, and this is now."

"That's the Navy for you, sir. If it isn't one thing it's another!"

Peter Christopher nodded.

"Thank you, Master." He picked up his pen. "If you could tell PO Griffin to hang around for another ten minutes please. This letter will be ready for him to take to Mdina by then."

Chapter 41

17:45 Hours (Local)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Residence of the Military Governor, Ardabil, Northern Iran

In the mind of Colonel General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian, the commander of Army Group South, the *early* investment and capture – hopefully largely intact – of the city of Ardabil was the first and most important litmus test of the viability of Operation Nakazyvat. If Ardabil, some seventy kilometres from the Caspian Sea and less than half that from the border with Azerbaijan could not be taken swiftly, it augured nothing but ill for the rest of the campaign in the mountains of Northern Iran.

Babadzhanian had no pretensions to be a great strategist. He was a fighting soldier, a tank man with a profound understanding of, and a virtually unparalleled experience of armoured warfare who believed in fighting battles step by step, constantly reappraising successes and failures and ruthlessly exploiting the weaknesses exposed by each probe or counter punch. He had planned for the most likely possibilities; he had even planned for a scenario in which the Iranian units stationed on the border were capable of not just mounting a robust, in depth defence but also of retaining a limited capacity to launch narrow front counter attacks against the exposed flanks of his armoured columns tens of kilometres inside Iran. The only thing Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian had not factored into his plans was that the Iranian army – British and American trained and equipped, albeit with older surplus kit, some of it of World War II vintage – would attempt to surrender en masse as soon as the initial bombardment lifted, and subsequently melt away before the T-62 led spearheads of 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army. Less still had he dared to imagine that the relatively small airborne force dropped to seize the small Iranian Air Force base north of the city of Ardabil would take the airfield intact at a cost of less than ten casualties, and that the fleeing defenders would panic the whole of Ardabil into submission while the first T-62s of the 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army were still snarled up along the

narrow roads fifteen kilometres north west of the city.

None of his tanks had yet reached the city as Babadzhanian's Mil Mi6 Red Air Force helicopter bumped down onto the verdant lawn of the elegant compound just outside the old city of Ardabil.

Paratroopers rushed forward to form a circling, protective honour guard for the Army Group Commander. Salutes were exchanged.

"I respectfully recommend we get under cover, Comrade Colonel General," shouted a lean, hook-nosed major over the thrumming of the rotors directly over his head, "there are still several enemy snipers active in the city."

Babadzhanian nodded his curt acknowledgement of the warning but marched unhurriedly towards the mansion of the former military governor of Ardabil. Inside it was cool, almost cold and nobody had started to clear up the mess the previous occupants had left in their headlong rush to escape.

The conqueror had little time to waste admiring the intricate and colourful tessellation of the mosaic floors under his feet, or the hand-painted Farsi sayings on the wall and ceiling tiles at each doorway. It was all Babadzhanian could do to contain his elation at such a bloodless victory. In a matter of hours his deepest fears had proved to be groundless, and each and every one of his theories about the intrinsic dissonance and incoherence of an Iranian state – founded upon a throne stolen by a usurper dynasty which but for the meddling of the British and the Americans could have fallen at any time in the last decade – made up of religious and ethnically diverse and incompatible communities, had been vindicated.

Ardabil was a case in point; its population was mainly Azeri, not Iranian. Most families in Ardabil traced their origins not to Iran, but to Azerbaijan where in times within living memory many had been forced to flee because of religious persecution or economic necessity or had simply been driven south in one of the minor tribal and border wars that had afflicted the region from time immemorial. Many of the Azeris in Ardabil and the surrounding country felt themselves to be at least half-Russian and half-Azerbaijani; to some, possibly a sizable minority, the Red Army tanks and Red Air Force jets rumbling through their villages and thundering across their skies were liberators.

Big maps were spread across a table roughly dragged into the centre of what must have been some kind of banqueting hall the day before.

Technicians wearing the tabs of the Fourth Guards Tank Regiment on their uniforms snapped upright as the Army Group Commander entered the room.

"Carry on!" Babadzhanian barked.

The technicians were from his Headquarters Company, sent forward the moment the commander of the under-strength airborne company which had secured the nearby air base had, on his own initiative, pushed on into the northern suburbs of the city. During the great Patriotic War Babadzhanian had been slow to fully appreciate the marvels of modern communications technologies; but his experience putting down the counter revolutionary uprising in Budapest in 1956 had taught him exactly what went wrong if unit and army level command communications nets lost contact one with the other.

In Hungary he had ended up with tanks and infantry in the wrong places at the wrong times; the 'Budapest Action' would have been a dirty, bloody business whatever he had done but if he was asked to repeat the affair he would have conducted his business faster, with co-ordinated crushing brutality. Back in 1956 his armour had moved in according to an overly rigid plan and then everything had gone to Hell. It had not mattered in the end; the uprising had been put down and his masters in the Kremlin did not care how it had been done. However, *he* had known what had gone wrong and *he* had learned valuable lessons from the experience, every one of which he had rigorously applied to every facet of the planning for Operation Nakazyvat.

Babadzhanian leaned over the map table, resting his clenched fists on the map of north eastern Iran. He still could not believe that the Iranian Army – albeit garrisoning the city in battalion rather than the regimental strength he had anticipated - had fled Ardabil, the city that guarded the tomb of Sheikh Safi-ad-din Is'haq Ardabili, the twelfth and thirteenth century poet and the Kurdish Sunni founder of the Safavid Dynasty. The very name of 'Ardabil' came from an etymological root which meant 'holy town' or 'holy place'; to abandon such a city without a fight spoke of a people and an army ripe for conquest.

The Commander of Army Group South often found his Red Army comrades thick-headed, too obsessed with what they saw on the map to stop and consider what lay beyond the roads, towns, cities and symbols. Campaigning was not a mere matter of breaking through defence lines or negotiating the terrain, of logistics or of manoeuvre or even of entrenchment

or position. Understanding 'the ground' was only a part of soldiering. Understanding one's enemy was much more important.

With a full-strength Guards Tank regiment and a few hundred infantrymen Babadzhanian could have held Ardabil against the rest of 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army for a month; the Iranians had had as many tanks as any of his front-line regiments and a garrison of over a thousand men billeted inside Ardabil, and yet, barring the activities of a handful of stay behind snipers, hardly a shot had been fired in defence of the city.

Ardabil!

Ardabil; the city from which the Safavids had set out to conquer the whole of Iran and to create a new Muslim Persian Empire that at its zenith had ruled all of modern day Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, the North Caucasus, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain and Afghanistan, as well as large areas of Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan for several hundred years. As one day the USSR would again rule all those places and many, many more!

How could a true patriot abandon a place like Ardabil without a fight?

Tabriz, two hundred kilometres to the west would be unlikely to fall like such a ripe, low hanging fruit into the palm of his hand like the ancient city of Ardabil; in war one accepted a gift from the gods without demur for those gods were fickle, ready to turn on one without warning at any moment.

"What's going on in Tehran?" Babadzhanian demanded, abruptly curtailing his private reverie.

"Comrade Colonel Kurochnik reports that the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment is holding the perimeter of Tehran Mehrabad Air Base without difficulty at this time, Comrade Colonel General!"

Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik was a reliable man long overdue for promotion. Although he had been wounded in action against Krasnaya Zarya fanatics in Romania less than six weeks ago, he had insisted on jumping over Tehran with his men and if Babadzhanian was certain of anything, Kurochnik would have been in the thick of the action ever since.

Maskirovska.

Dym i zerkala, smoke and mirrors.

The art of persuading one's enemy to stare so fixedly at one hand that he never sees the sucker punch coming with the other.

Kurochnik and his men had done their job to perfection; decapitated –

literally – the usurper Pahlavi regime, reduced the capital of Iran to a seething, panic-stricken, uncontrollable disaster area, and now he was drawing the entire Tehran garrison onto the Mehrabad airfield partially encircled by the south western suburbs of the city. After dusk every available Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber would attack Tehran, their bomb loads targeted to destroy the transportation infrastructure – roads, railways, bridges – with the aid of criss-crossing navigation and targeting beams broadcast from within Mehrabad air base and the mountains to the north of the city. In the confusion the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment would be airlifted out of the combat zone before the final devastating act of the *Tehran Gambit* of Operation Nakazyvat was enacted.

Babadzhanian's southern flank – specifically the flank of 2nd Siberian Mechanised Army - had to be shielded before Ardabil could become the great staging post for a logistics train which would eventually stretch all the way from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf via Sulaymaniyah in Iraq.

Understandably, the question of how to shield 2nd Siberian Mechanised Army's ever lengthening, completely exposed left flank had been the most heated topic of debate during the planning of Operation Nakazyvat.

Conventional thinking dictated that nothing short of a third – non-existent – tank army would suffice for such an arduous and militarily challenging task; but Babadzhanian did not have a third army and even if he had had such an army, he would not have wasted it facing south of 2nd Siberian Mechanised Army's line of march towards an enemy that might never come. In the end the Minister of Defence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, like Babadzhanian a veteran and 'hero' of the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis, had slammed his fist on the table and ended further debate by declaring: 'We do it the way comrade Amazasp Khachaturovich says!'

The greatest living Soviet soldier's cherubically evil face had creased into a wicked grin as he employed the patronymic form of Babadzhanian's name – which because of his Armenian-Azerbaijani upbringing he himself rarely used – and came down on the side of the only man in the room he trusted to carry out Operation Nakazyvat.

'We let the mountains cover the southern flank!'

But first the Iranian state had to be de-coupled from its antiquated, corrupt feudal command and control system. In the Iran of the Pahlavi

Dynasty nothing happened without the permission of a member of the small governing elite around the person of the Shah. Everybody, everywhere in the Shah of Iran's kingdom looked to Tehran to do its thinking for it, and at the end of the day, to command it to do whatever needed to be done.

Iran was like a great slumbering bear.

Cut off the bear's head and the body of the immensely powerful and dangerous beast would be helpless for weeks, perhaps months while Babadzhanian's two armoured armies trundled through its northern mountains and gathered on the northern flood plains of the tributaries of the Tigris and the Euphrates ahead of the great thrust south to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

Chapter 42

10:45Hours (EST)
Saturday 4th April 1964
The White House, Broad Street, Philadelphia

The Giraud Corn Exchange Trust Building a few hundred yards down from City hall, the temporary home of the House of Representatives was neither *white* nor was it in any sense a *house.* However, as a statement of the grandeur and majesty of the office of the President of the United States of America it was monumentally impressive.

The building had been selected by the Vice President. Lyndon Baines Johnson had single-handedly taken upon himself the burden of removing the apparatus of government from battle-ravage Washington to Philadelphia that spring. The great project remained a work in progress but Philadelphia had now been the de facto capital city of the Republic for nearly two months. Back in Washington, the removal of the governmental bureaucracy had enabled the accelerated clearance of the debris of the Battle of Washington and permitted rebuilding to commence uninhibited by having to constantly work around the living organs of the national administration.

LBJ had stopped looking for sites for the Philadelphia White House when he walked through the doors of the bankrupt Giraud Corn Exchange Trust Building. Its proximity to the relocated House of Representatives apart – a double-edged sword if ever there was one - the building recommended itself for its interim role in many ways. It was truly grand - obviously 'presidential', it was built like a fortress and had a huge vault, a likely bomb shelter in these troubled times – and possessed a surfeit of rooms within it and its adjoining thirty-one storey office block sufficient to accommodate not just the Presidential Staff but the new Philadelphia offices of both the State and the Treasury Departmental bureaucracies.

The Corn Exchange Trust Building itself was a magnificent rotunda designed by the Architect Frank Furness in 1908 as a reproduction of the Pantheon in Rome. The exterior structural fabric of the great edifice was constructed 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 reception parties greeted all high-profile visitors to the Philadelphia White House.

Today only a small party was waiting to intercept Lord Franks as he hurried inside after braving one of the angry spring showers roving across the city. His bodyguards held back, shaking the water of the battery of umbrellas which had failed to completely keep their charge dry in the downpour.

"My, my," the British Ambassador exclaimed ruefully, "I swear that it never used to rain so hard in the old days." The brim of his hat was dripping wet and the lenses of his spectacles were blurred with water.

J. William Fulbright had made a point of coming downstairs from his office to be seen greeting his visitor. He shook his friend's hand and smiled sombrely. This morning Philadelphia was like an agitated hornet's nest; positively buzzing with anti-British sentiment.

He led Oliver Franks towards the stairs.

"The President is flying back to Philadelphia tomorrow morning," the United States Secretary of State confided. "He's as worried as I am about the news from the Mediterranean. Bob McNamara's as mad as a March hare about what happened at Malta."

The British Ambassador had heard more than one troubling account of the Secretary of Defence's somewhat fraught dealings with the high command the United States Navy. The latest he had heard of the affair of the sinking of the USS Scorpion in December – an incident in which HMS Dreadnought, the Royal Navy's only nuclear-powered submarine had been damaged by a torpedo launched by a Grumman S-2 Tracker flying off the USS Enterprise – was that it was still the official view of the Navy Department that the American submarine had been sunk by the Dreadnought. At the very moment the newly formed US Sixth Fleet was fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean senior officers in Philadelphia were still peddling bare-faced lies, and scurrilously politicking against British interests in the heart of the relocated seat of the American government.

Oliver Franks would not have been at all surprised if the malicious rumour that the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom had become so

infuriated with the lack of progress in reinstating a unified - NATO, North Atlantic Treaty organisation – integrated high command for ongoing and future *Allied* operations in the Mediterranean and possibly elsewhere, that it had unilaterally taken matters into its own hands and appointed Admiral Sir David Luce as Supreme Commander, had actually originated from within the upper echelons of the US defence establishment. If he had been a betting man he would have wagered its most likely source was the Navy Department, newly relocated just across the Delaware River in New Jersey.

The resultant furore had given a new focus to all those in the United States who believed that in the aftermath of the October War the only way forward was to pursue a ruthlessly 'America First' policy. People who subscribed to this view bitterly resented every grain of corn, drop of oil, and every cent in aid that went overseas; particularly when that precious treasure went to prop up a former ally who, in many American eyes, had in some way never clearly articulated 'let them down' on the night of the war.

Problematically, very few people in America yet understood that President Kennedy had launched a massive pre-emptive strike against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw pact Allies possibly *without consulting with, or forewarning* its closest NATO ally, and that far from hanging back at the critical moment the United Kingdom had only known that war had been declared when the first Polaris missiles broke surface in the Norwegian Sea and the first Soviet missiles began to hurtle over the horizon on terminal trajectories targeting London and the English East Coast bomber bases of the RAF's V-Bomber Force, over forty percent of which had been destroyed on the ground.

"What is the mood in England?" William Fulbright asked as soon as the two men were alone in his palatial office. Heavy blast drapes made the room a little gloomy unless the lights were on and armed Marines stood guard outside the Secretary of State's door.

"Grim," Oliver Franks replied. "The Prime Minister has taken things very badly. I have learned that she and Admiral Christopher were personally very close. They were at Balmoral at the time of the attempt on Her Majesty's wife, you know. Apparently, the Fighting Admiral shielded her with his body during the attack and the Prime Minister, well, obviously she wasn't Prime Minister at that time, she nursed him the night after the attack and afterwards they were, as I say, very close..."

Fulbright's eyebrows lifted.

This was all news to him and as he absorbed the import of the finely calculated confidence the British Ambassador had adroitly shared with him, his worries multiplied.

"Very close?" He asked, as if he was simply musing aloud.

"I am led to believe that Mrs Thatcher was affianced to the Fighting Admiral," Oliver Franks said lowly.

In his terse trans-Atlantic telephone conversation with his immediate superior, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson had been at pains to impress upon him that this information was only to be divulged if, and when, Franks saw no other way of warning their Allies that what had happened at Malta ought to be the thing concentrating minds, not the nonsense about the who was, and who was not in the frame to be 'Supreme Commander'.

Oliver Franks looked the United States Secretary of State in the eye.

"The couple planned to announce their intention to marry at the earliest appropriate time. The wedding would not have been until the conclusion of Sir Julian's tenure in Malta. At that time, it was anticipated that he would retire from the Service and stand by his new wife in her political career."

The United States Secretary of State said nothing.

Overnight the American Ambassador in Oxford had personally informed the British Prime Minister that Rear-Admiral Detweiller had been removed from his command and would almost certainly face charges of dereliction of duty and negligence on his return to the United States.

Walter Brenckmann had reported that the Prime Minister had received the news in stony silence.

Fulbright raised a hand to his brow,

He sighed long and hard.

"Hell, Oliver," he grunted, "this thing just gets worse!"

Chapter 43

21:15 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Mdina, Malta

Marija had felt like she was going to swoon with relief – or it might just have been from sleep deprivation and exhaustion – when Dr Michael Stephens had knocked on the door of the first-floor office of the Medical Director of St Catherine's Hospital for Women and cautiously stuck his head into the room.

'You might not be so glad to see me when I tell you why I am here,' he had warned her, entering the office wearing a boyishly apologetic expression. He had stayed on his feet until he had delivered the *bad news*.

Under the articles of the War Emergency Act (Dominions and Dependent Territories, 1963) the Director of Military Medicine on Malta decrees that for an interim period of not less than ninety days the temporary Medical Director of the Women's Hospital shall be Surgeon Lieutenant Michael Cuthbert Stephens, who will henceforth report to his immediate superior, Surgeon Captain Hughes at Royal Naval Hospital Bighi, under whose remit the aforementioned Women's Hospital will be licensed to continue to operate under the terms of Martial Law now in place across the Maltese Archipelago.

Marija wanted to hug Michael Stephens; but her pride made her register a somewhat half-hearted complaint.

'St Catherine's is a charitable establishment which has always operated under the auspices and the financial supervision of the Arch Diocese of Malta. Although,' she confessed immediately, somewhat undermining the skeleton of a case she had begun to make for the hospital's ongoing independence, 'Margo generally got her own way on most things.'

This had started her crying. She had held off her tears until then because she had convinced herself she needed to be strong for the other women. But now, alone with Michael Stephens she sobbed unrestrainedly. Shyly, and very awkwardly, the doctor who so much resembled an uncannily youthful, less rotund version of his famous surgeon uncle who had unaccountably been

the love of Margo Seiffert's life had hesitantly risen and placed a hand on Marija's shoulder.

Marija had recovered her composure eventually.

'You should be sitting in this chair,' she had observed, waving at the mess of the office, and at the window where the wind gusted in and out without let or hindrance since all the glass had been blown out yesterday. 'I honestly don't know what to do with all this administrative paperwork. I don't know what I was thinking volunteering to try to be Margo...'

Afterwards she had walked around the hospital communicating the news to the other women and the patients, men and women, who filled every bed and available free space in the building. She and her nurses were only *nurses* and most of the people being carried into St Catherine's Hospital were in need of much more than she or her women could do for them. Michael Stephens had accompanied her to start with but as word spread that he, not Marija was the new Medical Director, she had left him to get on with his work.

"I wondered if I might find you here, Miss," a gruffly gentle man's voice said in the gloom as Marija sat alone in the cold inner courtyard of the hospital where Margo had died. She had wanted to commune with her dead friend; but for the moment there was only a shocked silence in her head.

Marija looked up.

"Sorry, begging your pardon, Mrs Christopher," the man muttered uncomfortably, stepping out of the shadows.

Marija recognised Jack Griffin and spontaneously, smiled which utterly disorientated HMS Talavera's legendary hard case. It was several seconds before he retrieved his scattered wits.

"The Captain sent me to find you," he explained.

"Here I am," she retorted patiently.

"Yes, the Captain said for me to find you and to give you this letter. He had to report to the *new* C-in-C, you see..."

In the darkness and the shadows, with her face illuminated only by the loom of lamps blinking through shattered windows on the upper floors of the hospital Jack Griffin suddenly realised that the young Maltese woman before him might not know that the Fighting Admiral was dead.

"Did you hear the news about Admiral Christopher..."

"Nobody really knows much about anything," she murmured, her voice

trailing away...

"They say he was killed in the fight to defend the headquarters," the man blurted. "Sorry, I thought you must have heard, it having happened just a couple of streets away from here...."

Marija thought she was going to start crying again.

"No, things have been busy and very strange since I got here," she said in a stranger's voice.

"There's some story going around about your friend Clara Pullman being with him when he died." Jack Griffin decided he had probably said enough and shut up.

"Clara?"

"That's what they say, sorry, I..."

Marija rose from the bench. She shook her head.

"No, you have nothing to be sorry about, Mr Griffin," she comforted him, patting his arm. "Things are so," she shrugged, "so mixed up." Her husband's father was dead and she was worrying about her own loss; she should be with Peter.

Jack Griffin pressed the envelope into her hands.

"The Captain said for me to give you this. He said if you decided to travel to Valletta after you'd read it I was to make sure you got there safely. He said for me to bring a couple of bruisers with me, just to be safe, like. It's a bit well, lawless out there. Anyway, half the deck division, well, them that's still breathing, leastways, volunteered to come with me," he chuckled with grim pride.

Marija, ever practical, suggested they walk back inside the hospital where there was light so that she could read her husband's letter; which a little while later she opened with trembling, suddenly clumsy hands.

Peter's writing was jerky and there were stray spits of ink here and there on the single sheet of bonded letter paper. The scrawled words filled both sides of the single sheet.

My Dearest Marija,

I am a little knocked about but otherwise in one piece and you must not worry about me.

My father is dead and more than half my brave Talaveras are gone or badly wounded. But that is the way of war, I suppose. Once I

knew you were unhurt nothing else really mattered.

Forgive me if this note is a mess. They mean to make my Talaveras and I heroes and to send us back to England to meet the Queen and goodness knows who else. The C-in-C wishes you to accompany me. I told AVM French that I would ask you to accompany me but that if you felt you had obligations on Malta which prevented your coming to England then he would have to jolly well lump it!

On a purely selfish note – I want to see your smile and to hold you in my arms. PO Griffin will bring you to Valletta if you can leave Mdina. Otherwise, he will act as postman for your reply.

I love you, Marija Calleja. I am and shall always be your adoring husband, Peter.

Marija started crying...

Jack Griffin, who had stepped into the corridor reappeared, his face a picture of dismay.

"I am okay. No, I'm not," she decided contrarily. "But I will be okay in a minute. I will return to Valletta with you. I don't think I can do much good here and..."

Marija left the rest unsaid.

The man she had loved since she was a teenage girl confined in a metal cage in RNH Bighi while Michael Stephens's famous ground-breaking orthopaedic surgeon uncle, and Margo Seiffert had slowly rebuilt her crushed lower body and left leg, needed her and her place was by his side. She had been stupid to allow herself to be transported so far away from Kalkara, to be separated from him when she had known that Peter was nearby.

It was a mistake that she would not lightly make ever again.

Chapter 44

22:00 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Foreign Secretary's Residence, Balliol College, Oxford

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson had greeted his visitor with a sanguine smile. He had known Sir Richard 'Dick' Goldsmith White for over twenty years and although the two men had often been professionally at odds, they had always operated on the basis of mutual respect, and oddly, trust. Oddly, because the Foreign Secretary had spent most of his career as a high-flying civil servant keen to protect his political masters from the machinations of MI5 and MI6, and Dick White had been Britain's premier spymaster for a generation.

The Foreign Secretary's wife had met the tall, elegantly attired and immaculately preened head of MI6 at the door and pecked his cheek in welcome as she had in happier times before she had departed; her presence at Balliol was a fleeting one, a hurried visit to change into a less creased frock and to 'brush up' before she went back to the Prime Minister's rooms at Corpus Christi. Crisis or no crisis her younger friend needed her, and somebody had to make sure the Thatcher twins were sheltered from the storm of chaos and dissent that was threatening to swamp the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom. There had been angry crowds in the street that afternoon and the Army had had to be called in to restore order in the city centre.

Alone in Tom Harding-Grayson's study, a cluttered oak-panelled former don's room deep within the ancient college, the Foreign Secretary's intelligence chief waited as his old friend poured two generous measures of Whiskey into ugly, utilitarian tumblers.

"Pat looks well," Dick White observed, accepting the glass he was offered.

"Yes, she and Margaret are very close. Most of the time she is acting *in loco parentis* with Carol and Mark. She's very fond of the brats. She tells me she never suspected she was the 'maternal sort'." The Foreign Secretary's voice was a little hoarse but betrayed none of the angst-ridden

despair that had brought him so low in the last forty-eight hours. "If you've come to offer your resignation," he said abruptly, 'forget it. That's not up to you or me. The Prime Minister issued an edict this afternoon about 'men who are more preoccupied with doing the honourable thing than in serving their country'. Nobody resigns. If anybody is for the chop," he grimaced, "Margaret will deliver the blow herself."

"Not even the Angry Widow can stop a man resigning, Tom," Dick White retorted with an irony that verged on insouciance.

"No? She's right, you know," Tom Grayson-Harding countered, resuming his seat in front of the low fire guttering in the hearth. "In the old days a fellow could walk away from the consequence of his actions with impunity; but not now."

"Nevertheless, I will be tendering my resignation. I have the letter in my pocket."

"Rykov?" His friend asked. "Or the whole Red Dawn nonsense?"

"Krasnaya Zarya was, and is real, Tom."

"If you say so, old man."

The spymaster sipped his drink, pausing to reflect that one of the few sectors of the pre-war economy which had survived relatively unscathed and would in any other time have boomed was the Scottish Whiskey distilling industry. In an age when potable, clean drinking water and a reliable electrical supply were at a premium, or unavailable across large parts of the country, Scotch Whiskey was so ubiquitous that but for government regulation the country would be completely awash with the stuff.

"If I had come to you and told you that, despite the evidence to the contrary and the complacent view from across the Atlantic that the Soviet Union was not a 'busted flush', you wouldn't have taken me seriously, Tom."

"The Soviet Union is a 'busted flush'," the Foreign Secretary declared. "Or at least I hope it is or we are all in big trouble."

The spymaster contemplated his Whiskey.

"In the old days you and I talked a lot about Abadan and what might happen if the Soviets attempted to force a corridor to the Indian Ocean, Tom," he reminded the other man. "Before the war the Americans, and to a lesser degree, ourselves, kept significant naval and air assets in and around the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. Iraq, Iran and Pakistan seemed militarily and politically vulnerable in those days but with our bases in the

region and with the option of quickly deploying reinforcements by air and via the Suez Canal, well," he spread his hands, "we were confident we could meet any likely threat. But now?"

Tom Harding-Grayson remained silent.

"Suez is blocked at Ismailia by vessels sunk by a Krasnaya Zarya nuclear strike," Dick White re-stated what everybody knew. "Our forces in the Persian Gulf and in other 'friendly' countries in the region have been slashed to the bone. The Americans picked up *all* their toys in Arabia and sailed home after the October War. What if the stories of Soviet troop concentrations in Azerbaijan and the reports of some kind of uprising in Tehran turn out to be something altogether more worrying, Tom?"

The Foreign Secretary groaned.

"I outlined my former 'concerns' about a Soviet push south through Iran and Iraq to the Cabinet today," he reported glumly. "The Prime Minister thought I was being hysterical. The trouble is nobody can see beyond what happened in Malta yesterday." He supped his Whiskey, meditated and met the spymaster's gaze. "The House of Commons will sit on Monday. Margaret will make a statement to the House."

Dick White read between the lines.

"Might the government fall?"

"Yes." Tom Harding-Grayson drained his glass. "Margaret wanted to get onto the first plane out to Malta. Willie Whitelaw and I had a heck of a job talking her out of it. As it is the Chief of the Defence Staff, Airey Neave and Iain Macleod are heading off to the Mediterranean as soon as they've filled in the holes in the runway at RAF Luqa. Well, a couple of aircraft carrying doctors, nurses and medical supplies will be going out first, but 'the VIPs' will be hot on their tails."

It was the turn of the Director General of the MI6 to hold his peace.

Tom Harding-Grayson was still uneasy about the decisions that had come out of that evening's War Cabinet. The general view around the table had been that the worst had happened and that the time had come to pick up the pieces. His own view remained that what had happened in the Mediterranean was a political rather than a military disaster which raised new and frightening questions about the former Soviet Union's surviving war fighting capabilities. The spectre of further significant aggressive moves on the part of an enemy they had all believed to be a 'busted flush' was suddenly back

on the table.

However, once it had been decided that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce would fly to Malta to assess the situation and if necessary – the decision would be his and his alone – act as interim Commander-in-Chief of all British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations regardless of American sensibilities, and that Airey Neave and Iain Macleod would accompany him, the debate had shifted to one of how best to limit the political damage at home and how to patch up the potential new rupture in Anglo-American relations.

"Sir David might take command in the theatre of operations?" Sir Dick White asked rhetorically. "Why are two Ministers going out to Malta?"

"Well, Airey Neave is Minister of Supply. His department's writ runs throughout the United Kingdom and the remaining dominions and dependent territories. Malta will need all the help it can get if it is going to be back on its feet as quickly as possible. Besides, the press love Airey."

"Presumable, the Minister of Information is going to Malta to talk a good war?"

"Something like that. Apparently, the MOI had a film crew with a ringside seat overlooking the Grand Harbour when the Battle for Malta kicked off. According to Iain they got pictures of HMS Talavera roaring out of port to attack the enemy."

Much of the evening's War Cabinet had been spent discussing not the war, or war fighting but the contentious subject of how best to fight the 'battle for hearts and minds'. Throughout the heated discussions the Prime Minister had been unusually aloof, perhaps a little part of her spirit broken by the loss of the man she had secretly planned to marry.

With a man like Sir Julian Christopher by her side there was no telling what she might have achieved. That she had already achieved great things and might yet go on to achieve greater things was not to be denied. But without Julian Christopher by her side, at her shoulder, the one man in Christendom she trusted with her deepest doubts and secrets, she would forever be in some way diminished. Worse, the spark of optimism and never say die unreasoning courage which had been her hallmark in the short months of her meteoric premiership seemed briefly to have been extinguished. The Angry Widow's anger, until now largely apocryphal had been transformed overnight into something bleaker, more real, deadlier and potentially self-

destructive.

“The heroes of the Battle of Malta are to be flown home to be appropriately feted,” he concluded sourly.

Sir Dick White’s handsome face was wearing a troubled frown.

Sending Sir David Luce to Malta to stabilise the situation was an eminently pragmatic decision; but if the Government planned to hide behind the ‘heroes’ of yesterday’s disaster rather than to face up to what it implied for the continued prosecution of the war in the Mediterranean, that was, well, despicable. It smacked of an unwillingness to confront the changing priorities of both the tactical and strategic situation in the region. It seemed self-evident to the spymaster, as it must to most senior military men that Great Britain was no longer ‘great enough’ to continue to wage war in an essentially ad hoc fashion. Either the country geared itself to fight an ongoing ‘total’ war or it modified its global pretensions. Operation Grantham, the hastily thrown together amphibious operation to re-conquer Cyprus had required every available ship, warplane and soldier in the Mediterranean at the cost of leaving the most strategically important British base in the theatre naked, effectively stripped of its defences. But for the fortuitous belated intervention of the US Navy and the suicidal bravery of the men of two small Royal Navy ships, British arms in the Mediterranean might have been facing an unimaginably more devastating setback. The Soviets had come within an inch of seizing the Maltese Archipelago!

If Malta had fallen into hostile hands, even for a short period the consequences were unthinkable.

Would the invaders have invited in the Italian Fascisti?

Or treated with the criminals in charge in nearby Sicily?

Or sought an alliance with the forces of the despotic military junta on Sardinia?

Or flown in more troops from Eastern Europe?

Re-fortified the islands and used the three hundred thousand or so Maltese as an expendable slave labour force?

And where would the ships committed to Operation Grantham have returned to refill their fuel bunkers, dry dock and refit?

Where would those ships have re-armed had the armouries of Malta been in enemy hands?

Those ships might have been trapped indefinitely in the Eastern

Mediterranean, bottled up in ports like Alexandria, Haifa, Beirut and Limassol, trapped and picked off at will by hostile submarines and bombing raids. Yesterday the United Kingdom had come within minutes of complete disaster; had those two small warships – the Talavera and the Yarmouth - not drawn the fire of the big Soviet ships when they did the island would almost certainly have capitulated. Even if the invaders had only seized parts of the archipelago, Malta would have ceased to be a viable fleet base for the Royal Navy. The magnitude of the disaster which had been so narrowly averted was positively nightmarish...

"But for those two ships," the Director General of MI6 said, unable to completely hide his disgust at the bungling which had left Malta so vulnerable, "we would be sitting here talking about the abandonment of Operation Grantham, the abdication of British influence in the Mediterranean and the collapse of any hope of a long-term rapprochement with the Americans? Goodness only knows what effect that would have had on our Commonwealth friends and allies! The United Kingdom would have become a laughing stock!"

"Yes," the Foreign Secretary sighed. He changed the subject: "Did you know Arkady Pavlovich Rykov was still working for the Soviets?"

"Yes. That was my working assumption all along."

Tom Harding-Grayson nodded, sat back in his chair and smiled a smile that had he not been so weary would have been unambiguously saturnine.

"And the woman he was with?"

"She was my," Dick White hesitated, "*control*. But in the way of these things..."

"Was she KGB too?"

The spymaster shook his head.

"No. Up until the time I debriefed Rykov – I don't actually think that was any more his real name than Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov, by the way – in Portugal before Christmas, *she* was a *rock*. After that I think she lost focus. It happens. My fault, really. It is always a mistake to leave an agent in place so long that they begin to believe that they are the legend they have been living. I think she began to *be* Clara Pullman. In fact, I think she began to rather like Clara Pullman. Even after Clara Pullman's feelings for Rykov became, shall we say, complicated. I don't know the full story, not yet. But I strongly suspect that at the end *she* attempted to be Clara Pullman and to live

another life. Unfortunately, this *crisis* probably occurred at exactly the time it was most critical to be in *control* of Rykov and his activities on Malta."

Tom Harding-Grayson tried to unravel the jargon, decode the convoluted assumptions underlying the spymaster's matter of fact, conversational account of how one woman's emotional turmoil might inadvertently have facilitated mayhem, and possibly, sometime in the next few days the fall of the government of which he had been proud to be a member.

"Was it worth it?" He asked curtly.

"My counterpart in the Security Service will be better able to speak to that in the United Kingdom," the Director General of the Secret Intelligence Service replied. "I gather that despite Sir Roger's misgivings about the information I was able to pass onto him that MI5 has spent the last forty-eight hours sweeping up and generally eradicating Red Dawn's tendrils in the United Kingdom. My people have been using rather more direct and less *judicial* methods on Malta, in Gibraltar, Portugal, Spain and in Beirut." He ran a hand through his thinning fair hair. "As to whether it was *worth it*? Time will tell."

Tom Harding-Grayson's disgust was readily transparent.

"So, when the Prime Minister asks me what the SIS knew about the Malta fiasco," he snarled. "What do I tell her? That MI6 could have pulled the trigger and eradicated Red Dawn at any time but didn't act until Malta was burning?"

Dick White was impassive.

"What you tell the Prime Minister is your affair, Tom," he remarked, urbanely unflustered. "What I have just told you is that the Malta 'fiasco' provided my organisation, and MI5 in England, the opportunity to roll up legacy KGB networks left behind after the October War and several post-war Red Dawn-type networks inimical to our cause. The attempt by those networks to co-ordinate, in the main apparently impromptu, terroristic attacks and assassinations in the United Kingdom, Gibraltar and Malta brought them out into the open where *my* people could *deal* with them. Yes, I could have had Rykov eliminated at any time in the last few months but what would that have achieved? Yes, there were suggestions, indications that Red Dawn, Krasnaya Zarya might attempt in some way to disrupt our operations in the Mediterranean. No, I did not know that Malta was to be the subject of a major naval bombardment and an attempted airborne invasion any more than

Rykov or my *control* on the archipelago *knew* that it was going to happen. And frankly, even if I had had some prior warning of that attack, would you or your colleagues in Government have taken me seriously?"

Given that Tom Harding-Grayson had suspected that the original reports some months ago of the very existence of Krasnaya Zarya was no more than MI6 hyperbole he hardly trusted himself to answer.

"Good luck when you explain all that to the Prime Minister, Dick," he concluded with grim resignation.

Chapter 45

23:05 Hours
Saturday 4th April 1964
Emergency Command Centre, Marsa Creek, Malta.

Tents and lean to awnings had been pitched and stretched over every available piece of flat ground and two Ton class minesweepers – HMS Coniston and HMS Repton – which had been brought around from Msida Creek where they had escaped yesterday's bombardment with only relatively minor splinter damage, and moored close inshore at dusk so that their engines and generators could provide electrical power to the rapidly expanding Emergency Command Centre in the old disused seaplane hangar and the adjacent requisitioned dock buildings.

The main deck, bridge and crew spaces of the two four hundred-ton vessels were now also being used as accommodation and offices for the men and women who were arriving all the time to swell the headquarters staff. Many of the newcomers were walking wounded, others still a little dazed, everybody was dusty and dirty and exhausted.

After her journey through the ruins and the chaos of the streets of Mdina, past the still smouldering wreckage of Ta'Qali airfield, and into the devastation of Floriana, Marija had been a little surprised by the atmosphere of calm at Marsa Creek. Everybody seemed to know what they were doing, nobody was running, rushing and although practically every face was ashen with weariness and shock, there were no raised voices, and everything seemed unnaturally *business-like*.

Jack Griffin had done the talking at security barriers.

"PO Griffin, *Talavera*," he had proclaimed proudly. "Escorting Commander Christopher's wife. Orders of the C-in-C!"

It transpired that Air Vice-Marshal French had left instructions that he was to be informed when 'Mrs Calleja-Christopher arrives safely at Marsa Creek'. However, the C-in-C had been 'called away briefly' and Marija was impatient – actually she was very nearly insensibly distraught with anxiety by then – to throw herself into her husband's arms.

So, it was that Jack Griffin had accompanied her onboard HMS Repton, where Peter Christopher was haltingly dictating – periodically looking to Talavera's dishevelled bearded Canadian navigator, Lieutenant Dermot O'Reilly to confirm this or that detail - his After Action Report of HMS Talavera's part in the Battle of Malta to the minesweeper's chief writer. A fourth man was present in the Repton's captain's day cabin, an aging four-ringer who had the look of a librarian rather than a warrior. It transpired that he was Captain Lionel Faulkes, the senior Royal Navy officer attached to Daniel French's hastily re-organised Malta Command Staff.

Husband and wife – the one discarding any pretence of a British stiff upper lip, the other oblivious to the witnesses – flew into each other's arms. Marija threw her arms around her husband's neck; he enveloped her in his embrace and as often seemed to happen, her feet did not touch the ground for many, many seconds thereafter.

"I thought you were going to your death, husband!" Marija gasped breathlessly, still not caring what the others saw or heard. "Rosa, my sister and I, we saw Talavera racing out of the Grand Harbour..."

"Right about then I was worrying about you, my love!"

Marija's tears came in a new flood; she buried her face in his shoulder as gently the Peter put her down, her feet settling on the deck.

"Margo is dead," she blurted.

He held her crushingly close.

Husband and wife slowly, slowly became aware that they were alone in the cabin and that the other men who had been present when Marija arrived had quietly shut the hatch behind them on their way out.

Peter Christopher looked into his wife's moist tawny brown eyes and was suddenly, sickeningly struck by the enormity of what, in yesterday's madness, he had very nearly lost forever. For the first time he experienced a stabbing pang of doubt.

He had believed he was going to his death.

Had it been really been worth it?

"Things *out there*," he muttered, "got to be a bit *sticky*," he added, the words not wanting to be spoken. "After we torpedoed the first two big ships the third cruiser coming down from the north had our range and we were, well, dead in the water by then and in a frightful fix. If the Yanks hadn't turned up when they did, I don't know what would have happened..."

Actually, they both knew exactly what would have happened; he and all his men would be dead now.

Marija sniffed, broke from his embrace and wiped her face and nose with a dusty sleeve. Nobody in the whole wide world knew – apart from her - how close the man she loved was to breaking down and completely falling to pieces; and she was *not* about to let it happen. Her expression became defiant, her smile determined even if her eyes remained mirrors of worry.

"You would have done what you had to do, husband," she informed him simply. For the first time she realised he was wearing an ill-fitting *foreign* uniform. Even if the uniform had been tailored specifically for him it still would not have suited him. "Yesterday it was your duty to try and get yourself killed. Each time you do something brave and stupid like that I will try very hard to forgive you."

Peter Christopher blinked into Marija's almond-eyed gaze, saw the mischief bubbling deep in the limpid pools of her eyes and grinned a very, very sheepish grin.

"But only if I return?"

"Yes!" Marija declared, frowning more severely than she meant. "How would I forgive you if you did not return?"

The man was regaining his senses.

"Will you come with me to England?"

"Of course, I will go with you to England! I am your wife!"

Peter Christopher instantly felt guilty to have asked the question in the first place. Marija saw this and took pity on him. She surveyed his bruised face, the newly stitched gash on his left cheek, the hastily cleaned up nicks above his eyebrows and the still oozing clumsily sutured wound to his scalp hidden somewhere in his matted fair hair. In retrospect she realised she must have hurt him more than somewhat with the passion of her recent hug. She guessed her idiotically courageous husband was probably a mass of black and blue under his shirt. She noted also that he seemed to be standing on only one leg.

"I think," Marija decided, "that today is one of those days when you and I are both as sore and aching as each other, husband?"

"I think you may be right, wife," the man concurred ruefully.

Marija giggled.

"Have you heard if your parents are okay?" Peter asked.

She shook her head. “No.”

Rachel Piotrowska, the woman he and Marija had known as Clara Pullman had told him how Margo Seiffert had died.

“I know what happened to Margo.”

Marija set her face against the world for a moment; she replied blankly, neutrally with a rhetorical question.

“Do you know what happened to your father?”

Peter nodded. Margo Seiffert’s death, his father’s death, and so much of the misery and grief of the last day would be things they locked away until they were strong enough to face them.

“I spoke to Clara Pullman,” the man explained. “It turns out that that’s not her real name; I was right about her being a spook all along,” he hesitated, his weary thoughts drifting. “Anyway, she was with my father when he died. He was shot just after the Soviets stormed the headquarters. Just one bullet,” he touched his chest, “but it must have nicked something important, an artery perhaps. There was nothing anybody could do. He lived long enough to know we’d won the battle.”

Marija went up on tiptoes and planted a wet kiss on her husband’s lips.

“When do we go to England?”

“Tomorrow or the day after. The plan keeps changing.” He waved at the typewriter on the small desk behind them. “AVM French’s people are in a funk to get Talavera’s After-Action Report cobbled together before the first VIPs fly in tomorrow afternoon or evening. I keep remembering things which ought to be included. Fellows who ought to be mentioned in despatches; that sort of thing. I thought they’d be more interested than they are in my recommendations for gongs. Did you know that it was your little brother, Joe, who was the chap who actually fired the torpedoes that hit those two big ships?”

“Petty Officer Griffin talks of little else, husband,” Marija confirmed, her tone soothing. She had recovered her composure and recognised that it was too early to expect the man she loved to be fully himself. After what he had been through it might take weeks or months, he might never again be exactly the man she had known before the battle.

Marija would have whispered comfort and sympathy, clung to him but there was a quiet knock at the door and she knew the Royal Navy wanted Peter – *her* Peter - back. She was torn by the helpless look that flickered in

his face.

She laid and hand on his chest over his heart.

“I will be here waiting for you when you have finished your work, husband.”

Chapter 46

23:30 Hours (GMT)
Saturday 4th April 1964
Prime Minister's Rooms, Corpus Christi College, Oxford

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson was as shocked as his wife had warned him he would be when he set eyes on the Prime Minister. She had not slept for forty-eight hours, her eyes were red-rimmed, her pallor grey and her normally perfectly coiffured hair was – by her own exacting standards – distinctly careworn. But that was not the most worrying thing; all the fight seemed to have gone out of her.

The Defence Secretary, William Whitelaw rose from his chair as the Foreign Secretary entered the room, nodding a weary greeting to his friend.

"Willie has been filling me in on the latest news from the Mediterranean, Tom," Margaret Thatcher explained, her tone just minutely diffident. "And explaining a little more about his plan to blockade the Falkland Islands with submarines."

The man in question gave the newcomer a somewhat wan look.

"I had a trans-Atlantic chat with Bob McNamara," he reported. "I've done my best to quash this nonsense about the First Sea Lord being despatched to the Mediterranean to become the Supreme Allied Commander," Willie – only his enemies called him 'William' – Whitelaw went on. "The Americans are still livid about it." He shook his head. "Sorry, I don't need to tell you that. You're the poor fellow who has had to mend the fences."

Notwithstanding she was two decades his junior Margaret Thatcher was viewing her Foreign Secretary with maternally concerned eyes.

"You look all in, Tom. You must sit down. We'll see if somebody can rustle up a nice mug of chocolate, or perhaps, Horlicks for you."

Tom Harding-Grayson was glad to take the weight off his tired and aching frame. He had been trying to decide whether he ought to recommend the summary dismissal of Sir Dick White to the Prime Minister when Walter Brenckmann had called to update him on the latest news from Philadelphia.

Somebody at the US State Department – of all places – had put out a press release confirming that quote '*following the breakdown of the chain of command in the Mediterranean the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom has demanded the appointment of Admiral Sir David Luce as Allied Supreme Commander in Europe and the Middle East*'.

"You've reassured our American friends that there is no substance to the reports about Sir David's mission to Malta?" The Prime Minister asked.

"Bill Fulbright knows the stories are nonsense, but..."

Where there ought to have been anger and a steely glint in the Angry Widow's eyes there was mild, housewifely forbearance.

"Willie thinks I should speak to President Kennedy?"

"I agree. We have to do something to clear the air, Margaret."

"What would I say to him, Tom? Now look here, Jack. Your boys were supposed to be patrolling the waters around Malta but Admiral Detweiller decided to play war games two hundred miles to the west and left his allies in the lurch?"

Forty-eight hours ago, Margaret Thatcher would have said it with venom and excoriating sarcasm; tonight, she spoke with tired resignation.

"Yes, I'd recommend you to say exactly that to President Kennedy," her friend concurred wryly.

William Whitelaw gave the Foreign Secretary a quizzical look.

Tom Harding-Grayson shrugged.

Neither the disaster in the Mediterranean nor the humiliation in the South Atlantic had done such irreparable damage to Anglo-American relations as the ongoing campaign of misinformation being waged over the 'Supreme Commander Question'. Make no mistake; a well-orchestrated 'campaign' was being waged in the pages of American newspapers, across syndicated continental television and radio networks and from the back rooms of the House of Representatives. As many as a score of Senators and Congressmen, mostly but not exclusively Republican, were out on the stomp in Philadelphia and their voices were drowning out the relatively feeble cries of 'foul' coming from the British Embassy and a State Department Press Office that literally, to J. William Fulbright's incandescent rage, did not seem to know if it was coming or going. What made the situation worse was that the President had yet to utter a single word on the subject and would not until he 'returned to Philly' sometime in the next few hours.

The whole thing was a dreadful comedy of errors compounded on the UAUK side by an exhausted middle ranking official in Iain Macleod's Ministry of Information. Responding to the American furore a briefing note had been issued to the British press concerning the proposed visit to Malta by Sir David Luce on a morale boosting inspection and fact-finding mission. However, the note had been badly worded and this, in combination with several uncorrected typographical errors and omissions had failed to unambiguously deny that the First Sea Lord was being send to Malta to take command of *All Allied Forces*. The American East Coast media circus had fallen on the Ministry of Information's 'note' like a colony of vultures and had been picking over the entrails of the unfortunate document ever since.

In Philadelphia the damage was already done.

It made no difference that the United States Ambassador to the Court of Blenheim Palace, Walter Brenckmann, fully understood what had happened and that there had never been any underhand British plot to install 'one of their own' in command of 'American GIs'.

In Philadelphia the Anglophobes who had never wanted the Washington rapprochement of last December were on the war path; there was fresh talk in Congressional circles of re-applying some of the sanctions and prohibitions to cut off the recently restored food, fuel, drugs and munitions lifelines across the North Atlantic. It seemed Britain's enemies in America had been patiently awaiting their moment, keeping their powder dry for just such an opportunity to turn the screw.

It was a doomsday scenario that Tom Harding-Grayson had not foreseen. He could conceive of nothing that would be so injurious to the long-term interests of his country than a new split with the United States. Once driven back into its former isolation America might wallow in its own troubles for a generation.

"I can't say any of that to Jack Kennedy, Tom," Margaret Thatcher objected. "Not right now, anyway. Perhaps, tomorrow when I have had a little rest?"

What terrified Tom Harding-Grayson was that she did not sound as if she cared one way or the other. It was as if she had divorced herself from things, lost interest.

"Yes, you should rest, Margaret," Willie Whitelaw agreed, rising to his feet and gesturing for the Foreign Secretary to leave ahead of him.

The Prime Minister made no sign of noticing their departure.

Chapter 47

01:50 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Married Quarters, Kalkara, Malta

Marija and Peter had turned the downstairs living, or as it was more usually called in Malta, the ‘family’ room of the small house into a bedroom when Rosa had been discharged from hospital in Mdina. There was a second small bed room upstairs but the stairs would have been a problem for her at that time because she was still in plaster. A single wood-framed cot had been acquired and squeezed into the space beneath the window and in the weeks since she had moved back to Kalkara, Rosa had begun to make the room her own. By some miracle the window had not blown in, or out, and the room had survived the bombardment completely untouched.

Rosa had pulled up a chair and watched Alan Hannay sleeping on her bed. She had cleaned up his head wounds – two superficial but nasty gashes to his scalp, applied a little liniment to his bruised mottled right cheek and persuaded him to take off his shirt, so that she could liberally apply more of the same calming balm to his bruised, literally black and blue, ribs – and afterwards he had needed no encouragement to stretch out on her cot.

“This is awfully good of you,” he had muttered in embarrassment and promptly fallen asleep.

Rosa had lost track of time as she watched over him. He murmured incomprehensibly in his unconsciousness, perhaps reliving the horrors he had witnessed on HMS Talavera’s burning deck. She had wasted no time worrying about the fact that she hardly knew the young naval officer; that they had never actually walked out together, only ever really met in passing and never had the opportunity to privately talk to each other about anything in particular.

He had looked at her in *that* special way from the start. The first time they met she had been a bandaged mess, in plaster and yet he had still looked at her in *that* very special way. He had always looked at her as if she was *special* and nobody had ever done that before.

She had been slow to reciprocate but by the time she was recovering and able to move – albeit with great clumsiness, difficulty and no little pain – around St Catherine's Hospital for Women, Alan who regularly looked in to say 'hello' to Marija, had begun to seek her out. Again, just to say 'hello'. Now and then they would pass a few minutes together, usually in the company of other women, nurses and patients, in the courtyard before he had to rush off on his latest errand.

He had of course, been Admiral Christopher's flag lieutenant in those days, with practically no time for himself, let alone anybody else. Less than a week ago – although it seemed longer, a scene from another age – in the moments before he drove Peter Christopher to the docks and HMS Talavera left harbour for three days of sea trials he had shyly suggested they might 'go out for dinner' on his return. Rosa's heart had very nearly failed her; by then she had been hopelessly smitten, hanging on his every word, longing for his next passing visit and his every spoken syllable turned her previously cold, lonely world upside down.

Now at last she had Alan Hannay to herself.

The day had turned to evening, and then night had fallen.

It was a clear night and Rosa's eyes had adjusted to the gloom.

The man stirred and blinked at Rosa.

She had offered him a glass of water and he had drunk deep.

She had taken his hand stroked and squeezed it comfortingly.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Don't know what came over me," he yawned, his thoughts still scrambled. "How long have I..."

"Several hours. You were exhausted," Rosa cooed.

"I suppose I must have been," he conceded, attempting to prop himself on an unsteady elbow. He slumped back. "I thought I was dreaming but I wasn't."

Rosa was proud that she had never been anything other than *proper* in her *relations* before and during her unhappy marriage. She had not used her husband's obvious physical indifference to her as an excuse to consider, or even contemplate unfaithfulness. She had never so much as flirted with another man. She knew she was attractive to men; the boys had always circled her at school. Yet her husband whom she had convinced herself she loved had, after coldly, mechanically consummating their marriage abjured all physical contact with her for long periods. Until the war he had

occasionally come to her bed but after each of those cold-hearted couplings she had felt used, unhappier and less sated than ever; but now her husband was gone and she was a free woman again, if not in the sight of the law then certainly, in her own head.

“I almost lost you,” she said timidly, in a tone so tremulous that had she not formed the words in her own mouth she would not have recognised the stranger’s voice.

“Sorry,” Alan Hannay grinned lopsidedly. “I’ll try to be more careful next time.”

Rosa was in a daze, her thoughts churning.

She stood up and in an ever-deepening trance collected the hem of her dress in her hands, lifted it over her hips and over her head in a single dreamy movement. She paused, feeling her face flush with heat. Her mouth was dry and she did not trust herself to speak. She did not dare to meet the man’s gaze as she unhooked her bra and slipped off her knickers.

“Rosa, I...”

She reached for his hand, pressed it to her belly.

“I want this,” she blurted in breathless whisper.

The man had levered himself off the bed, self-consciously discarded his borrowed trousers without daring to look again at the woman and together they had, awkwardly, mindful of each other’s minor fresh and half-healed injuries eventually and in a shroud of almost suffocating embarrassment arranged themselves uncomfortably, nakedly, face to face in the narrow cot, he on his left side, she on her right and although touching each other involuntarily somehow, remained impossibly a little apart like the innocents abroad that they both for all the madness of their lives, remained.

“Gosh,” Alan Hannay confessed, “look, I don’t know how to say this, but... You should know I’ve never done this before.”

They had contrived to lie together in the darkness for some minutes barely touching.

“Never?”

“I was a bishop’s son, you see,” he explained lowly. “And until lately most girls of my acquaintance thought I was rather a swot. Putting on the Queen’s uniform rather improved things but then the war came along, and well, what with one thing and another I really didn’t have much time or reason to socialise, or to meet girls. And I well; basically, I never was the

sort of chap to take liberties..."

Tentatively, Rosa pressed her face to his, sought out his mouth and kissed him. She was trembling with something akin to terror for moment, shocked that she could be acting so brazenly but all those fears and doubts faded in an instant.

He kissed her back, as uncertainly, their lips pressed, open together.

Her mouth was soft, warm, wet.

Rosa tried to draw him against her but he flinched, could not suppress a groan.

"Sorry," he moaned, "I don't remember much about it but the Master at Arms said I fell off the dashed stern house quite early in the battle. I think I probably cracked a rib."

"You fell off?" Rosa demanded hoarsely in horror.

Alan Hannay realised that he had stopped feeling like an idiot.

"Well, now that I think about it I think I was more a case of being 'blown off' it. I landed on a pile of floats, cork-filled things that had just been spread all over the deck by a shell that must have gone straight through the stern without going off..."

Rosa shut his mouth with a new, gently lingering kiss that went on and on and on until the lovers had no choice but to come up, gasping for air as if they had been holding their breath under water for several minutes. Her fingers cautiously roved his misused torso, and then hesitantly, his loins. His hands responded, moving wonderingly over her breasts and belly but were strangely shy of delving lower until she guided his fingers between her thighs.

Thereafter, things happened of their own accord. He seemed impossibly hard as she sought to draw him inside her. Momentarily, it seemed neither he nor she could couple. She squirmed onto her back and he entered her, sank inside her and she held him.

Their pains went away.

Later they lay together beneath the sheets, melded as one, breathing the same breaths, safe from the nightmare of a war which had so nearly torn them apart before they had ever had a chance to discover what was meant to be.

And then they slept the sleep of the young and the pure of heart and the just.

Chapter 48

05:49 Hours (Local)
Sunday 5th April 1964
Mehrabad Air Base, Tehran, Iran

“Stop looking at your bloody watches, boys!” Colonel Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik, the commanding officer of the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment barked with jovial brutality. Already the stars twinkling between the drifting clouds of smoke were beginning to wink out; soon the pre-dawn twilight would lighten the darkened airfield. It would not have been lost on the men manning the forward defence line that their commanding officer had walked arrogantly across nearly a hundred metres of completely open ground – as if he personally ‘owned’ every millimetre of those one hundred metres - to join them in their shallow entrenchments. A show of bravado went a long way even with seasoned regulars; officers who failed to or were unwilling to lead their men from the front had always been, and would always be, a waste of space in the Red Army.

Kurochnik was a solidly build man who shrugged off the onset of early middle age with the rugged pugnacity that he commanded his elite paratroopers. He had trained the men around him harshly, mercilessly but the ferocity of his training regime was the reason most of the men around him were still alive. Every one of his veteran troopers was a match for five or ten of the lazy, indolent amateurs the Iranian Army had clumsily and incompetently thrown at them. It was only in the last couple of hours that the enemy had given any real indication of an understanding of the fundamental principles of manoeuvre and concentration and belatedly brought up armour to support his conscript infantrymen.

Everybody around Kurochnik instinctively ducked at the whistling passage of a 105-millimetre round from the long gun of one of the Iranian’s British supplied Centurion tanks. The shell slammed into the control tower five hundred metres to his right.

“Fucking idiots!” He snorted contemptuously. If the numerically superior Iranian forces massing in the buildings beyond the southern fence of

the air base had known what they were doing they would have started lobbing mortars into his positions by now. What was the point of bringing up tanks if your infantry commander had still not taken his thumb out of his arse? If the enemy had the balls to attack now they would lose a lot of men but they would quickly over run his lightly held outer perimeter. Konstantin Kurochnik had no respect for enemies who were afraid to die.

Ten minutes ago, his men had put a shoulder-launched rocket propelled anti-tank round into the turret of a Centurion that had been so unwise as to expose itself. The explosion had been satisfyingly loud and bright in the night but the tank had been undamaged and backed into dead ground a minute later.

Centurions were bastards to take out!

If he had learned anything that night it was that Centurions were two times as tough as they had any right to be!

At a guess twice as hard to knock out as a standard T-62.

He had read the reports about the way the British had fought their Centurions back in the Korean War; not really believed what he was reading. But now he had actually seen a Centurion in action with his own eyes. How the fuck could a twenty-year-old design handled by such imbeciles still be so fucking hard to knock out?

Another 105-millimetre round whistled past to harmlessly demolish another section of the abandoned control tower.

“In eight minutes!” Kurochnik yelled. “At zero-five-five-eight hours shoot your last RPGs and empty your mags into the enemy lines, throw out a screen of smoke grenades and run like fuck through the inner perimeter line and don’t stop running until you reach the pick-up point!” He took another breath. “Any questions, boys?”

There were no questions.

Kurochnik waited a few seconds before climbing out of the trench and marching, as upright as if he was on parade in Red Square on May Day towards the rear.

His men did not know how hot this place was going to get in a little over a couple of hours’ time. But his boys were nobody’s fools; they guessed that time was running out.

A single bullet pinged on a slab of nearby tarmac.

Colonel Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik did not break step.

Chapter 49

03:58 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Bomb Shelter No.3, Floriana Bastion, Malta

The bunker was cool, dank and stank of sweat and worse. Electric lights had been hurriedly installed and the faint stink of a diesel generator chugging wearily in the darkness outside the entrance seeped into the depths of the old, half-forgotten bomb shelter reactivated less than twelve hours ago to accommodate sleeping quarters and additional 'secure' working spaces for the joint Anglo-American operations staff set up by Air Vice-Marshal French and his United States Navy counterpart Vice Admiral Clarey.

The British had started excavating the sections of the nearby Lascardis War Rooms complex below Valletta which had been partially collapsed by the B-52 strike in December a couple of months ago; mainly to recover the bodies of the dead rather than in an attempt to bring the warren of tunnels and caverns back into use. In the meantime, other long neglected and shut up bomb shelters had been surveyed and readied in case of need. Sections of Bomb Shelter No. 3 had been condemned just after the 1945 war and permanently closed off with concrete plugs; but the caves remaining were still capable of housing and sheltering – albeit for brief periods – several hundred people.

"You must rest, husband," Marija decided.

Peter Christopher was too exhausted to argue; even had he been of a mood to argue with his wife. In his as yet short married life he had already worked out that he would not be arguing overmuch with Marija, not now, not ever, about anything in particular or general.

Finding a gloomy, private corner Marija had laid one of the blankets they had been handed at the entrance to the shelter on the rock floor. Stiffly, she had lowered herself into a sitting position with her back to the wall. She patted her lap and her husband obediently lay down so that she could cradle his sore head. Despite the discomfort of the uneven floor he had slept almost immediately, unaware of the blankets spread over him by women from the

section of WRENS in charge of the shelter.

Marija watched over her husband.

She felt a little guilty abandoning her friends in Mdina. Also, for so meekly surrendering St Catherine's Hospital to the tender mercies of the Military Administration: Margo would never have *run away* or surrendered *anything* but she was not Margo; any more than she was just a younger replica of her own Mama, whom she loved dearly and fondly respected despite her old-fashioned, quirky and stiflingly limited perspective on the outside World. Margo had had big dreams; her mother no ambitions beyond her immediate family, her husband and her children. Although first and foremost Marija planned to be a good wife and mother; she wanted to live her own life and when she had lived that life for however long it lasted in this changed new post-cataclysm World, she hoped to have as few regrets and as few unanswered questions as possible. Wherever Peter went, she would follow.

Marija distractedly stroked her husband's head, slowly losing herself in her tiredness and her thoughts.

"Excuse me, Mrs Calleja-Christopher."

Marija realised she must have dropped off to sleep.

She looked up into the youthful face of a man who seemed very familiar. It irked her not to be able to immediately put a name to his face. He had spoken in Maltese, quietly, respectfully and a little sheepishly.

"Forgive me. We met once or twice when you were leading the Women of Malta protests outside the gates to Manoel Island last year," the man who was about her own age explained. "You probably don't remember me..."

"Mr Boffa," Marija recollected, without confidence. "Paul, isn't it?"

"Yes," the man agreed with relief. He squatted down so that his eyes were on a level with Marija's. "I was honoured to be permitted inside the Cathedral at your wedding. Sir Julian arranged for me to have a pass on account of my being the editor of *The Times of Malta*. Well, the temporary editor, the board hasn't actually met to confirm my post or anything very much at all really this year. After the bombing raid in December some colleagues and I decided to try to keep the paper in print, and your good friend the late Lieutenant Siddall pulled strings to get us back into production soon after Sir Julian arrived in Malta. You wrote a fortnightly diary about the Women of Malta for my predecessor as editor until the bombing in December

but I was only a stringer in those days...”

The visitor realised he was talking too much and shut up.

Marija waved him to sit near her on the floor. She also put her finger to her lips and glanced down at her fitfully sleeping husband.

“A stringer?” She asked in a whisper.

“I was paid per column inch of script that appeared in the paper. I wasn’t even a full-time journalist in those days...”

“Oh,” Marija murmured. She looked down at her sleeping husband’s face. “I don’t think my brave husband has slept for at least two days,” she explained, proudly, tenderly stroking his face.

“This is awkward,” the other man confessed. “I feel like I am intruding...”

Marija studied Paul Boffa. The stubble on his young chin was more down than beard. Like her he was a Maltese native who had seen far too much grief and suffering in his as yet half-lived life. They were both of the generation who might yet hold the future of their home islands in their hands.

“I did not know that my father-in-law,” she involuntarily crossed herself at mention of her husband’s slain father, “was involved in helping your paper. But,” she smiled sadly, “I should not be surprised. I read the story you printed about my brother Samuel being an innocent pawn in that dreadful business with the sinking of HMS Torquay. I wondered at the time if Sir Julian was behind that.”

“All the rumours about your brother must have been horrible for you, Mrs...”

“Please. We are hiding in a bomb shelter and our islands are in ruins around us. I am *Marija*. May I call you Paul?”

“Yes, yes, of course. I would be...” Paul Boffa was about to say that he would be ‘honoured’ to call her Marija. He thought better of it at the last moment, perhaps realising that she would tease him for his cupidity. This he knew because her kind smile told him she saw right through him. “Air Vice-Marshal French’s information officer said it would be all right if I talked to you and Commander Christopher,” the flustered journalist went on. “But this obviously isn’t a good time...”

Marija took pity on her compatriot.

“You may talk to me. If he wakes up my husband will talk to you. For him it would be rude not to talk to you. For me, well, I chose to talk to you

because I want my husband's story to be told *first* in Malta."

This utterly perplexed the youthful editor of *The Times of Malta*.

"I was fortunate to get to know my husband's father a little. The first time we met I was a little afraid he would think of me as less than his son deserved. *A grasping little Maltese hussy*. I even suspected that he might put obstacles between us. Instead, he 'approved' of me so much that I think I became his 'daughter-in-law in waiting' even before I met Peter."

Paul Boffa was struggling with his shorthand pad.

"I didn't sharpen my pencil," he apologised.

Marija giggled, her husband blinked awake and she stroked his brow. He slept again.

"Today Peter and I belong to Malta but tomorrow," she hunched her shoulders resignedly, "that will be over, for a while at least. So, we will talk now while we can."

"Is it really true that you and Commander Christopher never met until HMS Talavera came to Malta?"

"Yes. We were pen friends from when we were thirteen."

"When you were thirteen you were still..."

"In hospital. At Bighi, mostly held together with metal," she recollected ruefully. She stroked her husband's sleeping cheek. "I think I loved him from the start, but it was different for him. I think he loved me for a long time but never knew it until the night of the war..."

"Love you..." The unconscious man murmured complacently.

Marija and the journalist were silent for some seconds.

Around them quiet voices echoed down the corridors, distantly a typewriter clattered, and the far away rumble of the diesel generators provided a continual, low-level background hum.

"The funny thing is," Marija went on, "whenever I heard Peter had been involved in this or that battle I was never surprised. When his ship was bombed in the Atlantic off Cape Finisterre I thought I might have lost him. I fainted when I heard he was all right. Then there was that fight off Lampedusa when poor Captain Penberthy lost his foot and Peter had to take command of the whole squadron, and later the dreadful struggle to save the USS Enterprise. I sort of expected him to be, I don't know, heroic. Because he just is. Heroic, I mean. My sister, Rosa and I, we were high on the hill above Kalkara on Friday when HMS Talavera raced out of the Grand

Harbour like a greyhound. The big shells were landing all around her and she was running up all the flags that her people could find in her flag lockers; and she looked so brave and so small as she disappeared from sight behind Fort Ricasoli..."

Marija's voice tailed away, she was a little embarrassed by how dreamy her words must have sounded.

"A little later I felt death. I think that was when my friend Margo Seiffert was murdered but at the time I was afraid it was my husband." She wiped away a tear, sniffed. "God is sometimes merciful."

"You *felt* death?"

"How could one not feel it at such a time?"

Paul Boffa was too shell shocked to pursue this further.

"I am intruding," Paul Boffa mused aloud. "I will leave you in peace. But first, may I ask a last question, Marija?"

"Of course, Paul."

"They are saying that Admiral Christopher ordered your husband to save his ship?" He shrugged in an agony of indecision. "That he told your husband to save himself and his ship? Is that true?"

"No," Marija replied. She spoke now in English. "Peter told me that his father's actual order was: '*Cut your lines and go, Peter.*'" She let this sink in. "And then Admiral Christopher added: '*get out to sea and await further orders'*. But there were no further orders. So, my husband interpreted Sir Julian's orders in the way any destroyer captain in the Royal Navy would have interpreted them. He steamed at full speed towards the enemy."

Paul Boffa looked at the woman in mute astonishment.

Marija seized the moment.

"Did you know my little brother Joe was onboard HMS Talavera in the battle?" This was self-evidently news to the journalist. "You see the Talavera left the Grand Harbour so suddenly he was not able to go ashore. And then the near misses as the ship was escaping the Grand Harbour killed or wounded many of the torpedo crew. So, Joe had to work the torpedo tubes and fire the torpedoes that sank those two big ships that where shelling Malta."

If Paul Boffa had been struck speechless by her previous revelations he was now briefly dumbfounded, stunned very much in the fashion of a man who has just been hit on the head with a lump of two by four.

She had just handed him the biggest scoop of his career.

Marija viewed him quizzically.

“Your mouth is hanging open, Paul,” she observed sympathetically.

“Can I print that?” He asked anxiously. “I mean all of it?”

Marija nodded, she understood perfectly why the new C-in-C’s men had sent the youthful, unwary, idealistic editor of *The Times of Malta* to her.

“Even the private things,” she emphasised because she knew that her days as a comparatively anonymous dutiful Maltese daughter and wife were over forever.

In the morning a very different life awaited her and the man she loved.

Chapter 50

09:25 Hours (GMT)
Sunday 5th April 1964
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire, England

Iain Macleod was in a vile mood. His back was playing up, his old thigh wound from 1940 was making him walk like the Hunchback of Notre Dame and he was about to board an RAF plane – on which smoking was prohibited – and therefore faced the prospect of the best part of four to five hours without the solace of a single cigarette. The cherry on top of his personal cake of woe was the news which had come in overnight from Cyprus; the modern frigate HMS Leander had been torpedoed and sunk twenty miles west of Pathos, and the enemy on land, having previously retreated into an enclave in the north-east of the island had mounted a local counter attack which had inflicted over a hundred casualties on two companies of Scots Guards and destroyed several armoured vehicles. Moreover, ambushes by 'stay behind' guerrilla forces had begun to disrupt the activities of lines of communication troops and to threaten depots as far back as the beachheads. At least thirty people, mostly civilians had been killed in these 'nuisance' attacks, necessitating the withdrawal, or the holding back of hundreds of desperately needed troops from the front line.

"It is all very well for the Chief of the General Staff to complacently turn around and say he expected this sort of thing to happen all along," the Minister of Information complained irritably, "but we simply can't afford to allow ourselves to get bogged down in a war of attrition in Cyprus!"

The Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir David Luce had spoken to General Richard Amyatt Hull before setting out for Brize Norton. Since the October War he had learned to treat whatever a politician said about making war with a very large pinch of salt.

"General Hull is anything but 'complacent' about the situation on Cyprus. It would have been astonishing if we had not encountered any 'stay behind' forces, Minister," he observed tersely. "Likewise, the enemy has every right to attempt to counter attack us at a time and place of his choosing

and, unfortunately to do his level best to sink our ships. We are fighting a war, sir. Things go wrong in war. Unexpected things happen and people are killed and wounded. That is the nature of the thing."

This morning there was impatience and barely veiled disappointment in his voice and his customary imperturbable urbanity was audibly strained.

"Yes," Iain Macleod snapped angrily, "coming from the man who left Malta undefended that's a bit rich!"

The Minister of Information had limped half-a-dozen paces farther towards the Comet 4 jetliner waiting at it hardstand in a pool of arc lights fifty yards away before he realised that he and his companion, Airey Neave were alone. With a growl of displeasure, he turned to confront the lean silhouette of the First Sea Lord.

"Sir David?" He asked peremptorily.

Airey Neave had taken his friend's elbow.

"Iain, old man," he said, a scion of reasonableness. "That's not fair. Neither you nor I was on the spot in Malta..."

The First Sea Lord had not moved.

"Sir," he said with icy dignity. "Have you actually taken the trouble to read the reports – any of the reports – that I had delivered to your private office during the course of the early hours of this morning?"

"Not of all them. I've skimmed through most of them. I'm a busy man..."

This was no lie; in addition to being the Minister of Information and thus the Unity Administration of the United Kingdom's chief official propagandist, he also held the post of leader of the House of Commons, and the onerous, somewhat poisoned chalice of the Chairmanship of what remained of the Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

"We are *all* busy men these days, sir," the man who spoke for the Chiefs of Staff of the three armed services observed tartly. His tone stated rather than suggested that if a man under his command had attempted to use the 'I'm a busy man' excuse to justify not being on the ball then very severe consequences would certainly have ensued.

"But for young Peter Christopher's actions in first drawing the enemy fire, thus allowing our weakened garrison on Malta to achieve local concentration against the main enemy airborne forces around Mdina and

Luqa; and secondly, in subsequently crippling *two* of the three enemy heavy units supporting those airborne forces," the First Sea Lord paused, not for effect but because he had been so angry he had forgotten to take a breath for some seconds, "we might well have lost Malta. Not because of a military decision taken on the ground or at sea in the Mediterranean; but because nobody in Government heeded *my* repeated entreaties to establish a robust chain of command in the theatre co-ordinating *all* Anglo-American operations. Frankly, in the present situation it ill-befits anybody in England to sit in judgement of fighting men overseas."

Iain Macleod opened his mouth to speak in his own defence.

However, the First Sea Lord had not finished and he cut the politician off before he could say a single word.

"Furthermore, whichever official in your department put out that press release which failed to clarify the purpose of *my* visit to Malta ought, in my opinion, to be shot."

"That was..."

Airey Neave cut across his Cabinet colleague.

"Shut up, Iain." He took a step closer to the First Sea Lord. "We're all a little bit;" he grimaced, "frazzled at the moment, Sir David. My colleague meant no offence. God only knows we are all in the debt of those brave young men in those two gallant small ships. You and Sir Julian were very close, and nobody knows better than you the magnitude of his loss to our cause."

"Quite," the professional head of the Royal Navy acknowledged brusquely. "I suggest we board the plane without delay so we can be about our business."

Airey Neave drew a breath of relief.

The present crisis had not just strained the patience of the Chiefs of Staff it had pointed up the glaring weaknesses and deficiencies in British military capabilities, cruelly highlighting how over-stretched those forces were *everywhere*, and vividly illustrating the past insensitivity of the political elite to practically every warning the Chiefs of Staff had voiced. The point had been reached when if things got out of hand sooner or later one or other, perhaps all three of the Chiefs of Staff might turn around and say 'enough, no more'.

The three men fell into ragged step, pausing at the foot of the ladder up to

the open forward hatch of the RAF liveried Comet. Airey Neave and the First Sea Lord held back as Iain Macleod haltingly, painfully ascended the steps. The ever watchful Marines and Royal Military Policemen patrolling around the jetliner would have been happy to assist the Minister of Information but he hated it when people offered him a helping hand.

Airey Neave turned to the erect, dignified naval officer at his shoulder.

"Contrary to outward impressions, Admiral," he said lowly, "*we* are all in this together."

"Yes, Minister," Admiral Sir David Luce retorted dryly, "but while *we are all in it together* it is *my* people who are the ones who are actually doing most of the dying."

Chapter 51

09:42 Hours (GMT)
Sunday 5th April 1964
Redditch, Worcestershire, England

Seamus McCormick had been flying blind for several hours. At both pre-designated ‘contact points’ he had parked up and waited – twenty minutes each time – and there had been no ‘contact’. This meant only one thing; the rest of the active service unit embedded in England ahead of his arrival had been driven underground, or worse, ‘blown’.

The farm buildings had looked derelict and they had needed to get off the road and work out what to do next.

An hour ago, they had broken into the *coffin* containing the small arms and plastic explosives. Each of the three men now had a loaded Browning 9-millimetre pistol stuffed in his waistband as they crouched around the fire.

Army trucks drove from base to base. Army trucks carried their cargo and that was it. They had been travelling light; no food, no rucksacks, blankets, none of the normal kit a British squaddie slung over his back on a march. If they had been stopped carrying anything like that questions would have been asked and it would have ended badly. So, they were travelling light; and now they were hungry with no maps, and no safe place to hide up.

The cigarette cupped in Frank Reynolds’s hands had burned down to a stub. He took a last drag and threw it into the fire they had lit to warm their hands. He was the younger of the two IRA killers assigned to ‘watch over’ the turncoat British soldier who was nominally the leader of their small ‘cell’.

Reynolds glanced to Sean O’Flynn, the stockier of the two gunmen.

“There’s no way we’d get those coffins back across the water,” he grunted, stating the obvious.

“We could bury them,” the other man suggested thoughtfully. “Leave them for somebody to collect later?”

Seamus McCormick listened impassively as he smoked his cigarette and continued to think through his next move. His mind was walking down much narrower, sharply focused roads than his companions. The IRA men still

thought they had options, that they were still in control of their own fate but Seamus McCormick knew otherwise. He had been in the British Army over eight years before he defected, done time in Germany and Aden, actually spent two tours in Ulster fighting people exactly like Frank Reynolds and Sean O'Flynn. He had no illusions as to how perilous their situation had become and how little time they had before the net closed around them.

Before the October War there would have been other traffic, civilian traffic, on the roads to make it harder for the searchers to zero in on their quarry. These days there were no private cars, only registered trucks and lorries, and there were roadblocks everywhere cracking down hard on the black market and rigorously enforcing the 'transit and transfer' protocols designed to stop the wasteful burning of fuel by military and other vehicles. They had been lucky so far.

Very lucky.

Theoretically, food ought not to be a problem.

Three men in uniform with current ID cards could walk into any 'Austerity Kitchen' in the United Kingdom and get a free meal with no further questions asked. Usually, the meal on offer was only some kind of soup, a lump of bread and a mug of tea but a man could live on that almost indefinitely. However, that was the *only* thing going for them.

Theoretically, they could also steal anything they needed; fuel, maps, clothes, uniforms at the point of a gun. However, if they tried it more than once they would probably be dead a few hours later. The mainland was just as much an armed camp as Ulster and most major roads were patrolled; post-October War even the Police carried hand guns and rifles.

"We're not burying the coffins," he said quietly.

It had rained overnight and the ground around the three men was wet.

McCormick picked up a stick and scratched a cross in the earth.

"We're here, outside Redditch," he declared. And scratched another cross approximately south-east of the first. "This is Oxford, sixty to seventy miles away. And this," he added another cross west of Oxford, "is RAF Brize Norton, a few miles west from it." He looked at the faces of his associates. "Another fifty miles more or less west from there is Cheltenham, and another nice long runway. In between we have the Cotswold Hills. The main runways at Cheltenham and Brize Norton are laid out so that aircraft can take off and land into the prevailing westerly wind. At both airfields the

runways are angled approximately west-south-west in relation to magnetic north. This matters because it determines the landing approach and take-off flight paths of approaching or departing aircraft. Are you guys still with me?"

Frank Reynolds scowled, Sean O'Flynn was poker-faced.

"An aircraft which is just about to land or has just taken off, most likely heavy with fuel, cannot take violent evasive action without stalling and crashing. That matters because a jet airliner at altitude like a Comet or a V-Bomber like a Vulcan is basically a big jet fighter, very nearly fully aerobatic like giant Hurricanes or Spitfires. It they have sufficient altitude they can twist and turn, dive and climb sharply and if they get lucky, *evade* a heat-seeking missile like a Redeye."

Neither IRA man spoke.

All three men stared at the four crosses and the lines joining them on the ground at their feet.

"Aircraft take off and land *into* the wind so the way the wind is blowing tells us where to get the best shot at an aircraft's tail pipes – the hottest part of the airframe – when it is at its most vulnerable. *When it is making its final landing approach.*"

The two IRA men were beginning to smile; they could not help themselves.

"What we need to do is get from here," Seamus McCormick prodded the first cross he had made, "to here and here," he went on indicating the crosses for Brize Norton and Cheltenham. "Or rather, I'm going to take two of the Redeyes to here," he stabbed at Cheltenham, "and you two are going to take the other Redeye to Brize Norton."

"You said you were the only man who knew how to fire these things?" Sean O'Flynn objected almost speaking in a whisper.

"Anybody can fire the bloody thing!" McCormick grunted. "*You* just won't have a snow flake's chance in Hell of hitting anything!"

"So, what's the..."

Frank Reynolds patted his comrade's shoulder and gave McCormick a dark look.

"You said there was only one launcher, friend?"

The former British soldier shrugged.

"I lied."

Chapter 52

09:44 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
USS Charles F. Adams (DDG-2), 4 miles East of St Paul's Bay, Malta

"MAN IN THE WATER!"

The moment the call reached the bridge of the guided missile destroyer the alarm sounded, the engines were stopped and crewmen streamed up onto the decks of the USS Charles F. Adams. All night she had been standing close in off St Paul's Bay with over fifty of her people ashore and onboard the wreck of HMS Yarmouth. The last of the seriously injured had been airlifted by the USS Independence's Sea Kings to hospital on Gozo or directly back to the big carrier. The destroyer's small marine detachment and twenty seamen under the command of the ship's Executive Officer had remained on land when the Charles F. Adams had been forced to crawl into deeper water and head south.

Her main fuel bunkers were nearly dry and any time now her pumps would be sucking sludge out of the bottom of the starboard emergency tank. After that she would be adrift off a rocky and visibly unforgiving lee shore in water too deep to safely anchor until – hopefully - a tug arrived to haul her into port.

In St Paul's Bay HMS Yarmouth smouldered, a partially gutted hulk. Overnight her Squid anti-submarine mortars had lit off, sympathetically igniting hundreds of rounds of forty-millimetre ammunition stored in her after main deck ready lockers. By then everybody who could be saved had been lifted off the wreck. Over half the frigate's crew were dead or missing.

As the Charles F. Adams lost way heavy objects clunked against her port hull plates.

Commander Simon McGiven had been down in the engineering spaces discussing how soon his ship could take on a hundred tons of heavy bunker oil at Marsamxett Anchorage – where he was assured that the oiling wharf had survived the recent bombardment unscathed – and get back on station off St Paul's Bay when the alarms sounded.

A lean compact man of only slightly more than average height he had trotted – not run, for that was a thing a commanding officer could not do with dignity – up the ladders to the main deck and gone immediately to the port rail. As a young man, a very young man in fact, he had been a midshipman on the USS Honolulu at Pearl Harbour that fateful day in December 1941 and had enjoyed a charmed career for the rest of that war right up until the morning of 10th June 1945 when his ship, the Fletcher class fleet destroyer USS William D. Porter (DD-579) was sunk by a Kamikaze off Okinawa. He had only been in the water thirty minutes before he was rescued but that was long enough for him to understand, completely, what the men in the cold, choppy Mediterranean had been through since their ship sank the best part of forty-eight hours ago.

Two days ago, McGiven had not wasted a second thought about looking for the survivors of the Yavuz and the Admiral Kutuzov, or of their escorts that the Independence's Air Group had mercilessly hunted down and destroyed farther out to sea. No sooner had the Charles F. Adams and the Berkeley raced to interpose themselves between the last enemy cruiser and the by then burning British vessels, the surviving enemy heavy had promptly disengaged and attempted to retire north east at flank speed. McGiven had manoeuvred to open his ship's A arc – so that both his fore and aft quick firing automatic five-inch turrets could engage the enemy - and the Berkeley had raced back to stand by HMS Talavera. McGiven would have pursued the fleeing enemy until the ends of the Earth but at flank speed he would have run his bunkers dry in literally minutes, so reluctantly, he had called off the chase and left the surviving enemy vessels to the tender mercies of the Independence's A-4 Skyhawks.

He had since learned that the Skyhawks had bombed the Chapayev class Soviet cruiser to a standstill fifty-six miles north-north-east of Valletta and finding her dead in the water but stubbornly still afloat the morning after the battle the SSN USS Permit had administered the coup de grace with two Mark 14 torpedoes, both of which exploded beneath the keel of the crippled enemy ship, breaking her back and sending her to the bottom in less than three minutes. Nobody had sent out search and rescue ships or choppers to the co-ordinates where the cruiser – thought to be the Komsomolets – and her eight-hundred-man crew had gone down.

Commander Simon McGiven and his comrades had been far too busy

rendering assistance to *real* heroes.

HMS Yarmouth had taken a direct hit to her bridge early in the action. Likewise, another hit had opened up her single twin 4.5-inch gun turret like a sardine can ripped apart by a rifle bullet. Most of the later hits seemed to have passed through the ship before exploding but near misses and massive splinter damage had set her on fire amidships. By the time the Charles F. Adams hove alongside the frigate was being conned from her emergency steering position on the stern.

Simon McGiven had no idea how HMS Yarmouth's people had contrived to successfully run their sinking ship practically up onto the beach in St Paul's Bay. What he did know was that by so doing whoever was responsible had probably saved the lives of most the men who had survived the Battle of Malta.

Now the commanding officer of the Charles F. Adams gazed at the heads bobbing in the tangle of floating wreckage in a long thin, current-sculpted slick, for hundreds of yards out to sea. Here and there an arm waved. He guessed that many of the heads bobbing in the cold water had died many hours ago.

He looked to the sky, the clouds and back down to the sea.

The flotsam and detritus of battle was drifting down onto the destroyer. Boarding nets were going over the side, life jackets and flotation blocks were being hurriedly stacked along the rail.

He sighed and hastened to the bridge.

"How much water do we have under the keel?" He demanded.

"Six hundred feet, sir."

McGiven strode to the bridge wing.

"SLOW ASTERN!" He ordered. The destroyer's forward momentum was carrying her ahead of the slick of survivors and debris.

He waited for the screws to bite the iron grey seas and to feel the movement of the ship under his feet.

"ALL STOP!"

He turned to the Officer of the Deck.

"Manoeuvre so as to keep the ship between the survivors and the coast." Then, after giving orders for a report to be transmitted to the USS Iowa and copied to the flagship, he returned down to the main deck to supervise the recovery of men who had ceased to be his mortal enemies the moment they

went into the water.

Ship-wrecked mariners all.

May God have mercy on our souls.

Chapter 53

08:45 Hours,
Sunday 5th April 1964
Fort Rinella Joint Interrogation Centre, Malta

Major Denzil Williams, the MI6 Head of Station on Malta and as of thirty-three hours ago, give or take a few minutes - the de facto ‘Security Chief’ of the archipelago reporting directly to the Acting C-in-C, Air Vice-Marshal French, had had to forego the ‘pleasure’ of interrogating Samuel Calleja overnight as a constant stream of new prisoners was processed into the hastily designated ‘Joint Interrogation Centre’ in the old fort opposite Valletta.

“What’s the latest head count?” He asked the careworn blond woman who had assumed the role of his secretary and chief translator overnight.

“Eighteen Maltese men and five women,” Rachel Angelica Piotrowska reported, looking up from her notes and the neatly piled sheaf of *Prisoner of War Reception and Identification Control Sheets* she had collected in the last few hours. “And thirty-two officers and senior non-commissioned other ranks of the 38th and 39th Guards Airborne Regiments of the Red Army.”

“How the fuck are we supposed to interrogate all those bastards?” Williams complained, slumping down into a chair in front of the woman’s desk. He fixed her with a ruminative stare; she did not seem to be half the bitch he had thought she was when she was with Arkady Rykov but he was not about to make the mistake of underestimating her a second time. Not if the stories coming out of Mdina were half-true...

She gave him an unsympathetic look.

“One at a time, Major,” she suggested dryly. Already her voice was flecked with accentuations which hinted at her Polish childhood. After years affecting the tone and manners of an upper middle-class Englishwoman there was no longer any need for pretence.

“Very funny!” He had never seen the woman without make up, roughed up, not entirely ‘on show’ as if she was about to step onto an international catwalk and he was asking himself where he had seen her before, years ago

long before she was on Comrade Arkady Pavlovich's case.

"What would you rather do? Shoot them all?"

"Yes, well, I seem to recall that you made a pretty good start on the job the other day in the Citadel, Miss Piotrowska."

Rachel did not have the energy to glower at him.

"That was in combat, Major."

"Um..." He grunted, rose to his feet. "What would you do if I started breaking the rest of Samuel Calleja's fingers?"

The woman's expression became bleak. The Acting C-in-C's orders regarding prisoners had been explicit. Regardless of the status of 'detainees' – be they suspected agent provocateurs, saboteurs, spies, fifth columnists, or simply captured soldiers in uniform – 'all prisoners will be treated with decency and their physical and medical needs given appropriate priority'. On the subject of interrogation methods 'Gestapo tactics' were without exception, *forbidden*.

Air Vice-Marshal French had specifically 'asked' her to make that 'crystal clear' to Major Williams.

She had been able to soften the pill be adding that the C-in-C had also promised: 'those prisoners of war and Maltese traitors clearly guilty of committing war crimes against the civilian population, or self-evidently guilty of treachery will be summarily executed under the powers vested in me in due course.'

That had cheered up Denzil Williams more than somewhat, even though Rachel felt it advisable to keep reminding him about the inappropriateness of 'Gestapo' methods.

"Samuel Calleja's admission documentation indicates he was processed into this 'Centre' without obvious physical injuries other than a bang on the head and an injured left hand. If he subsequently sustains significant additional harm *you* would have to explain exactly how he sustained those injuries." She put down her pen, sat back in her chair. The coarse fabric of the over-sized battledress tunic and trousers she had been issued with the previous evening itched and scratched, she felt shapeless and somehow diminished in the uniform and the heavy shoes that she had been given were hurting her feet. "In any event, don't you think enough people have been," she shrugged, "damaged on this island in the last forty-eight hours?"

The man scoffed derisively.

“We have most of the people responsible for ‘damaging’ our friends and comrades and murdering God alone knows how many helpless innocent civilians sitting in our cells right now!”

Rachel said nothing.

“What do you think your friend Arkady Pavlovich Rykov did to the poor sods he brought here so he could cover his tracks?”

“I don’t know what he did to them,” she lied. Arkady had tortured and murdered at least one woman in the dungeons of Fort Rinella. Other men he had killed. She understood now that he had done it to stop his victims betraying him and that Julian Christopher had compelled him to do it because he wanted the men responsible for the terrorist killings, atrocities and the sabotage of HMS Torquay liquidated before the poison spread via Samuel Calleja to envelope the rest of his family, and eventually, by tainting his own son, his and the Royal Navy’s good name. At the time she had accepted it as a necessity of war; Arkady’s victims had been members of his own Krasnaya Zarya cell; all except Lela Catana-Perez, whose only crime now seemed to have been that she had had the misfortune to have been unknowingly married to a Red Dawn conspirator. In retrospect she now knew that if she had ever been so unwise as to have left the monster alone with Rosa Calleja, it was likely a similar fate would have befallen her.

Julian Christopher had been an honourable, moral man confronted with an impossible choice but he had not hesitated. He had done what was necessary because he understood that the true evil of war is the terrible things one’s enemies forced one to do.

“Don’t you?” The Denzil Williams taunted Rachel, backing away until he found the cold, unyielding end wall of the cell appropriated as the ‘Admin Room’ for the ‘Centre’. “Admiral Christopher would have given us *carte blanch* with all these bastards. Dammit, he wouldn’t have wasted time and resources we don’t have guarding POWs, he’d have had the whole lot of them put up against a wall and shot!”

Rachel did not think that this was remotely likely.

Over three and hundred and fifty Soviet soldiers, including scores of wounded men, had laid down their weapons and surrendered. A few were still on the run; they were being hunted down like dogs. Those fit to work had been organised into gangs to assist in rescue operations or placed at the disposal of the Royal Engineers attempting to put the main runway at Luqa

back into commission. At least thirty Soviet paratroopers were under guard at Royal Naval Hospital Bighi, many suffering from dreadful life-threatening injuries.

"No, he wouldn't have had anybody shot," she declared. "*We* have to be better than our enemies otherwise what right do *we* have to survive?"

"That's too deep for me."

The woman wanted to slap him.

"You shouldn't have had Arkady beaten to a pulp at Gibraltar," she snapped at Denzil Williams.

"You mean I should have killed him?" The man inquired acidly. "Rather than just roughing him up?"

Rachel rose from behind her desk and crossed her arms tightly across her breasts as if she was suddenly cold.

"You forced Dick White's hand, you imbecile!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Because you almost killed Arkady Pavlovich, Dick White had to make it look like an accident. He had to travel to Portugal to make it *look* like he was bringing him in from the cold. Arkady told him nothing that I hadn't already passed on to him via other channels. Have you any idea how hard it was to persuade Arkady to come back to Malta to dismantle *his own* networks. You and I would both be dead by now if he hadn't been forced to do it to maintain his cover!"

Rachel turned away.

Why are men so obtuse sometimes?

"Yes, that's all very well," the man protested indignantly. "The way I see it, all he did was take out a few expendable assets he knew were already blown. What about the people we've got locked up downstairs? He didn't roll up *their* networks?"

"They weren't working for Rykov, you..."

Why are some men so obtuse and so stupid all the bloody time?

"What are you talking about?"

"The people we've got here were nothing to do with Arkady Pavlovich Rykov," Rachel explained slowly, wondering as she spoke if she ought to be pronouncing each syllable of each word slowly and separately because from the look on the face of the Secret Intelligence Service's Head of Station on Malta, English was obviously not his first language. "After he was forced to

roll up his *only* network on the island he was too busy trying *not* to give himself away to do anybody any harm. He was trapped on Malta. Sooner or later he would have betrayed himself. When those big ships started shelling the island and the paratroopers started dropping out of the sky he must have thought all his birthdays and Christmases had come at once!"

Denzil Williams was staring at her as if she was mad.

"Don't you understand?" She asked plaintively. "Arkady Pavlovich had failed and his handlers had cut him adrift. His only surviving friend on the archipelago was Samuel Calleja, a man who didn't even know how to remove the safety on the Makarov pistol he was holding to Admiral Christopher's head at the time I broke into the headquarters building in Mdina!"

Chapter 54

09:50 Hours (GMT)
Sunday 5th April 1964
Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

“You must have put something in my hot chocolate before I went to bed last night,” Margaret Thatcher remarked to her friend, Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson as the car, a newly delivered armoured Bentley slowed briefly before being waved through the heavily guarded checkpoint on the Oxford Road east of the picturesque village of Woodstock. There were few people about, it was Sunday morning after all and the leaden overcast threatened spring showers sooner rather than later. Old thatched cottages and houses swept past as the two women studiously looked out of their respective windows, left and right.

At first glance the October War had left Woodstock untouched but the roads hereabouts were empty of all but official traffic because of the chronic petrol shortages, and coal smoke lingered in the air from hearths that were the only source of heating in dwellings which could rely on only two to four hours electricity per day. In Woodstock as in most places the United Kingdom was a drab, cold place much like both women recollected it had been in the darkest days of the Second World War.

A helicopter gunship usually shadowed the Prime Ministerial convoy when Margaret Thatcher travelled by road; today, no helicopters were available. In lieu of aerial firepower the Prime Minister’s Royal Marine bodyguards – whose members proudly called themselves the AWP, the ‘Angry Widow’s Praetorians’ had mounted recently acquired American 50-calibre heavy machine guns on the Land Rovers topping and tailing the convoy rushing through the Oxfordshire countryside.

“Yes,” Pat Harding-Grayson confessed in a tone which was not such much apologetic as smug. “I crushed up two sleeping pills and found a spoonful of sugar to hide the taste.”

Margaret Thatcher frowned.

“Poisoning a Prime Minister is probably an offence under the Treachery

Act," she observed, albeit without malice.

"You hadn't slept for two days and you were getting cranky, Margaret."

"I was *getting* no such thing!" Except she now realised that she had been getting very 'cranky' and worse. This morning notwithstanding that her head ached a little she felt more her old self. The news from Malta – no, the news about Julian Christopher – had been like an unexpected blow to the solar plexus and she had been, well, stunned and for periods of the last two days, *lost*. She knew that the men around her had been doing whatever could be done, the majority of them were much more attuned to the day to day needs of governance in a time of war than her but for many hours she had ceased to be their *leader* and that was inexcusable.

The note from Blenheim Palace had arrived after she had gone to bed last night, *drugged by her closest friend*.

'Her Majesty cordially requests the presence of her Prime Minister at 10 o'clock. The Prime Minister is invited to take morning tea with her Majesty prior to joining her for the Morning Service in the chapel at Blenheim. The Prime Minister's children and aides are very welcome to join Her Majesty at said Service.'

The twins, eleven-year-old Carol and Mark sat obediently in the backwards facing seats within the most heavily armoured section of the Bentley. Both children had grown familiar with being in the proximity of VIPs, and accustomed to being introduced to the 'great men' of the day but the prospect of a visit to Blenheim Palace and an encounter with *The Queen*, and possibly *Prince Charles* and *Princess Ann* was another thing altogether. However, while they were in the company of their mother and their *governess* – neither twin was entirely sure what Lady Patricia Harding-Grayson's exact title or position was, just that she was a very kind, nice lady and that they absolutely had to do what she told them to do – no harm could possibly befall them. Insofar as they thought about such things at all; both twins had worked out that of all the clever and very important people in their mother's life the only person with whom she was completely at ease, was 'Auntie Pat'.

"I really should have kept the Palace better informed of events," Margaret Thatcher sighed.

"Your private office will have done that anyway, Margaret," Pat Harding-Grayson reminded her.

“Yes, but...”

“You simply cannot do everything yourself.”

“No. This whole thing has rather knocked me for six,” the younger woman – by the best part of two decades – confessed. “I keep thinking I ought to be angrier, but actually, I am angry. Very angry.” She sighed. “And disappointed. Once again, the Americans have let us down. I don’t just mean in the Mediterranean. Admiral Detweiller’s decision to remove his ships from Malta was ill-advised but it would not have mattered but for the sabotage of the archipelago’s radio communications and radar systems. The First Sea Lord tells me that the system was badly damaged in December’s attack, and then again by the attacks in February and knocking out just one or two key electrical switching stations was probably sufficient to bring down the whole network. The Americans have shipped new radar equipment to us but we just don’t have the technical wherewithal to quickly rebuild a complex air defence system. All our best people went off to Cyprus, you see. The assumption was that Admiral Detweiller’s ships would act as sentinels around the Maltese Archipelago.” Margaret Thatcher pursed her lips and sighed. “Sorry, I am rambling.”

“Carry on,” her friend invited her. “You’re not boring me, or anything.”

The Prime Minister smiled.

“What happened on Malta wasn’t entirely the Americans’ fault. Historians will look at the ‘Battle of Malta’ in years to come and write it off to bad luck and sabotage and say that I was far too preoccupied with grand strategy and took my eye off the ball. In a funny sort of way, I’m not angry about any of that; what really gets my goat is the American obsession with this stupid story about Sir David Luce having been appointed Supreme Commander in the Mediterranean behind their backs!”

Chapter 55

11:05 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
The Verdala Palace, Malta

Because the Verdala Palace was the official – although since December of the previous year largely unused – residence of the Commander-in-Chief of All British and Commonwealth Forces in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, it was guarded at all times by a platoon of infantrymen. At the time of the Soviet airborne attack a mixed platoon of walking wounded and sick-listed Green Jackets supported by a dozen Ghurkha riflemen had been stationed in the main building, which outwardly resembled a medieval castle. The bodies of the Soviet paratroopers shot to pieces beneath their swinging canopies long before their feet touched the ground were lined up by the roadside outside the walled palace gardens.

Now and then the stench of death, a vilely putrid corruption wafted through the open windows of the strangely unscarred bastion overlooking the brilliant azure blue Mediterranean on the eastern shore of the main island of Malta.

In their first-floor state room Marija fussily helped her husband into his brand new, freshly pressed uniform.

Peter Christopher was edgy, anxious to be reunited with the members of his crew who should by now already be on their way to the Verdala Palace. The initial plan to meet the VIPs from England at Luqa air base had been abandoned earlier that morning; nobody had explained why; presumably because the whole ‘shindig’ had been switched to the Verdala Palace.

“Stop fidgeting, husband,” Marija demanded with her face pinched with fond vexation. She and Peter had been transported across the island while it was still dark, and in the privacy of one of the state room she had ordered her ‘hero’ to lie down on the big bed so that she could properly examine his injuries. As she had suspected his torso was a mass of deep, horribly discoloured bruises.

Sending for a first aid kit she had excised two small pieces of shrapnel

from below his left shoulder blade; it had troubled her that her husband had hardly flinched because she understood it could only mean that he hurt practically *everywhere*. Studying his chest, she concluded that at least one, or perhaps two of his ribs on the middle of his right torso, were cracked. She had begun to relax a little when she determined that his messy head wounds were all of the superficial variety. She had painstakingly, lovingly tidied him up.

"You look like you've been in a street brawl in Valletta," she had assured her husband when he eventually claimed that 'I'm all right, really'. Her look had silenced his complaint. "People will be taking *our* pictures," she reminded him. "It is important that *we* look *our* best."

Her husband's right ankle and right knee were swollen and his whole leg had stiffened overnight. No amount of liniment application or bandaging was going to remedy the twisted knee and sprained ankle; time alone would heal those sorely tried joints.

"You will have to walk with a stick and for once," she had smiled, "lean on me," Marija decided feeding him aspirins for his numerous aches and pains.

Even though the Verdala Palace had been largely unoccupied during Sir Julian Christopher's tenure in command on Malta, the domestic and administrative staff of the palace had been retained to ensure the building was immediately available for use as an emergency hospital or a command centre.

"Your father's uniforms very nearly fit you perfectly, husband," Marija observed, pausing to admire the tailoring of the dark cloth as she brushed a speck of dust off one shoulder. Sir Julian had kept several spare uniforms in store at the Verdala Palace, each bereft of gold braid, cuff rings of rank or medal ribbons, for such fripperies were to be sewn on at need. A resident seamstress on the palace's staff had already sewn a commander's three rings onto the brand new uniform jacket.

Peter Christopher swallowed hard, tried to blink back his tears.

Marija rested her head on his chest and ever so carefully, wrapped her arms around the man she loved.

He kissed the top of her head.

"Now that I look the part," he said with mock bravura to hide his distress, "you must try on those dresses."

The women who had brought in the uniforms had also laid three very

expensive-looking dresses on the big double bed at the heart of the state room. The 'fancy frocks' as Margo Seiffert would have described them had belonged to Lady Marian Staveley-Pope, the wife of Sir Julian Christopher's predecessor on Malta. Hugh Staveley Pope had been second-in-command of the Mediterranean Fleet at the time of the October War and had been advanced to Vice Admiral and to overall Theatre Command after his own chief's assassination. His wife, Lady Marian, had been holidaying with friends on the French Riviera at Villefranche-sur-Mer on the night of the war and never been seen or heard of again. Lady Marian had been Admiral Staveley-Pope's second wife, some quarter of a century his junior and by coincidence possessed of a similarly trim figure as Marija.

"These are far too grand," Marija objected. The dresses bore Parisienne labels and were made of a fabric that felt so fine beneath her fingers that she was half-afraid to handle, let alone wear, creations so *opulent.*

"My love," her husband grinned, his bruises making the expression oddly lopsided, "to me you would be the most beautiful woman in the world if you were dressed in a potato sack," he shrugged, painfully because the gesture tweaked something that did not want to be tweaked deep in his rib cage, "but in these *weeds*," he chuckled softly, "you will be Rita Hayworth, Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren all rolled into one!"

Marija instantly stared at her feet, afraid that she was blushing so violently in her pleasure and embarrassment that the top of her head would explode. In her disorientation she inadvertently slapped her husband's shoulder just above his right clavicle with the flat of her very, very distracted left hand.

"Ouch..."

This sobered her in a moment.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

But the man was laughing and the next thing she knew, so was she.

Chapter 56

10:05 Hours (GMT)
Sunday 5th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford

Walter Brenckmann had anticipated an entirely different reaction to the news he had just delivered to the Foreign Secretary. The Ambassador of the United States of America to the Court of Blenheim Palace had hurried over from the temporary Embassy compound at Trinity College with the telegram straight off the Cipher Room teleprinter.

Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson shook his head, grimaced in apology.

"I'm sorry, Walter," he grunted, waving at the papers on his desk in the former don's study on the first floor of the medieval pile which now accommodated the Foreign Secretary's private office. "We had a few setbacks on Cyprus overnight and the casualty toll from Malta just seems to go up and up." He hesitated. "And I can't shake this nagging feeling that something else is going on." Again, he shook his head and forced a smile.

"Sometimes it is only when things are darkest that you discover who your real friends are, Tom," the dapper former United States Navy destroyer captain replied wryly.

"Yes, quite. It is marvellous news that the President is coming to England," the Foreign Secretary declared – and it was marvellous news – but in the light of the *other news* that MI5's apparently comprehensive 'swoop' on 'Irish and other insurgent elements' had conspicuously failed to 'sweep up' any of the Redeye surface-to air missiles that Chiefs of Staff and everybody else who 'needed to know' in Oxford was presently so exercised about, the President's timing was not wholly propitious. And then there was the news of the similarly *spontaneous* intention of the Irish Government to send 'cabinet level plenipotentiaries to England to defuse' the 'tensions' between 'our countries'. Nobody in the UAUK thought it was a remotely good idea for senior members of the avowedly anti-partition Fianna Fáil Dublin Government to be on British soil, let alone to meet and confer – possibly - with the Irish-American President of the United States of America

while he was in Oxford. Emotions were running high about the 'Irish problem', feelings could hardly be more tender and the bloody IRA had smuggled state of the art *American* anti-aircraft missiles into the country! "However, the visit of the 'Irish delegation' might create difficulties."

Walter Brenckmann had emphasised that although junior members of the 'President's Party' might hold informal bi-lateral conversations with members of the Irish delegation the President had no plans to speak to any member of *that* party. While the President could not be seen to be openly cold-shouldering the Irish 'peace delegation' - that would look bad back home especially while the 'Supreme Commander' furore raged – he was sensitive to and respectful of the British government's position.

"The President is coming to the United Kingdom to reinforce our alliance," he said. "And of course, to publicly lay this Supreme Commander business to bed once and for all."

Tom Harding-Grayson sighed.

This, of course, was the other fly in the ointment.

Other than that General Harold Keith Johnson was the Chief of Staff of the US Army, the Foreign Secretary personally knew nothing about the man and there would be little opportunity to sound out the opinions of the British Chiefs of Staff prior to the Supreme-Commander designate of All Allied Forces in Europe stepping off the plane with Jack Kennedy sometime late tomorrow afternoon at Brize Norton.

Tom Harding-Grayson cleared his throat.

"I take it that President is aware that our security people have not yet intercepted the IRA active service unit responsible, we believe, for smuggling three prototype General Dynamics Redeye shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles into the United Kingdom?"

"Yes. The President has been advised that these missiles pose only a very slight risk to aircraft in flight; which is why the US Army specified a two-year program of evaluation trials before making a decision whether the Redeye system is suitable for general deployment."

The Foreign Secretary was not so sanguine.

"In my experience what military men think will or won't work often bears very little relationship to reality, Walter."

"As I understand it a Redeye has to be launched from virtually point-blank range at the tail pipes of a jet to have any chance of hitting it. Besides,

I hardly think that even the IRA would fire a rocket at the President’s plane!”

Chapter 57

10:05 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Redditch, Worcestershire

Seamus McCormick had kept the plan simple because he knew there was no way he could sell a complicated plan to the two IRA killers who had viewed him with sullen, mistrustful eyes as he spoke.

He would assemble all three Redeyes.

Frank Reynolds and Sean O'Flynn would steal a vehicle and drive south with one missile and an M171 launcher. They would find a 'firing point' somewhere in the Cotswolds to the north or north east of Brize Norton; they had no chance of getting anywhere near optimum range so there was no point bothering. Their job was – some time during the middle of tomorrow, any time from mid-day to about four o'clock in the afternoon would be fine – to shoot their single Redeye in the 'general direction' of RAF Brize Norton.

That was all they had to do.

Afterwards, if they elected to remain in England that was their business; likewise, it was up to them if they tried to make a 'home run' return to Ireland.

He would take the other two Redeyes and the Bedford lorry and head down to Cheltenham.

"What's your plan when you get to Cheltenham, friend?" Sean O'Flynn asked menacingly.

"You don't need to know that."

"We do," Frank Reynolds snarled.

"No, you don't."

Brize Norton, Cheltenham and Prestwick in Scotland were the three busiest civilian airports in the United Kingdom and all three were also emergency bases for the RAF's surviving V-Bomber Force. V-Bombers were routinely dispersed to each location. Unlike Prestwick, both Cheltenham and Brize Norton were protected by batteries of long-range Bristol Aeroplane Company Bloodhound surface-to-air missiles and locally

by emplaced guns of every imaginable calibre from twenty-millimetre all the way up to 3.7-inch barrels. Moreover, both of these southern ‘civil hubs’ sat within five to ten-mile-deep defence exclusion zones.

Seamus McCormick planned to penetrate the Cheltenham DEZ by masquerading as a missile technician delivering spares for the Bloodhounds positioned in the hills overlooking the eastern end of the two-and-a-half-mile long runway of the air base which had been laid across the footprint of the old race course. He rated his chances as about sixty-forty, against. With the two IRA men in tow he had no chance whatsoever of getting inside the DEZ.

More importantly, there was no point breaking into the Cheltenham DEZ if when he got there he did not have anything to shoot down. If an emergency or a scare could be engineered at Brize Norton then all 'high priority' landings would automatically be switched to Cheltenham for several hours guaranteeing a plethora of possible targets. Two IRA men randomly shooting off a Redeye in controlled Brize Norton airspace – or even getting caught inside the DEZ before they got a chance to shoot their missile - was hardly a sure-fire way to engineer an ‘emergency’; but it was the best thing he could think of in the circumstances.

McCormick contemplated his options.

“Think of this as a grouse shoot, boys,” he suggested. “I need you two to be my *beaters*. I need you to kick the bushes and flush me some nice fat helpless birds into the air so that I can ‘bag them’.”

He smiled thinly.

“Unless either of you boys has got a Centurion tank in your pocket there’s no way the three of us can shoot our way into the Cheltenham DEZ. As for Brize Norton,” he shrugged, “if we try to do it the other way around we all end up dead; three dead men lying on the ground with three unfired Redeyes with British squaddies smoking Woodbines and laughing amongst themselves. Do it my way and you boys might get home to Dublin to tell the tale of how you tweaked John Bull’s nose.”

“What about you, friend,” Sean O’Flynn growled.

“How do you mean?”

“After this? What about you?”

Seamus McCormick looked the IRA assassin in the eye.

“Whatever happens, there is no *after* for me.”

Chapter 58

11:05 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Royal Naval Hospital Bighi, Kalkara, Malta

Joe Calleja had not really been awake when the ward orderlies had got him out of bed, cleaned him up and started to dress him in a somewhat over-sized civilian suit. He had never owned, nor foreseen the need to own, such a suit. True, he owned a comfortable old jacket – with patched elbows – and a tie that he sometimes wore to church to placate his Mama, but a suit? No, never. Nowhere in *Das Kapital* did it say that a good Marxist had to own, or in fact, had any right to own a suit. Admiralty Dockyard lackeys and British oppressors wore suits. Not good honest Communist dockyard electricians like Joseph Calleja!

A wheel chair – a rickety, squealing contraption – had been rolled, clanking and jolting into the ward.

"I can walk!" Joe had protested.

Actually, he very nearly fainted in attempting to stand up.

The men in the other beds had waved and cheered, not in any way derisively he had realised, as he was slowly, hurtfully pushed out into the corridor.

"Where are you talking me?" He asked belatedly.

"You're going off to the Verdala Palace with the other Talaveras," he was informed in a weary, matter of fact way.

With the *other* Talaveras...

"Oh." Most of the times men had come to cart him off somewhere new in the last eighteen months it had been to arrest him so the prospect of visiting the seat of British Imperial power on the archipelago in the company of men with whom he had just fought a huge battle was, well, *different* and gave him considerable pause for thought. So much so that he said not another word until Petty Officer Jack Griffin, decked out in what looked like a brand new Blue Dress No 4 uniform still stinking of mothballs swam into his field of vision.

“Look what we’ve got here, lads!” The red-headed, piratically bearded and scarred Navy man guffawed loudly.

Joe winced as men surrounded his wheelchair, each and every one of them intent on patting and slapping his back and shoulders and ruffling his hair.

“Good on you, mate!”

“You had us worried...”

“You don’t look half as bad as they said?”

“The drinks are on you the next time we end up in Sammy’s Bar!”

Sammy’s Bar was a notorious Navy watering hole off Pieta Creek at the eastern end of Marsamxett Anchorage. It was a Navy bar – its real name was ‘The Old Bar’ but the Royal Navy had renamed it years ago - renowned for purveying various beverages of dubious provenances and sweet white that had very little in common with the output of any other vintage produced in pre-war Europe. Sammy’s Bar was the sort of place a Maltese civilian like Joe Calleja would normally give as wide a berth as possible...

“Sammy’s Bar!” The men around him chorused. “Sammy’s Bar!”

The circle of faces parted and the painful back slapping ceased.

“Give the civilian room to breathe, lads!” Chief Petty Officer Spider McCann ordered. He bent low and squinted thoughtfully at the battered dockyard electrician. Presently, he was joined in his earnest scrutiny of the injured man by Lieutenant Alan Hannay.

“Mrs Calleja will accompany us, Mr McCann,” the young officer declared. “Joe will need somebody to keep an eye on him.”

Joe Calleja was fascinated by the fleeting suggestion of an unspoken question in Spider McCann’s eyes and his momentary delay in acknowledging the *suggestion*.

“Aye, sir.”

“Hello, Joe,” Rosa Calleja said uncomfortably.

The man in the wheelchair blinked at his sister-in-law. She seemed somehow changed, as if a cloud had lifted off her shoulders. Her short hair was brushed back off her face and held in check with a blue band, she had applied some kind of subtle rouge to her cheeks and she seemed *alive*.

“We are all to go to the Verdala Palace in a bus they are sending,” she explained. “It will be a bumpy ride,” she apologised. “I will try to get hold of some more aspirins and *the boys* are looking for pillows and cushions to

make you comfortable."

She patted his undamaged left arm gently and departed.

Jack Griffin leaned over Joe.

"*They* were going to leave you behind!" He complained, clearly horrified by the idea. "But then Mr Hannay called up HQ and everything was sorted!"

"Oh, I see." *Or rather he did not.*

"Fuck it!" Jack Griffin growled. "You were the one who actually sank those two big fuckers. Not those fucking come lately fucking Yanks!"

Chapter 59

10:15 Hours (GMT)
Sunday 5th April 1964
Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, Oxfordshire

Queen Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the Seas Queen, and Defender of the Faith had been flanked by her two children, fifteen-year-old Prince Charles, and thirteen-year-old Princess Anne in the reception hall as Margaret Thatcher and her own small entourage had been graciously escorted into Blenheim Palace.

It was some minutes later after much bowing and scraping and the mutual introductions of their respective offspring that Monarch and Prime Minister removed themselves to the library where, across a low ornate table bearing a tea service the two women had settled in Queen Anne chairs.

“I shall be mother,” the Queen announced.

It had become the custom in recent months for the Prime Minister to be accompanied at audiences with her sovereign by a representative of her Labour Party coalition partners in government. The arrangement was one which recognised that within the current constitutional and parliamentary *accommodation* put in place after the October War, that there was an inherent ‘democratic deficit’ and it was vital *not* to place the Queen, the one inviolable and inalienable surviving symbol of national unity in a position where she seemed to be in any way partisan. Today, this was not an issue because the Queen had specifically summoned as was *Her* right, *Her* Prime Minister for a *private* audience.

Presently the two women, both younger than any of their senior ministers, both bereaved and torn with fears for their children and loved ones, viewed each other over the rims of their tea cups.

“I know that you and Admiral Sir Julian Christopher were very close,” the Queen said sadly. “These must be awful times for you?”

Margaret Thatcher did not trust herself to speak.

She nodded mutely.

The Queen's three-year-old son Prince Andrew had been killed in the regicidal attack on Balmoral four months ago and her husband and consort Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh had suffered injuries so severe that he was still as yet insufficiently recovered to make the journey south to join his family at Blenheim.

The two women had established a rapport in the aftermath of the attack on Balmoral, jointly setting up and managing an emergency casualty clearing station in the ruins of the castle. Since then they had unflinchingly faced one crisis after another in the sure and certain knowledge that this was their lot, the burden that they must both carry, *together*.

The Queen was the younger of the two by six months, not yet thirty-eight for another three weeks or so; and she never allowed herself to forget the crushing weight of responsibility that pressed down upon her Prime Minister's eminently capable, but nonetheless fragile shoulders.

"Sir Julian and I were to be married," Margaret Thatcher said, relieved to be able to say it without fear of anybody overhearing or interpreting her grief for weakness. "I confess that I have not been myself since I heard of his death, Ma'am."

"That is entirely understandable."

There would be no crocodile tears in this room today. It was enough that the two women understood and empathised one with the other. Neither paused to contemplate the strangeness of how it had come to be that a grocer's daughter from Grantham had become the primus inter pares – first among equals – in Queen Elizabeth II's realm.

"I am quite recovered now, Ma'am."

The Queen did not believe this and her silence communicated it.

"Recovered," Margaret Thatcher qualified, "but not reconciled. I had hoped, all of us in government had hoped, that we could see some kind of end in sight. With American help I saw a day when not only Cyprus would be back in our hands, perhaps Crete also, and that we might effectively have penned the evil of Red Dawn behind defensible barriers for the foreseeable future. But recent events, if they have shown us anything at all have shown how little we know about our enemies."

"How goes the campaign in Cyprus?"

"We have taken casualties at sea, in the air and on land overnight, Ma'am," Margaret Thatcher admitted. "However, the Chiefs of Staff are

confident that the whole island will be in our hands within the next seventy-two hours. Inevitably, there will be a great deal of mopping up to do over the course of the coming weeks but Operation Grantham is broadly speaking, proceeding according to schedule."

The Queen nodded, sipped her tea.

"What of the reports from Iran?"

Her Prime Minister's face hardened.

"Our listening stations have intercepted a large volume of short wave radio traffic. In Farsi and English but also in Russian from the area of the Iranian-Azerbaijani border with the former Soviet Union, and from within and around Tehran, Ma'am."

The Queen raised a patient eyebrow.

"The situation is very confused," Margaret Thatcher continued. "However, it is clear that what we initially interpreted as a popular uprising, or a full-scale coup d'état aimed at toppling the Shah's government," she hesitated, the words tasting dangerously bitter in her mouth, "is no such thing. Large numbers of men dressed in former Soviet uniforms and armed with former Soviet weaponry briefly took control of the city. Our own embassy and that of the United States and the embassies of several other countries were attacked, our diplomats murdered and our compounds ransacked. We believe that the Shah of Iran was residing at the Sa'dabad palace to the north of the capital at the outset of the attack. That Palace was over-run by the 'invaders' and there has been no word of the Shah's personal fate. The latest news to hand is that Iranian Army units have entered the city and have driven the 'invaders' into the western suburbs around the Mehrabad Air Base, Ma'am."

The Monarch's brow was somewhat furrowed.

"Forgive me, you have employed the term 'former' in the context of troops behaving and dressed as 'Soviet' troops?"

"Yes," the other woman agreed. "The distinction is one that is still being made by our intelligence analysts. However, given what happened at Malta and various other *indications*, I personally think that we have reached the point at which such distinctions are somewhat academic."

"Oh, I see."

Margaret Thatcher took a deep breath.

"I believe we may have been making our plans under a completely false

premise," she said grimly. "Further, I believe that Red Dawn, an organisation which we have previously classified as a terroristic, stay behind organ of the largely destroyed pre-war Soviet state, may be no more or less than the outrider of the surviving elements of KGB and the military machine of the USSR. I further believe, or more correctly fear, that recent events lead to the conclusion that significant, coherent elements of the 'former' USSR survived the war and that potentially, this is the spectre that now confronts us in the Eastern Mediterranean and, conceivably will threaten our vital strategic interests elsewhere in the World."

"Where does the news from Iran fit into this revised 'threat picture'?"

"I don't know," Margaret Thatcher conceded. "Tom Harding-Grayson has described a doomsday scenario in which unstoppable Soviet tank armies crash through the mountains of Northern Iran down into the floodplains of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in Iraq, and subsequently drive south to the Persian Gulf seizing the Kirkuk oilfields, Basra and eventually Abadan Island. Frankly, that all still sounds a little far-fetched to me, Ma'am." Margaret Thatcher shrugged. "I hope it is far-fetched. With the Suez Canal still being blocked at Ismailia there would not be an awful lot we could do about it," she shrugged again, "if it came to it."

"Presumably, all reinforcements to the Persian Gulf would have to go around the Cape of Good Hope? Or all the way across the Pacific from the West Coast of America?" The Queen inquired. "That would take months, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Always assuming we actually had the 'reinforcements' and the necessary war-fighting materiel to hand in the first place. As you will know well over half the Army's tanks and armoured vehicles were based in West Germany at the time of the October War and the factories which produced those vehicles were mothballed last year because of the chronic post-war shortages of high-grade steels and the hundred and one other things that are required to build sophisticated modern fighting vehicles. Priority was given to warship construction and maintenance and in keeping our surviving aircraft flying, Ma'am."

"Quite." The Queen tried not to sound overly worried. "My word, the thought of having Russian tanks parking on the beaches of the northern Persian Gulf ready to drive into Kuwait and Saudi Arabia is hardly an appealing prospect?"

“No, ma’am,” Margaret Thatcher concurred, “it is most certainly not!”

Chapter 60

12:30 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Joint Interrogation Centre, Fort Rinella, Malta

"My name is Rachel Angelika Piotrowska," she explained unhurriedly. "You and your case officer, Arkady Pavlovich Rykov, knew me as a fading English courtesan called Clara Pullman. As it happens I was born in Lodz, in Poland in 1928, and I was just old enough to be able to kill Fascists when the war came. In 1945 the Red Army liberated Ravensbrück, where the Nazis had left me to starve to death. Despite everything I had been through I was still an innocent in some ways at the time. But then I was raped by one Red Army pig, then another, and more than once by several of the pigs at once. That was when I started 'putting down' Soviet 'animals'. *Like you.*"

Samuel Calleja stood before her desk in the hastily set up office in one of the upper caverns of the old fortress. His hands were cuffed behind his back and he was swaying, exhausted, on his feet. He was naked apart from his stinking, soiled skivvies. Two redcaps flanked him, both hefting long night sticks.

Rachel met the man's sullen stare with coldly unblinking eyes.

"You will tell me about your disappearing act around the time HMS Torquay was blown up?"

"I don't have to tell you anything."

"No, you don't," she agreed.

Samuel Calleja tried to stand up straight.

"I don't care what you do to me," he spat.

Rachel shrugged. She nodded to the Redcap standing menacingly behind the prisoner's left shoulder. It was a pre-arranged sign; while Samuel Calleja squeezed his eyes shut and braced himself for the first impact of a night stick across his naked back the Redcap stepped back and picked up a blanket from the floor which he shook out and draped around the shivering man's shoulders.

"I'm not going to do anything to you, Samuel." Rachel declared,

assessing the confusion in the prisoner's eyes as she quirked an unfunny smile. "I am not a monster like Arkady Pavlovich."

"Then what are we doing here?"

"We're having a nice friendly chat and once you've told me what I want to know you'll feel a lot better about things."

"You're mad!"

"Yes, a little bit. But I'm tired of hurting people. So perhaps I'm not quite as crazy as I was a few days ago."

The man was too weary to think clearly. He had never been trained to resist interrogation; even when he had led an assassination squad to murder the post-war Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet – and incidentally, his wife who was unfortunate enough to be in the car with him at the time – he had not actually fired a shot. The killers had been Moscow-trained thugs, Arkady's people. His job was to make it possible for Arkady's people to merge into the background of Maltese society, to provide places to hide their weapons and explosives, to be the guardian of their radio, a courier and postman. He had never fired a gun in anger or personally harmed a hair on anybody's head. Moreover, he had no idea if the sabotaging of British communications and radar across the archipelago was Arkady's doing; or even why the Russian had spared him after he had butchered all his friends...

"Did you plant the bombs that sank HMS Torquay, Sam?"

Samuel Calleja shook his head before he knew he had reacted.

"Okay," Rachel half-smiled. "That didn't hurt, did it?"

Again, the man shook his head involuntarily, before his conscious mind had had a chance to catch up with his body's instinctive response.

"If it wasn't you, who was it who planted the bombs?"

"I don't know. I was already hiding in the safe house at Qormi by then. I was to send daily reports about V-Bomber movements, and..."

There were places in Qormi, north east of RAF Luqa, where aircraft parked at dispersals, and take offs and landings could be observed during the day, so that made a kind of sense. Anybody with a good pair of binoculars in Rabat or Mdina would probably have a better view of the comings and goings at the air base. Why Qormi? Because it was easier to hide in the post 1945 war close-packed urban sprawl?

"And *what else,* Sam?" Rachel had not moved from her seat at the desk piled with files and loose documents.

“And coded messages Arkady Pavlovich needed to send to...”

“To where?”

“I don’t know. The code sign changed every twenty-four hours.”

“What happened to your radio?”

“It will still be in the basement of the house in Qormi. Arkady Pavlovich came to collect me the night before the invasion.”

“He told you it was an *invasion*?”

“Not exactly. He just knew something was going to happen. He said we had to be in Mdina when it happened.”

“Why did he take you with him?”

Samuel Calleja’s eyes clouded with new confusion.

“I mean,” Rachel observed scornfully, “it wasn’t as if you were going to be much use to him in a fight?”

The man bristled at this insult but he remained mute.

“You could have shot me three, maybe four times in Admiral Christopher’s office while I was dealing with Arkady Pavlovich,” she reminded him. “How did Admiral Christopher get separated from his men, by the way?”

“I don’t...”

“When the Soviet paratroopers assaulted the headquarters complex most of the fighting took place on the lower levels. I discovered you, Arkady Pavlovich and two dead British officers on the upper floor of the complex. The other officers had obviously been disarmed and executed.”

“I had no part of that!”

Rachel rose slowly to her feet and came around the desk. She settled in front of the man, resting the back of her thighs against the table. She folded her arms.

“Convince me,” she invited with an absolutely humourless smile.

“Arkady and I followed the second wave of troops into the building. The first wave got driven down into the cellars. There was nowhere for anybody to hide, no ways around the defenders. They all had Sten guns and grenades were going off. We ran into two officers carrying the Admiral. They were trying to walk him to somewhere safer. He’d already been shot...”

Rachel decided that sounded vaguely plausible.

“And?” She prompted.

Arkady Pavlovich forced them to carry the Admiral up the stairs. I didn’t

know where we were going; I'd never been inside the headquarters, you see. When we got to the staff room outside the Commander-in-Chief's office Arkady told the other two men to put the Admiral in a chair and then he, well..."

"Murdered them in cold blood?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"We took the Admiral into the office. Arkady reckoned there would be another way out of the complex from Admiral Christopher's office but there wasn't. And then about a minute later you walked in."

Rachel stared at the man and waited, knowing there was more.

"I think Arkady Pavlovich thought we could trade our lives for the Admiral's."

"He said that to you?"

"Yes."

"What else did he say to you?"

"He talked about getting off the island and being picked up by a submarine but that might have been a lie. He said our comrades had done their work well and 'blinded' the British. I think he honestly believed that the British would surrender. He was looking forward to settling old scores."

Rachel shivered.

Nobody had been closer to the monster that was Arkady Pavlovich Rykov than she; she would probably have been the first 'old score' he settled.

"Why didn't he kill me weeks ago?" She asked, not expecting to get an answer.

"He knew he was 'blown'. If you'd gone missing or been killed the authorities would have come straight to his door."

Rachel levered herself away from the desk.

She stood directly in front of the man.

"Why did you betray your own people, your own family?"

"I've betrayed nobody," Samuel Calleja hissed angrily. "Nothing will ever change on Malta unless the Maltese people throw off the capitalist yoke!"

Chapter 61

14:45 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
USS Charles F. Adams (DDG-2), 3 miles East of St Paul's Bay, Malta

The bodies of the dead were in rows on the destroyer's stern deck. The dead outnumbered the living by approximately two to one.

The survivors had all been from the Turkish battlecruiser Yavuz; the men who had escaped alive from the Admiral Kutuzov – if there were any – must have drifted elsewhere in another, separate little Sargasso Sea of detritus. The two great ships had gone down several miles apart and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that while one slick of human misery had been washed inshore, the other had been swept far out to sea.

The small British minesweeper, HMS Repton had manoeuvred close alongside the USS Charles F. Adams's starboard side so that the two captains could converse via bull horns.

"I LOOK FOREWARD TO RELIEVING YOU OF YOUR BURDEN, SIR?" The youthful lieutenant who commanded the short, broad four-hundred-ton minesweeper observed cheerfully.

"BY ALL MEANS, SIR!" Commander Simon McGiven replied.

In the near distance a big grey ocean-going tug that was at least twice the size of the Ton class minesweeper thrust purposefully towards the two warships. The big American guided missile destroyer's fuel bunkers were not, strictly speaking, *empty* but her pumps could not pump the near solid sludge left in the bottom her tanks and even if they could her boilers would probably not have been capable of burning it. Diesel generators kept the warship's essential services running in a disabled sort of fashion but she could not steam another inch and slowly but surely, she was being driven by the wind and current onto the rocky coast of the main island.

All the while the recovery of the living and the dead continued.

Forty-two-year-old Simon McGiven had been born in Cleveland, Ohio. His father had spent thirty years on the Great Lakes and hoped his son would be a school teacher or a bank clerk but then the Japanese had bombed Pearl

Harbour, and the rest, as they say, was history. When the time had come to return to a civilian career that he had never wanted he had applied to stay in the Navy. His first command had been an old World War II vintage barely modernised Fletcher class destroyer; in comparison to that old charabanc the Charles F. Adams was like a racing Ferrari. Except, of course, when she was dead in the water and sometime in the next ninety minutes she was liable to be blown onto exactly the sort of lee shore that must have terrified old-time sailors.

"MY ORDERS ARE TO STAND BY YOU UNTIL OUR MUSCULAR FRIEND TAKES THE STRAIN, SIR!" The kid on the bridge of the minesweeper explained.

McGiven had been about to suggest he might care to take his ship around to his port side and start hauling bodies out of the sea. However, it seemed that the kid's superiors had informed him that his first duty and the only rule that applied today was to ensure that whatever happened, the USS Charles F. Adams did not get dashed to pieces on the rocks of the Maltese Archipelago.

"THANK YOU, SIR!" McGiven could see the party on the Minesweeper's stern clearing gear and standing ready to shoot a line across to the Charles F. Adams's fo'c'sle.

"I WILL HOLD POSITION TO LEEWARD AT YOUR CONVENIENCE AND STAND READY TO PASS A TOW LINE, SIR!"

McGiven waved acknowledgement and lowered his bull horn.

"There's a survivor demanding to speak to the Captain, sir," a peeved yeoman reported. "Funny little guy. He's only got one leg and there's this Greek woman with him. They're tied together and she won't let anybody untie them, sir."

McGiven handed the bull horn to the bridge speaker.

"One leg?"

"Yes, sir!"

"And he's tied to a Greek woman?" He flicked a look at the Officer of the Deck who risked a grin. McGiven ran a tight ship but he had been in command long enough – seven months – to allow his people to know that although the old man might be a slave-driving martinet, he also had a sense of humour. "This I've got to see," he chuckled.

Chapter 62

17:04 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Karaj, 42 kilometres WNW of the Centre of Tehran, Iran

Everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong. The Red Air Force had failed to make an appearance that morning and because Colonel Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik had made the unforgivably bad mistake of actually trusting the Red Air Force, he had prematurely pulled the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment back from its forward perimeter and allowed the Iranians room in which to deploy their armour!

However, the worst thing was that because Kurochnik, having trusted the Red Air Force to airlift the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment out of its holding positions in and around Mehrabad Air Base in western Tehran, had also allowed his men to expend practically all their ammunition by the time daylight was breaking over the wide expanse of the airfield.

'*There has been a change of plan, Comrade Konstantin Yakovlevich*,' the arsehole at HQ had said over the scrambler link – as calm as you like – as if he was sitting on the veranda of his fucking dacha! '*Your regiment will have to hold on until later this afternoon!*'

It had been getting light about then.

Staying where he was on the airfield was a bad idea.

No cover, no bullets, no hope.

Colonel Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik had hastily reviewed his options; which were few and uniformly unattractive. In ten minutes it would be fully light and it was this that mandated immediate action.

'ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK!'

The men of the mixed force of poorly entrenched disorganised Iranian infantry and armour holding the western side of Mehrabad Air Base where the single-strand wire mess fence separated the runway from fields dotted with mud brick and haphazardly distributed old stone houses either ran away or surrendered. Four hull down Centurions never fired a shot and their crews could not wait to spring their hatches and throw up their hands.

Ever a practical man Kurochnik paraded his prisoners, some two hundred unsoldierly men in front of his newly won defensive positions and ordered them to sit down on the ground.

There was nothing quite as effective as a human shield to dissuade the enemy from mortaring and shelling one's trenches! A hurried head count revealed that he had over three hundred effectives, four Centurions, several jeeps and a couple of trucks, and about a hundred American made carbines including a few brand-new M-16 assault rifles all with plenty of ammunition. Nobody knew how to drive the tanks but they were already well dug in, hull down and his men soon figured out how to traverse the turrets and how to shoot the big guns; guns were guns so that was child's play. The important thing was that he had gained possession of ground that he could actually defend. Although his rear was fairly flat, open country, good for tanks, he could see for miles and nobody was going to creep up on him or surprise him. There was a sparsely built up area to the north, his right, but once he had extended a picket into the nearest building he felt secure on that flank. Directly to his left, due south there was more broken ground, useless if an enemy wanted to come at him in force.

The Iranians had sent over a Colonel to talk terms around mid-morning.

The man was an idiot; typical of the westernized playboys the Shah sent abroad to *Sandhurst* and *West Point* to be taught how to be gentlemen rather than soldiers. His uniform was immaculate, his moustache freshly manicured that morning and his boots so highly polished a real soldier could use them as shaving mirrors.

Konstantin Kurochnik had been astonished when the other man addressed him in moderately coarse *Moskva* Russian.

'Lay down your arms now and we won't cut off your balls,' he proposed, sniffing distastefully as if he had never smelled faeces and spilled entrails in the morning air of a battlefield. 'You will be treated as prisoners of war.'

The Soviet Union had never signed up to the Geneva Convention or any of The Hague protocols so that was absolutely the best offer Kurochnik was going to get.

The commander of the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment had put on his innocently perplexed face; the one he wore when he was dealing with particularly retarded senior Red Air Force officers.

'I don't have enough men to take the whole garrison of Tehran prisoner,'

he had retorted in apparent bewilderment.

‘Ah, you don’t understand my Russian?’

‘I understand your *Moskva* bollocks just fine, Comrade!’

The exchange had been going on in full view and the hearing of dozens of Kurochnik’s men, most of whom had started laughing. Several men had started taunting the Iranian.

‘SILENCE!’ The commanding officer of the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment had bellowed like a brown bear with toothache. Turning his full attention back to the Iranian parley officer he had said, soberly: ‘I am an officer of the Red Army. I surrender to no man.’

The Iranians had mounted a piecemeal frontal attack eventually but only after they had mortared and shelled and machine-gunned the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment’s positions for over an hour. By then they had exterminated the ‘human shield’ in front of the paratroopers’ lines, literally chopping and mashing their own people to bits without in the least inconveniencing Kurochnik’s men. He had given the order to wait until the onrushing enemy reached the mangled remains of their own comrades before opening fire. It had been pure murder.

The Red Air Force had finally arrived about ninety minutes ago, randomly dumping long strings of bombs across the heart of the city, one line of projectiles falling uncomfortably close to the paratroopers’ positions sending every man diving headlong for cover.

There had been too few helicopters to lift the whole regiment out of Tehran; that did not matter because four out of every ten men who had been alive that morning were dead.

Such was war.

“Nobody looks back!” Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochnik barked as he jumped down onto the ground thirty-five miles kilometres west of where the Red Air Force had collected him and the last men of the rear-guard defending the western boundary of Mehrabad Air Base.

“NOBODY LOOK BACK!”

In that split second the whole world seemed to burn pure, blinding white.

There was no noise other than the churning of the rotors of Mil Mi-6 heavy lift helicopters which had belatedly lifted him and the last survivors of the 51st Guards Airborne Regiment rear-guard out of the doomed city.

Pausing several seconds until he knew it was safe to look back the

veteran soldier turned around.

"Shit!" He muttered involuntarily as he eyed the giant mushroom cloud rising above what had once been the capital city of Iran.

There was no way that was a piddling little fifteen kiloton tactical nuclear warhead!

He could see the pressure wave of the huge explosion radiating out; of Tehran there was nothing left, just churning superheated irradiated dust. The breeze plucked at his face ahead of the approaching over-pressure wave.

Nobody had told him that there had been a change of plan.

If the fucking plan had been to nuke the whole fucking city all along why the fuck had he had to leave two hundred of the finest fucking combat troops in the whole fucking world dead on the ground?

What the fuck is going on?

Chapter 63

19:35 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Verdala Palace, Malta

Earlier that afternoon Peter Christopher and his wife had gone out to meet his men – and one woman, Rosa Calleja – as they clambered down from the dusty old buses requisitioned to bring them across the island from Kalkara. It had been an emotional reunion and there had been tears in the eyes of several Talaveras and both women. While Marija's husband, stiffly formal in his new uniform but incapable of not constantly breaking into conspiratorial grins with his men, attempted to maintain 'proper' decorum; Marija felt under no such obligation. Once her husband had saluted and shaken hands solemnly she seized hands and pecked cheeks, beaming at each battered hero as he stepped down and blinked in the glare of the hastily erected arc lights outside the 'Palace'.

Her brother, Joe, had held up a defensive hand, abjuring physical contact. The last time his sister had tried to embrace him back at Royal Naval Hospital Bighi it had almost finished him off. Marija settled for a mock hug before studying her younger sibling. The man the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta regarded as a Bolshevik trades union troublemaker was every bit as much the hero of the Battle of Malta as any man. There was a lump in her throat and she thought she was going to burst into tears again. Her brother's emotions were not dissimilar but he had been pumped so full of pain killers prior to his departure from Kalkara that he was hardly aware of much of what was going on around him.

Marija and Rosa had looked at each other and embraced.

However, time had been short. The newcomers had needed watering and feeding and the staff of the Verdala Palace had been instructed to 'spruce up' and make everything and everybody 'ship shape' ahead of the arrival of the 'VIPs from London'.

Thus, it was that Peter Christopher, Alan Hannay, Dermot O'Reilly, Spider McCann, Jack Griffin, and thirteen other Talavera's formed into a

parade line in the Reception Hall of the old castle. Rosa Calleja had hung back in the shadows, desperately trying not to make eyes at or to constantly distract HMS Talavera's former Supply Officer. Marija meanwhile had taken her place to her husband's left in the line.

She squeezed his hand for the others had brought sad news from Bighi. Another Talavera had died of his wounds that morning and Miles Weiss, the destroyer's Executive Officer, had not yet regained consciousness following an emergency operation to relieve what had turned out to be a massive sub-cranial haematoma. Miles had seemed fine – albeit a little dazed - until several hours after the battle, and then he had begun to exhibit symptoms of a mild concussion which had got progressively worse. He had had some kind of epileptic fit while he was being taken into the operating theatre.

"Admiral Clarey has had to return to his flagship," Captain Lionel Faulkes, a veteran U-boat hunter from the days of the Battle of the Atlantic in Hitler's War who having retired from the Navy in June 1962, now found himself the senior surviving Royal Navy staff officer on Malta. He had arrived shortly ahead of the VIPs. Faulkes was the man who had patiently, with great charm and pragmatic dexterity guided Peter Christopher and Talavera's Navigating Officer, Canadian Lieutenant Dermot O'Reilly through the hasty preparation of the official 'After Action Report' of the ship's part in the Battle of Malta the previous night.

Faulkes ran his eye down the line, smiled at Marija and returned his full attention to the tall young man who was about to become - somewhat reluctantly – a national hero.

"Air Vice-Marshal French will be accompanied by the First Sea Lord, Sir David Luce, Mr Neave, the Secretary of State for Supply, and Mr McLeod, the Secretary of State for Information and the Leader of the House of Commons." Behind him the film crew which had arrived with a crowd of journalists – who were milling around outside in the courtyard – was setting up, installing still more dazzling lights. The first two planes into RAF Luqa had carried over fifty doctors and nurses and several tons of medical supplies. The VIPs' aircraft had likewise been packed with medical supplies and transported several dozen 'experts', mainly Royal Engineers to the archipelago.

"I will do my best to stop this thing becoming a scrum," Captain Faulkes promised. "You will be introduced to each of the VIPs in turn by the Acting

C-in-C; thereafter you will escort the aforementioned VIPs down the line introducing each man to Sir David Luce. The other VIPs will follow you and the First Sea Lord as you progress down the line. If you would introduce each man," he glanced to Marija, "and your good wife in a moderately declamatory fashion so that each VIP catches each name that would be most helpful, Commander."

"I shall do my best, sir."

Captain Faulkes was shorter by nearly a head than Talavera's former commanding officer and significantly more than twice his age, his grey hair was thinning and his eyes a little rheumy. His was a very old head on a body wearied by a life leavened with more than its fair share of spills and privations. But for a quirk of fate might have died with so many of his friends and colleagues at Mdina two days ago. He felt the loss of the Fighting Admiral as any friend would; the Navy had lost its finest son and yet when he looked at Peter Christopher he now found himself looking at a youthful reincarnation of the father.

The King is dead; long live the King!

Lionel Faulkes had never married. His naval career had been everything to him and he had never wanted for company; the countless friendships he had formed in peace and war had been the real joy of his life. Wherever he went or looked in Navy circles he saw and was found by true friends, such was the real underlying, virtually indestructible strength of the Navy. Within those circles he had always been an oddly bookish man, the butt of many well-meant jibes for his scholarly conversation and carefully considered opinions and perspectives. After the 1945 war, his general health and constitution having been somewhat impaired by having had two ships sunk under him, he had become a career 'staffer'. He had been an instructor at Dartmouth when Peter Christopher had scraped through by the skin of his teeth, much to his father's infuriation at the time. Faulkes had not actually taught the boy but his father had asked him to 'keep an eye on the lad', so he had, albeit from afar and nothing which had happened to that apparently callow, unfocused youth, had subsequently surprised him.

In most of the ways that mattered Peter Christopher had already been his father's son back in those days at Dartmouth; he just had not realised it. He was a natural seaman with an innate eye for the weather and sea conditions, a born ship handler even when he was messing about in a skiff on the River

Dart in the shadow of the Britannia Royal Naval College on the hill above it. He had always been the sort of man others followed; it was simply that he had only latterly accepted in full the terms of his contract with the Royal Navy. Back at Dartmouth he had still been trying to be a civilian in uniform.

'Yea, and if some god shall wreck me in the wine-dark deep, even so I will endure… For already have I suffered full much, and much have I toiled in perils of waves and war. Let this be added to the tale of those.'

He wondered if the VIPs who were about to march into the Verdala Palace truly understood that they had just found their young Odysseus freshly returned from the Trojan Wars?

There was a commotion outside, the bawled commands of a drill sergeant and the sound of booted feet coming to attention on granite flagstones.

And then events began to blur.

Admiral Sir David Luce stood before his old friend's son.

Salutes were exchanged and firm handshakes clasped and held.

Peter Christopher was hardly aware of the anonymous men in suits behind the professional head of the Royal Navy.

"May I have the honour of introducing you to my wife, Marija, sir?"

"It would be my honour, *Sir* Peter."

The younger man hesitated. His father's baronetcy had been hereditary. He remembered somebody telling him that in Lisbon in what seemed like another lifetime long before he had ever set eyes upon Marija. He tried to be properly formal but afterwards he could not actually remember what he said next.

Marija stepped forward to greet Sir David Luce.

The older man tried not to beam like an idiot but it was impossible.

"How do you do, *Lady* Marija?" He inquired, clinging onto his composure only from habit.

Chapter 64

20:59 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
Forward HQ of 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army, Ardabil, Iran

Colonel General Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's mood was such that even the arrival of Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, the Minister of Defence in the ruling collective leadership of the Mother Country, could do little to dampen his growing elation.

"Comrade Konstantin Yakovlevich managed to get over three hundred of his men out before the Red Air Force finally got its act together at Tehran," the younger of the two most heavily decorated surviving heroes of the Great Patriotic War – by a mere six years in age but in appearance ten to fifteen years – reported with a wolf-like smile. All *real* tank men needed to have the soul of a wolf, to have the steely resolve to exploit a chink in the enemy's defences with ruthless, predatory hunger.

Babadzhanian had casually come to attention when his superior had stomped into the luxurious, opulent surrounding of the mansion of the former governor of Ardabil. Now he relaxed and led the newcomer to the map table – until yesterday the Iranian Military Governor of Ardabil's banqueting table – and waved at the high rocky plain south of the great barrier of the Alborz Mountains stretching all the way from the Caucasus to Afghanistan.

"Kurochnik says the Air Force used a bigger bomb than planned?"

Vasily Chuikov's wickedly cherubic wrinkled features momentarily displayed a flash of irritation.

"The aircraft they were going to send in the morning crashed on take-off. They loaded the only available 'fully generated', whatever the fuck that means," he complained like a disgruntled football coach whose star forward has just missed an open goal, "bomb onto another Tu-95. It took them all day to get the bloody thing working. Their story is that they didn't realise it was over twenty times 'bigger' than the plan called for until they were half way to the target! Fucking idiots!"

Babadzhanian had mandated the destruction of western Tehran and of

Mehrabad Air Base; it seemed the Red Air Force had demolished the *whole city*. It made little or no difference to the ongoing conduct of Operation Nakazyvat whether a Hiroshima sized bomb in the range fifteen to twenty kilotons had been employed or a three hundred kiloton weapon had been deployed over Tehran. Other than in the sense that if he had known the Red Air Force was going to obliterate the city anyway, he would not have wasted the lives of several hundred of his best – and in the current situation, irreplaceable - airborne troops in a demonstration primarily designed to decapitate the Shah's regime, and to humiliate and break the will of the Iranian people to resist. That was the trouble with the Red Air Force, the word 'proportionality' had never appeared in any of its manuals!

Nevertheless, Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian's mood was optimistic. He had specified a 'limited tactical nuclear strike' on Tehran, hoping that such a strike might be 'tolerated' by the British and the Americans if and when it became advantageous to repeat the medicine on Baghdad. The use of such a large 'city killer' warhead on a capital city might make repetition of the gambit problematic; but that was a thing he would worry about another day.

Today, his armoured spearheads were already well down the road from the Armenian border to Tabriz and after a brief overnight consolidation, leading elements of the 3rd Guards Tank regiment would soon be pushing west from the ever-expanding 'Ardabil Defence Zone' towards distant Tabriz from the east. Konstantin Kurochnik's fifty percent butcher's bill in Tehran apart, casualties had thus far been negligible.

"Still nothing from the British or the Americans?" Babadzhanian asked, looking up from his maps.

"Nothing," Chuikov chuckled so deeply it was surprising that the window panes did not vibrate in sympathy. "The Malta demonstration still has them shitting in their pants, Comrade Hamazasp Khachaturi!"

Chapter 65

22:35 Hours
Sunday 5th April 1964
USS Charles F. Adams (DDG-2), Kalkara Creek, Malta

Rachel Piotrowska had been vexed to discover that she had only been asleep a little over a half-an-hour when she was awakened. Within minutes she was being escorted down to the jetty in Rinella Creek for the short passage by boat beneath the Bighi cliffs towards the silhouettes of the nearest of the two big modern American guided missile destroyers.

Beyond the USS Charles F. Adams her sister ship, the USS Berkeley was slowly backing out into the Grand Harbour, having cast off her lines from the long low bulk of the oiler beyond. She sounded her steam horn several times as she began to glide past the nearer destroyer.

It was a clear night and all around the anchorage lights twinkled.

But for the filthy flotsam and jetsam drifting in Kalkara Creek and the taint of burning everything was eerily normally.

Onboard the Charles F. Adams Rachel was taken directly to the small Captain's day cabin on the bridge of the American destroyer.

"Commander Simon McGiven," the dapper man with the receding hairline and firm dry handshake said introducing himself as he rose from the papers he had been shuffling on his narrow, neat desk. "Thank you for coming onboard, ma'am. My Operations Officer is processing the survivors we picked up this afternoon. They all seem to be off the Yavuz, the old Turkish dreadnought. But," the destroyer's commanding officer shrugged, "we've got one guy, well, him and his female companion, actually, who might be of interest to *your* people at the Joint Interrogation Centre. I say 'might' because frankly, we can't make out a lot of what he's been saying and the woman doesn't seem to speak English or Russian or any kind of Greek that any of my people can make head or tale of. You are a linguistic specialist, I gather?"

Rachel stifled a yawn.

She was still dressed in the over-sized, coarse, itchy battledress top she

had been given the day before. She had since found a vest to wear beneath it and swapped her Army issue trousers for blue slacks she had seen lying on a pile of washed clothes at the Joint Interrogation Centre. She knew she must look odd wearing this particular trousseau with hopelessly impractical cork sandals on her feet and her hair a hopeless mess...

"Actually, I am a civilian intelligence analyst attached to the C-in-C's personal staff," she explained. It would not do to tell the commanding officer of a United States Navy warship that she was a spy working for, and only for, the Director General of MI6. "I speak many languages. Hopefully, I may be able to help."

The one-legged man lying in the sick bay cot might have been in his forties or fifties. The hard-faced woman with sun-bleached fair hair was a little younger. Both of the survivors realised immediately Rachel walked into the sick bay alcove deep within the aft superstructure of the American destroyer that, at last, somebody was taking them seriously.

The woman was clutching the man's right hand in both her hands like her life depended upon it. She instantly began to babble at Rachel and to the bespectacled, studious looking man in his early thirties whom she had been introduced to as Lieutenant-Commander Felix Kocinski. Kocinski, Rachel had discovered was the son of second generation Polish emigrants to the United States; he spoke a little pigeon Polish and had a very limited 'phrase book' vocabulary of the sort of flowery old-fashioned Russian that might have been spoken in Leo Tolstoy's time.

Rachel found herself staring at the man in the sick bay cot.

With an effort she clenched her teeth to stop her mouth hanging agape.

Disconcertingly, the man in the cot registered her momentary shock; but made no attempt to speak or remark upon it. Presumably, because like any apex predator he knew that the scent of blood was the first, not the last act in any hunt.

Rachel tried not to think about the long burst of fire from her Kalashnikov walking Arkady Pavlovich Rykov back across the room in the Citadel at Mdina; or how his broken body had jerked to a halt against the wall and slid, partially eviscerated, down to the floor...

Her discomfiture was brief, fleeting; concealed in an instant.

She was fully in control by the time she settled on the hard chair Lieutenant-Commander Kocinski gallantly drew up for her. She held up her

hand for the other woman to stop talking. After a few moments there was relative silence. Deep in the ship the hull gently hummed with the noise of distant generators and the rushing of the fire room blowers. The sick bay stank of disinfectant and outside the alcove – a small side compartment with three narrow cots – everything was bustling activity.

She pointed to herself and said in a random Russian dialect used throughout the Ukraine and in the border territories with the former Warsaw Pact allies bordering the Black Sea: "My name is Rachel. I am an interpreter. I speak Russki, English, Bulgarian, Rumanian, and a little Greek, but only of the islands..."

"I am Eleni," the woman survivor of the sinking of the Yavuz blurted. "My family fish... We captured by Roma soldiers... We sunk by Turkish ship... We taken onboard..."

Rachel translated for the benefit of the Operations Officer of the USS Charles F. Adams.

"She is a Turkish Cypriot," she explained in passing. "She was once married to a Greek fisherman from Samothrace who died some years ago in a storm..."

Lieutenant-Commander Kocinski wanted to ask a raft of questions but Rachel shook her head. Now that her initial shock had subsided she was studying the face of the man in the bed and he was returning her stare with a cool calculation that seemed wholly *wrong*.

Rachel felt as if she knew him and he was looking at her as if he knew her; and yet that was impossible and they both *knew* it.

Nevertheless...*his* resemblance to Arkady Pavlovich Rykov was *uncanny*.

Do I know this man?

He seemed to recognise her and understanding this – intuitively, or by some unspoken sign between the two of them – the Greek woman instantly shut her mouth.

"Eleni is a little bit *distraught*," Rachel said softly to Kocinski. "I'm sure you have a million things to do, Commander. Perhaps, if you left us alone? I'll give you a full report of everything I learn later."

The man hesitated.

"As you wish, Miss Piotrowska." He departed leaving the hatch dogged open.

Rachel pursed her lips and tried to remember where she had seen the man

in the bed.

"*Russki*?" She frowned. "*Roma*?"

The man who could have been Arkady Pavlovich Rykov's twin brother snorted a barely audible grunt of what his eyes told her was exasperated incredulity.

"The World has gone fucking mad," he sighed in Rumanian in a hoarse whisper before he started coughing up the last dregs of the muck he had swallowed in all the hours he had been in the water.

Eleni babbled at him incoherently.

"What is she saying?" The man asked presently.

"She wants to know if you and I are old friends," Rachel reported sourly.

The man in the cot vented a feeble guffaw of amusement.

For the benefit of his companion he shook his head.

My life is turning into a fucking comedy of errors...

The one-legged man had absolutely no idea how he had found himself in the water a couple of hundred metres from the capsized hull of the Yavuz with a dozen other people; or how he and Eleni had ended up clinging to a raft, or later lashed together either side of a what must have been some kind of steel drum or buoy. He had wanted to succumb to the cold so badly...but the bloody woman would not let him sleep...

And now he was onboard an American warship being interrogated by the mistress of the most dangerous man he had ever known, the former KGB Head of Station in Istanbul; the very same man whose persona he had stolen to escape the retribution of his old Soviet *friends*...

Chapter 66

21:50 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire

Seamus McCormick felt much safer on his own. Yesterday had been a nightmare; there had been no alternative to assembling the Redeyes in the back of the lorry parked between the abandoned farm buildings within sight of the main road just outside Redditch. Military convoys had trundled in and out of the town, twice aircraft had flown over very low. Miraculously, nobody had stopped to investigate the Bedford truck parked up in open view.

After dusk he had walked and talked the two IRA men through the basics.

Once primed the M171 shoulder launcher required to be pointed at the target and for the trigger to be pulled. However, nothing was ever quite that simple.

'The missile acquires the target's infrared, or heat, signature only *after* launch.'

He had had to explain everything in painful detail.

'Even if the missile is pointing directly up the tail pipe of a jet engine it takes several seconds for it to acquire the target. This means you have to aim the launcher at where you judge the *hottest* heat signature will be in say, three or four seconds time *after* you fire the missile.'

Frank Reynolds had eventually cottoned on.

'So, what happens if it doesn't *acquire* a target?'

'It will carry on in more or less the direction it was launched until it finds a heat source or it runs out of fuel and crashes several miles away.'

Sean O'Flynn had decided he was the one who was going to shoot the Redeye they were taking to Brize Norton.

'What if we just fired it at the control tower?'

'You'd get a face full of superheated spent rocket fuel if you aimed it at a ground target without launching it at an angle to the horizontal of at least forty-five degrees. Aiming this kind of missile at a ground target is virtually

impossible.'

'Forty-five degrees?'

'The launcher ejects the missile from the tube and the rocket motor kicks in the moment the guidance system detects it has reached a viable launch velocity. That means the rocket motor will initiate after it has travelled about fifteen to twenty feet.'

The two IRA men had unloaded their Redeye and stashed it in the nearby outhouses and gone off on foot to steal a vehicle. The arrangement had been that if they were not back inside an hour he would leave. In the event he had given his 'comrades' seventy minutes before he departed. He had toyed with the idea of retrieving the third Redeye, or failing that, booby-trapping it. In the end he decided to stick to the original plan.

If Frank Reynolds and Sean O'Flynn managed to create some kind of diversion at Brize Norton, good for them!

Salisbury Plain and parts of the Cotswolds were home turf for most British Army infantrymen, tankers and engineers alike. Cheltenham had had a small World War II aerodrome before the October War but it had been far too small for modern jet aircraft; hence the brutal destruction of Cheltenham Race Course, slashing nearly three miles of tarmac between the foothills to the north east deep into the suburbs of the town to the south west.

It was amazing what the British could achieve when they set their mind to it!

The villages of Bishop's Cleeve and Southam were almost directly under the flight path of the new air base. When the prevailing wind blew in from the Atlantic every aircraft flew low over the two villages; because no matter the ruthlessness with which the builders had carved the new runway out of the Gloucestershire countryside and demolished houses on the boundaries of the field, approaching planes – V-Bombers and big jets alike - knew they had to touch down virtually on the threshold of the main runway to be able to come to a safe halt short of Cheltenham town. Approaching low, sinking fast towards the gently rising Cotswold hills beneath them, landing required fine judgement; take off was simpler with the raw power of a modern jet bomber or jetliner's engines beneath a pilot's throttle hand. But landing, well, landing was a *challenge* even when the prevailing wind blew.

Sean McCormick had done the basic trigonometry, checked the arithmetic and worked out just how low aircraft would have to fly over

Bishop's Cleeve and Southam to land safely at Cheltenham. The numbers he got back were; below a thousand feet over Bishop's Cleeve, and a lot less than four hundred feet over Southam.

If the Redeye performed anywhere near to specification for a straightforward 'tail pipe shoot' those sort of ranges were *point blank*. Jesus, he might have had an even chance of winging a big aircraft with an old-fashioned Bazooka at five hundred feet!

The problem was he had to find a launch location where he could set up and wait for an aircraft to overfly him. Somewhere within a thirty-degree arc either side of the likely flight path would do nicely but the hills overlooking the air base were alive with troops and police. Everywhere within the five-mile defence exclusion zone around RAF Cheltenham was prime shoot first and ask questions later territory. He had only got this far because the dozy squaddies manning two roadblocks had taken his word for it – they had not looked overlong or hard at his movement orders – that he was delivering 'sensitive and very delicate replacement parts' for RAF Cheltenham's ILS (Instrument Landing System) and replacement 'guidance gizmos' for No 25 Squadron's two Bloodhound long-rang SAM batteries. These latter units were both located within the boundaries of the air base itself; and allegedly, 'slaved' to the local RAF air traffic control radars.

If his six-month old intelligence regarding the disposition of No 25 Squadron had been out of date he would have been dead by now. A couple of half-sentient questions would have revealed that he knew precisely nothing about the particulars of the air base's *Instrument Landing System* and he would have been reaching for the Browning forty-five under the dashboard.

With nowhere to hide a great big lump of a lorry like the Bedford he had brazenly parked the vehicle on the village green at Bishop's Cleeve, gone in search of the local Police House, told the local bobby his *ILS and Bloodhound* story and explained – well, complained actually - that the air base never accepted deliveries after dark so he was 'going to have to sit out the night here'. The policeman's wife, a skinny, wrinkled woman who despite appearances was most likely still in her forties had offered him a cup of tea.

'Sorry, I can't leave the lorry unattended for more than a few minutes at a time,' he had explained and disappeared back into the night again. He planned to move on around dawn, attempt to drive off road into the woods

and find somewhere where he could shoot the Redeyes from just inside a protective tree line. He had no idea how practical this would prove to be but that was always the problem when a man was making everything up as he went along.

The first time he got unlucky it would be the last.

Chapter 67

02:45 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Verdala Palace, Malta

Admiral Sir David Luce had been roused from an uneasy sleep by Captain Lionel Faulkes. His old friend Julian Christopher had asked for Faulkes as his Senior Staff Captain shortly after arriving in Malta in December last year, and the First Sea Lord had been happy to oblige.

"Who did you say this bloody woman is?" He asked again now that he was more fully cognisant of his surrounding as he pulled on his jacket. The First Sea Lord always felt undressed without his tie and jacket; looking the part was half the battle in high command.

"Air Vice-Marshal French was a little vague about that, sir," the other man apologised. "However, he was most insistent that we should hear what she has to say."

David Luce had not known very much about Dan French until recently. However, Julian Christopher had spoken of him as a 'very safe pair of hands' and a man in whom he 'confided without fear or favour'; and the airman's conduct of himself and his command in the intolerable and painful circumstances of the last few days had done nothing to diminish the First Sea Lord's growing regard for him. He had already determined to recommend Dan French be confirmed as C-in-C Malta to the Prime Minister on his return to Oxford. The airman and the man responsible for carrying out Operation Grantham, Rear-Admiral Nigel Grenville – advanced to the rank of Vice Admiral in command of the Mediterranean Fleet – would make a good team.

Rachel Piotrowska was surprised to be greeted in a small reception room on the seaward side of the palace not just by Daniel French, the Acting C-in-C but by several other men whom she recognised but did not know. The airman did the introductions; "Admiral Sir David Luce, Head of the Chiefs of Staff, Mr Iain Macleod, Secretary of State for Information, Mr Airey Neave, Secretary of State for Supply, and Captain Faulkes of my staff whom you have already met."

Everybody sat down in comfortable padded wicker chairs more normally to be found on sunny Mediterranean verandas, patios and balconies.

“I sincerely hope this turns out to be worth being turned out of one’s bed in the middle of the night, Commander-in-Chief,” Iain Macleod complained, affecting a jocular tone he obviously did not feel.

Dan French had taken the chair next to Rachel. He glanced to the First Sea Lord whose barely perceptible nod indicated he should chair the meeting.

“Miss Piotrowska has been in the employ of the intelligence services for several years, gentlemen,” he explained. “Suffice to say that her credentials have been personally vouchsafed to me by the Director General of the Secret Intelligence Service.” He waved for the woman to speak.

She hesitated, taking the measure of the group.

She was in a room with several intelligent, powerful men who, regardless of their vexed, tired expressions would undoubtedly listening to her every word with keen and very critical attention.

“My name is Rachel Piotrowska. Shortly before the October War Dick White sent me to assassinate the KGB Head of Station in Istanbul and Thessalonika, a man – no, a monster – hiding behind the name of Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov. Insofar as the monster had a *real* name his masters in Dzerzhinsky Square actually knew him by his alias Arkady Pavlovich Rykov. He was personally responsible, that is with his own hands, for the murder of at least twelve British agents...”

“Come, come!” Iain Macleod objected. “MI6 doesn’t have licence to kill. That’s all Hollywood tosh!”

Rachel looked at him.

Coolly, levelly, she just looked at him for several seconds.

“You people,” she observed, mildly, “do not deserve to be *protected* by people like *us* if you really believe that, Mr Macleod.”

Airey Neave stirred. Having never really broken his connections with the Second World War secret world of MI6 and the Special Operations Executive, he had few if any illusions as to the harsh realities of the way the ‘great game’ was actually played.

“Why exactly are we interested in this Fyodorov fellow, Miss Piotrowska?”

“By the time I caught up with him he was lying badly injured in a hospital bed at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey babbling about Krasnaya Zarya

and about ‘sleeper agents’ his masters had placed in the West during the 1940s and 1950s. I thought about cutting his throat anyway but that would have been churlish. Duty before pleasure,” she said quirking a misleadingly coy smile, “isn’t that what you gentlemen say?”

She had splashed water on her face and run a brush through her hair before setting out on the tortuous journey across Malta. She was aware her looks were fading, that she needed to spend time on her face and hair to still play the courtesan; but understood that tonight all that was completely wasted on *these* men.

“So, I became the monster’s mistress and very slowly I learned some of his secrets. What we know of Krasnaya Zarya, *Red Dawn*, what it is and what it is not true *you* learned from me. But Rykov only knew a part of the story. I don’t honestly think he knew that Malta would be attacked until a few hours before it happened, for example. But I’m not here tonight to tell you about Arkady Pavlovich Rykov. If you want to know about him you must talk to Dick White.”

“What the Devil are we here to talk about?” Iain Macleod demanded testily.

Rachel viewed the balding politician placidly.

“A few hours ago, I was asked to go onboard the USS Charles F. Adams to assist in the processing of the survivors of the Turkish battlecruiser Yavuz. Among my accomplishments I speak several languages. Specifically, I was asked to speak to a one-legged man in his forties and the Greco-Turkish woman whom the people on the destroyer thought was probably his wife.”

Nobody told her that she was wasting anybody’s time so she continued.

“It seemed the man – who more than superficially physically resembles Arkady Rykov – had been impersonating a certain Nikolai Vasilyevich Fyodorov in order to prevent the Soviet Commissars onboard the Yavuz sending him ashore where his actual identity would be uncovered. Had his true identity been discovered by his hosts at any time since the destruction of Bucharest,” she grimaced ruefully, “shortly thereafter he would have found himself in a KGB punishment cell, presumably having sensitive parts of his anatomy methodically excised so as to confirm the details of his confession.”

“Very droll,” Iain Macleod grunted. “Who is this man and why do we care, Miss Piotrowska?”

“Firstly, *we* should care because until Bucharest was razed to the ground by a *Soviet*, not a Krasnaya Zarya nuclear strike, this man was First Deputy Secretary of the Communist Party of the Romanian People’s Republic. And, secondly, *we* should care because he claims that he fled Bucharest specifically to make contact with the British, or the Americans, he is a little bit vague about which, to warn *us* that the Soviet Union is about to mount a massive ground offensive against *the West*.”

Sir David Luce coughed.

“Forgive me, Miss Piotrowska, I’m a little unclear as to how this man came to be on the Yavuz in the recent battle?”

Rachel frowned. “Does it actually matter, Sir David?”

“The man sounds deranged. Being in the sea for a couple of days does that to a man.”

Airey Neave re-entered the fray.

“You sound convinced by this fellow, Miss Piotrowska?”

“That’s because I know him and you don’t, Mr Neave.”

The man who had escaped from Colditz grimaced and recollected his training as a lawyer.

“Who is he? And how do you know he is who he says he is?”

“I know him because I met him several times in Bucharest in the year before the war when I was searching for Arkady Rykov. He had the Securitate, the Rumanian Secret police in his pocket and that was very useful to Arkady Rykov.”

Around the circle of chairs, the mood was sombre.

“His name is *Nicolae Ceausescu*.”

Chapter 68

04:22 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Forward HQ of 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army, Ardabil, Iran

Marshal of the Soviet Union Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov had taken a malicious pleasure in demanding to talk to his comrades in the collective leadership in the middle of the night. The men of Army Group South were not getting any sleep tonight so neither should the men who had ordered them to undertake their 'little route march to the Persian Gulf'. And besides things were going so much better than he – or he suspected Hamazasp Khachaturi Babadzhanian, a man who tended to dwell on all the things that could go wrong at the best of times – had hoped that he wanted to celebrate.

Babadzhanian had snatched ninety minutes sleep and gone straight into a conference with the commander of 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army. Striking while the iron was hot – red hot – the old movement plans were being scrapped and everything advanced by, in some cases, as many as seven days. Chuikov and Babadzhanian had discussed the possibility that this would lead to confusion and cause inevitable snarl ups in the logistical train; but decided that it was more important to exploit the success of the initial assault than to worry about unquantifiable 'cans of beans'. The mountains over and through which 3rd Caucasus Tank Army on the right and 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army on the left were advancing, was hardly rich foraging ground and there were strong arguments for not antagonising the local populations; but if it came to it Babadzhanian's men would seize whatever they needed as they moved forward. War was Hell and Army Group South was already deep within hostile territory.

It had taken the technicians in Chelyabinsk, the new capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics nearly an hour to set up the scrambler links and for aides to awaken Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin and Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, Vasily Chuikov's comrades in the so-called *Troika*, the collective leadership which had coalesced out of the ashes of the Cuban Missiles War. The old soldier had no real illusion about his role and status within the

Troika; he was there to guarantee the support of the Red Army, Kosygin and Brezhnev were the ones who really called the shots. If he had been a more 'political' soldier he might have put Alexei Nikolayevich and Leonid Ilyich straight on one or two things. However, he was in no way unhappy in his current boots.

Having initially had to be talked into backing Operation Nakazyvat he now accepted that his comrades in the collective leadership – Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin and Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev were two astonishingly shrewd and devious old commissars – who *sometimes* actually knew what they were doing.

"This had better be good news, Comrade Vasily Ivanovich," Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev grouched like a moody, half-asleep bear. If Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin was the real brains of the *Troika*, Brezhnev was its tempered steel backbone and the man who, at the end of the day, held the casting vote on every important decision. It was Brezhnev who had ordered the destruction of Bucharest, authorised the diversion of forces from the preparations for Babadzhanian's 'drive to the south' to mercilessly crush Krasnaya Zarya's unauthorised insurgency in the Balkans and Greece, and who had come down on the side of Admiral Sergey Georgiyevich Gorshkov's breathtakingly ambitious plan to 'demonstrate' against the British and the Americans in the central Mediterranean to mask the launching of Operation Nakazyvat.

Gorshkov had thrown away what was left of *his* Navy – the surface fleet, leastways – in the failed attempt to briefly seize and hold Malta. Thousands of men had been sacrificed and yet; here in Iran Army Group South was on the rampage, its progress undisturbed by British and American bombers, Tehran had been destroyed and still, the West had not yet stirred...

"We are winning the war, Comrade Leonid Ilyich," Chuikov chortled. Having allowed himself his fun he turned deadly serious. "Is Alexei Nikolayevich on the line?"

"Da!" Kosygin confirmed, sounding wide awake. "It is always good to speak to you Comrade Marshal. Even in the middle of the night!"

"We have decisions to make," the old soldier informed his comrades. "We'd expected much stiffer resistance but our forward observation units are reporting the enemy falling back or melting away into the mountains ahead of us. 3rd Caucasus Tank Army is already half-way to Tabriz, the way it is

looking here in Ardabil 2nd Siberian Mechanized Army may be allowed to motor west unopposed. Shit," he grunted, allowing himself a rare moment of reflection, "after what the Air Force did to Tehran the Iranian Army might not even exist anymore. If things go on like this our spearheads might be investing Sulaymaniyah in days not weeks!"

The two 'old commissars' of the *Troika* had emphasised from the outset of the planning for Operation Nakazyvat that the object of the exercise was not simple military conquest. While Chuikov and Babadzhanian would be given a free hand to conduct their business it was recognised that at specific 'way points' in the 'drive south' that 'political opportunities' might arise. In that event military operations would become subservient to the 'political necessities of the moment'.

The two 'old commissars' were silent as they absorbed Chuikov's meanings.

It was Kosygin who spoke first.

"What is your recommendation, Vasily Ivanovich?" He asked.

"Hit Baghdad now? Take it out before the British or the Americans know what's hit them!"

Chapter 69

03:25 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Verdala Palace, Malta

Air Vice-Marshal Dan French indicated for the woman to go before him into the darkness of the walled garden. She had requested a ‘short private meeting’ but there was nowhere ‘private’ within the Verdala Palace tonight. Most of the ground floor and two thirds of the first floor had been transformed into a hospital, the reception hall was a dormitory for the men of HMS Talavera and the off-duty soldiers from the palace guard, the two upper floors accommodated members of the C-in-C’s own staff, the staffs of the visiting VIPs and several hastily set up offices and communication rooms. The old castle hummed and murmured with movement and voices even at this early hour of the morning.

“You wanted to talk to me confidentially, Miss Piotrowska?”

There were armed guards everywhere in the darkness,

Rachel ignored them, kept her voice low.

“There’s something you need to know,” she said, whispering. Orders had been issued to bring Nicolae Ceausescu and the woman, Eleni, to the Verdala Palace. The two politicians, Iain Macleod and Airey Neave wanted to talk to Ceausescu before ‘wild rumours’ were transmitted to Oxford under ‘the flag of hard intelligence’.

Dan French suppressed a groan. Something in the woman’s tone broadcast that he was not going to like what she was about to tell him.

“That sounds ominous,” he remarked.

“Samuel Calleja has made a full confession.”

Later that day, or perhaps the day after, the heroes of the Battle of Malta would be flying back to England to be feted and acclaimed. Within forty-eight hours the Queen would be pinning medals on those heroes’ chests, shaking hands and no doubt exchanging the small talk for which such investitures were famous with the man whose face would shortly be plastered across the front pages of every newspaper in the civilised World, and

instantly the unrivalled star of every television news cast and Pathe report.

By the hero's side would be his beautiful young wife, Lady Marija Calleja-Christopher smiling seraphically. They would be instantly the most famous married couple in Christendom.

Moreover, in many of the pictures there would be the battered, stocky, sheepishly grinning presence of Joseph Calleja, the communist trades union agitator and troublemaker sacked by the Admiralty Dockyards of Malta only days before he rode into battle astride the torpedo tubes of HMS Talavera; and on an open, shot-torn deck launched the salvo of torpedoes that had won the Battle of Malta.

Marija and Joe; the siblings of the traitor Samuel Calleja.

Dan French held his peace a little longer as their steps carried him and his companion deeper into the darkness of the garden.

"Damnedest thing!" He muttered, exasperated in his weariness.

Rachel sensed that he was not talking about Samuel Calleja's treachery.

"Yes," she concurred.

"This business over Samuel Calleja, too," the man added ruefully. He had known the 'Samuel Calleja' situation was going to be a fly in the ointment the moment Rachel had told him who had been in the room with Julian Christopher at the end of the fight for the Headquarters complex in Mdina.

He had had a lot of other things on his mind at the time and in the intervening hours but he had not put the 'issue' to one side, let alone filed it away for further action at some unspecified future time and place. Keeping an impossibly large number of balls in the air at one time was what had kept him alive flying Lancaster bombers over Germany, and more than once saved his bacon flying the first operation V-Bombers. Thus, it was that he had already decided what he was going to do about the Samuel Calleja *problem* several hours ago.

The fact that the man had belatedly made a clean breast of his crimes was irrelevant. There had never been any real doubt that he was a traitor; an enemy agent who had betrayed the Crown in time of war.

The provisions of the Treachery Act were nothing if not specific in proscribing the disposal of those found guilty under its aegis. Dan French perfectly understood the powers and duties invested in his person by the current State of Emergency on the Maltese Archipelago, the fact of Martial

Law, and the responsibilities therefore incumbent upon him.

"Does he deny his involvement in materially assisting an enemy in a time of war?" He asked.

"No." Rachel hesitated. "What will you do with him?"

The VIPs had come out from England to bring back heroes and nobody had done more to earn their *triumph* back home more than Peter Christopher and his brave band of brothers; nor Joseph Calleja. The truth about Samuel Calleja's treachery would emerge soon enough...

"The business over Samuel Calleja will wait for another day," he said, and that was an end to it. "Nobody in this building *needs* to know about it for now."

Rachel blinked in the gloom.

She had been afraid the man would ask her to quietly make the problem go away and she had not known how she would react. Friday's bloodletting had changed who she was in ways she was still discovering; she had hurt enough people.

"Thank you for bringing *this* to me," the man went on, filling the vacuum of words. "It must be hard for you to trust people at the moment."

Rachel almost jumped with alarm.

How could he have seen through her so easily?

"A little," she admitted.

"The law will take its course but in the meantime no harm is to befall Mr Calleja," Dan French stated, just so there could be no later misunderstanding. "I'd be obliged if you would re-emphasise that to Major Williams on your return to Rinella please."

"Of course."

"Thank you. After you have spoken to Major Williams I think it would be best if you returned to Marsa Creek. Ideally, I would prefer Samuel Calleja's wife to be removed from the, er, 'firing line' at this time but every place on an aircraft returning to England has been allocated several times over already. Would you be prepared to take the young lady under your wing until things blow over?"

Rachel was somewhat taken aback by how far ahead the man was thinking and planning. She had presented him with an intractable problem, he had decided what he was going to do about it and was requesting her assistance in managing one relatively small element of the fallout.

“Yes. Somebody ought to look after Rosa,” she concurred.

They turned and began to move towards the main building. It would be a little while before Nicolae Ceausescu and his companion and nurse, Eleni could be transported across the island so there was no hurry.

“As I said, it is the damnedest thing,” Dan French remarked again.

“The last few days have been very strange,” Rachel echoed. Since Friday she had allowed her voice and its tone to abandon the English drawl she had so carefully constructed throughout her adult life. Even to her own ear she now sounded *Polish*, bereft of her English vowels albeit unable to rid herself of her habitual very English syntax. It was as if she was becoming a different person, another woman.

“Yes, indeed. When things have settled down a bit,” the man flashed a smile in the dark, “might we dine together one evening do you think, Miss Piotrowska?”

Chapter 70

02:50 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire

Seamus McCormick had no idea if the two Redcaps who had disturbed him fifteen minutes ago had raised the alarm before he emptied the magazine of his Browning forty-five into their faces and chests. In the ear-splitting silence after the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber the village around the green where he had parked up the Bedford lorry yesterday evening had remained dark, and nothing had moved. Very, very distantly a dog had barked. It had been surreal, otherwise nothing had happened.

Absolutely nothing!

But the two dead military policemen would be missed sooner or later and he did not have time to find out if they had friends in the vicinity. One of the Redcaps had fallen half-under the truck; the big lorry lurched forward over his body as he drove off.

Despite the cool of the night McCormick was sweating heavily and his mind was racing at a thousand miles an hour. One second, he had been fitfully dozing in the cab; the next the gun had been bucking and kicking in his hand. He had been aware of the spent cartridges clattering off the dashboard and the windscreen, yet not recollected hearing the sound of the rounds actually firing.

What the fuck am I doing?

The question shrieked in his head.

Where am I going?

He did not know the answer to either question.

Nor did he know why he had shot the two Redcaps. For all he knew they might just have wanted a chat, a friendly chinwag to help pass the boredom of their night shift. Neither of them had pointed a gun at him...

They had looked shocked when he started shooting.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" He screamed, breaking the Bedford to a squealing halt.

He had panicked.

He had had no quarrel with a couple of squaddies with MP armbands; they were men like him, victims who had had no part in his wife, Siobhan's murder, or in defending the guilty. His *only* fight was with the bastards who had sent him and thousands of men like him to make war on people who by rights ought to be his blood brothers.

He hammered the wheel in blind impotence.

He had never fired a gun in anger until tonight.

He had never killed a man until tonight.

And still there was no hue and cry. There were no flashing lights on the roads around the village. The houses by the road were dark, only the asthmatic rumbling of the Bedford's ancient, sorely tried engine broke the quietness of the night.

What was the plan?

To get the Bedford out of sight, hidden in the trees and to find a place with a line of sight to the flight path into RAF Cheltenham.

That had been the plan.

Perhaps, that was still the plan?

Seamus McCormick took a succession of long, decreasingly ragged deep breaths and waited for his heartbeat to slow down.

Hide the Bedford.

Unload the two Redeyes.

Find a launch site.

If he was discovered again then he would worry about it at the time.

He had run out of options and whatever happened he was not going to outlive this day. In that thought if in no other, there was a measure of cold comfort which might, if he was lucky, sustain him long enough to wreak his vengeance on his rulers.

Chapter 71

03:38 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Corpus Christi College, Oxford

MOST URGENT MOST SECRET AND CONFIDENTIAL STOP CAPTURED INFORMANT REPORTS ATTACK ON MALTA A STRATEGIC DIVERSION STOP MAIN SOVIET REPEAT MAIN SOVIET GROUND OFFENSIVE IMMINENT OR ALREADY UNDER WAY IN NORTHERN IRAN STOP OBJECTIVE OF MAJOR SOVIET GROUND AND AIR OFFENSIVE IS TO INVADE NORTHERN IRAN AND TO PASS INTO NORTHERN IRAQ SEIZING KIRKUK OILFIELDS STOP THEREAFTER TO DRIVE SOUTH TO BAGDHAD AND THEREAFTER DOWN THE FLOOD PLAINS OF THE TIGRIS AND THE EUPHRATES RIVERS TO SEIZE BASRA AND ABADAN ISLAND AND TO EMPLACE STRONG ARMOURED BLOCKING FORCES ON THE NORTHERN SHORE OF THE PERSIAN GULF THREATENING KUWAIT AND THE ARABIAN PENSINSULAR STOP INTEND TO PERSONALLY INTERROGATE INFORMANT SHORTLY STOP FURTHER MESSAGE WILL FOLLOW AS INTELLIGENCE BECOMES KNOWN STOP SIGNED CDS MACLEOD NEAVE MESSAGE ENDS.

The words burned off the message sheet searing Sir Thomas Harding-Grayson's numb fingers. Having been awakened to receive the news of the devastation of Tehran by a 'city-killer' strike, Margaret Thatcher had pressed the communication she had just received from Malta upon him without saying a word. The fact that Admiral Sir David Luce, the Chief of the Defence Staff had endorsed the message with his own imprimatur ahead of the signatures of the two Cabinet members who had accompanied him to the Maltese Archipelago the previous day made the blow even more sickening.

The Prime Minister was immaculately dressed and turned out, not a single hair out of place. The Foreign Secretary wondered if she had gone to bed that night; personally, he felt like death warmed up while she looked a million dollars.

“Willie and the others are coming over,” Margaret Thatcher explained tersely. “Clearly, we have all been living in a fool’s paradise. Yourself excluded, Tom,” she admitted grimly. “I am sorry I did not give your views the credence that they so obviously merited. I will be mindful not to make that mistake again in the future.”

Tom Harding-Grayson was too shaken to appreciate either the compliment or the promise. But for the steely implacability of the defiance in Margaret Thatcher’s blue grey eyes he would have most likely despaired. There had been some desperately dark times in the slightly more than seventeen months since the cataclysm of the October War; but none as black and hopeless as this.

Malta had almost been lost and British arms were disastrously over-stretched at the very moment a new and unsuspected deadly peril had emerged. The paper-thin rapprochement with the United States of America had failed to defend Malta, the alliance’s most strategically important base in the Mediterranean. There had been a complete - probably self-inflicted - failure of intelligence in the Middle and Near East. The Suez Canal remained blocked at Ismailia obviating any possibility of reinforcing the under-strength garrisons at Abadan, Aden and elsewhere in the region now threatened by what might turn out to be an irresistible tide of Soviet tanks. The American President was flying to England later that day in a last-ditch attempt to patch up Anglo-American relations, attempt to quieten his domestic opponents and to establish a working chain of command for an as yet non-existent joint military partnership on the ground in the Mediterranean; a plan which events already looked to have overtaken.

At the same time all this was going on a bunch of mad Fenians was roaming the English countryside with state of the art US-supplied surface-to-air missiles on the very day that every available transport aircraft was coming and going from Malta carrying south emergency supplies and new personnel and bringing back to England heroes by the dozen and wounded and seriously injured servicemen and civilians by the score.

Oh, and the Royal Navy had just submitted a paper to the War Cabinet recommending the deployment of submarines previously held in strategic reserve for the defence of the British Isles, on a mission to the South Atlantic to wage unrestricted submarine warfare on Argentinean naval and commercial shipping until such time as that country surrendered the

territories it had so recently stolen from the Crown!

The World had gone to Hell in a handbag!

“Cheer up, Tom! The Angry Widow declared. “At least we know what we are up against now!”

The man had handed her back the message sheet and slumped disconsolately into the nearest chair.

“The Soviets have destroyed Tehran,” he reminded Margaret Thatcher. “Short of starting a new atomic war I’m not sure if we can do anything about it if they have really set their sights on the Persian Gulf.”

His Prime Minister had given him a thoughtful look.

“Right now, I don’t know what we can do about it either,” she admitted candidly. “However, it seems obvious to me that there is one thing we must do.”

“Oh, what would that be?”

“Once and for all we and our American allies must *draw a line in the sand*!”

Chapter 72

06:16 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Verdala Palace, Malta

Admiral Sir David Luce and Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French took early morning tea together on the veranda as the dawn began to break over the Maltese Archipelago. The two men had business to conclude that was best contracted divorced from political interference.

"I will carry out the tour planned for this morning," the Chief of the Defence Staff informed the airman. "I will return to England on the first available flight out of Luqa this afternoon to report back to the Prime Minister. I also need to hold discussions with the Supreme Commander designate which, given developments overnight really won't wait until tomorrow. The new *Supremo* is a sound fellow, I think. Our paths crossed several times before the war. He's an interesting chap, actually; General Harold Keith 'Johnny' Johnson. He was captured by the Japanese at Bataan and survived three years in Jap prison camps. If the politicians give him enough elbow room he'll do a good job, I'm sure." He re-focused on more immediate issues. "I have communicated my recommendation that you be confirmed as C-in-C Malta under whatever new command arrangements are decided in the coming days."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, sir."

The Chief of the Defence Staff brushed this aside.

Both men were relieved that the latest news from Cyprus was much better than they had anticipated. Rear-Admiral Nigel Grenville had signalled that the enemy, having sallied from its north-eastern enclaves on the island had, his assaults exhausted and repulsed at heavy cost, now started surrendering in droves and Operation Grantham had overnight ceased to be a massive amphibious landing on a hostile shore and become a huge chaotic mopping up exercise. Even stay behind guerrilla groups were laying down their weapons.

"Nigel Grenville," The First Sea Lord went on, "is detaching Hermes, her

fleet train and the 23rd Support Flotilla to return to Malta. Hermes needs time in dry dock so she'll probably proceed to Gibraltar after she's flown off her air group and disembarked her war supplies and all air group personnel. I'm promoting Nick Davey, Captain D of the 23rd Support Flotilla, Commodore and putting him command of all destroyers, frigates and escort vessels based at Malta. I'll leave the minutiae of how he re-organises the rest of the Mediterranean Fleet to Nigel, who is to be promoted Vice Admiral and C-in-C Mediterranean Fleet with immediate effect when he returns to Malta from Cyprus. Any organisational arrangements we make in the coming days will inevitably be of an interim nature pending decisions about what to do about the situation in Iran."

Both men's ears still rang from what they had learnt from Nicolae Ceausescu earlier that morning. Dan French had been unsettled by the man's uncanny – rather eerie - resemblance to the late Arkady Pavlovich Rykov; the two men could have been brothers. This despite the fact that Nicolae Ceausescu's features were drawn and haggard and his mouth contorted now and then with pain from the stump of his amputated right leg high above where his knee had been. Eventually, with the pleas of his guardian, Eleni, becoming ever more plaintive he had been given morphine and wheeled away but not before Rachel Piotrowska had dispassionately translated his incredible story.

First there was his headlong flight from Bucharest as Soviet troops swarmed across the city. Then there was the crash of his Mil Mi-6 helicopter in a storm on an unknown island that turned out to be Samothrace in the Northern Aegean Sea. The tale grew more incredible with every twist; the loss of his gangrenous leg, sawn off in a ruined house with a clasp knife without anaesthetic. At death's door Eleni had nursed him back to life, just the first of many times she had saved him from death's waiting jaws. It was all too *incredible* – that was the *only* word to describe his odyssey – because the man seemed to have more lives than a proverbial lucky cat! Escaping Samothrace with a handful of faithful bodyguards his leaking fishing boat had promptly been run down in the night by the Turkish battlecruiser Yavuz! At each stage in the drama he had simply jumped out of one frying pan into another! Upon regaining consciousness in the sick bay of the old dreadnought he had immediately assumed the false identity of the feared KGB Head of Station in Istanbul and Thessalonika. On and on the scarcely

believable saga continued. Right up to the moment the Yavuz had fired the first broadsides in the Battle of Malta...

Nicolae Ceausescu had glossed over exactly how the information about Operation Chastise – in Russian *Operation Nakazyvat* – had been extracted from Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, the member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR whom he believed to be the master of *Krasnaya Zarya*. His audience had listened, largely in deeply thoughtful silence, as the tortured husk of a man had slowly, surely recounted the details of the storm which, even as they listened, must already be falling on the Near East. The Great Game was afoot; two Soviet tank armies, supported by hundreds of aircraft driving south to the Persian Gulf like an unstoppable steel wave at the very moment the Anglo-American axis was in a state of near total crisis and disarray.

Sir David Luce sighed.

"Back in England they plan to make a huge song and dance about Friday's battle. Medals galore in fact! *They* plan to promote Peter Christopher to Captain and award him and John Pope of the Yarmouth Victoria Crosses. John Pope's posthumously, obviously," the First Sea Lord explained. "Peter's far too damned young to have his fourth ring but," he shrugged and raised his tea cup to his lips. "Julian would have been tickled to bits to think his boy was the youngest post captain in the Royal Navy!"

"They ought to give Joe Calleja the freedom of Malta," Dan French suggested. "Or of any place he cares to name," he added, "after what he did!"

"And the George Cross," Sir David Luce guffawed. "That was what my two tame politicos were talking about earlier."

Dan French's eyes went glassy as he recollected his earlier conversation with Rachel Piotrowska.

"Yes," he sighed, "that sounds about right." He bit the bullet and with a bitter taste in his mouth he declared: "Look, there's a matter that I must broach with you, sir."

"Oh," the First Sea Lord did not like the sound of that. "You had better spit it out."

Knowing that there was no way to sugar the pill Dan French paused momentarily to order his thoughts.

"Lady Marija and Jo Calleja's older brother, Samuel," he explained

sombrely, “who had previously been missing presumed dead was captured in a Soviet uniform at the Citadel on Friday. He has since been interrogated by the security people and made a full confession of his treachery...”

Chapter 73

11:01 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
RAF Luqa, Malta

Commander Sir Peter Christopher looked at his surviving Talaveras. Two buses had collected the rest of his walking wounded from Kalkara that morning and there were fifty-six men on parade on the gritty tarmac. The burned-out wreck of the control tower and the shattered hangars behind it framed the pictures and movies that the crowd of pressmen continued to snap and record as he had inspected his men.

He nodded to Lieutenant Dermot O'Reilly, his senior surviving officer.

The Canadian bawled an order and the parade stood easy. About half the men clasped a mimeographed sheet in one hand; the words of the Navy Hymn passed around in the minutes before this short ceremony commenced by a pair of Ministry of Information civil servants who knew little and understood less about Royal Navy and its traditions.

"Before I joined you this morning," Peter announced, his voice steady above the clamour of the bulldozers and the repair teams still labouring on the distant taxi-ways. "I was called away to receive bad news from RNH Bighi."

He paused, unable to prevent his eyes flicking a glance sidelong to where Marija and Rosa stood with Captain Lionel Faulkes protectively circled around the battered wheelchair bound figure of the 'civilian hero' of the Battle of Malta, Joe Calleja. Other women, several in RAF blue had gathered behind them, listening sombrely.

"Leading Seaman Morris 'Mo' Akers died of his wounds overnight," Peter said, his jaw assuming a grimmer set, "as did Lieutenant-Commander Miles Weiss. I regret that I did not know Leading Seaman Akers as well as I would have liked. He joined Talavera after the action at Lampedusa and he distinguished himself in the fight to save the USS Enterprise. As did you all." He stopped to compose himself. "Miles Weiss had been my friend since before the October War."

Miles Weiss had been his best friend in the Navy. No, his best friend... He had seemed battered and bloody after he staggered out of the Talavera's wrecked gun director mount after that big shell had ripped off the top of it and hacked down the destroyer's great lattice foremast like it was made of balsa wood. Onboard the USS Berkeley he had complained of a headache and been diagnosed with a bad concussion. At Bighi he had repeatedly put himself to the back of the queue; only when he had collapsed a second time and begun to retch and vomit uncontrollably had he been prioritised by the impossibly hard-pressed medical staff at the hospital. By the time he was wheeled into an operating theatre he was unconscious, fitting spasmodically. It seemed he had had a massive cerebral haemorrhage, probably the consequence of proximity to the passage of the large, high velocity projectile which had destroyed the gun director. In the way of these things his fate had probably been sealed in that moment and afterwards there was nothing anybody could have done to help him.

But Peter still felt he had let his friend down.

Talavera had left fourteen of her two hundred and fifty-two-man compliment on shore when she cut her lines and raced out to sea, in the confusion five civilian workers had been trapped onboard including Joe Calleja; whom at least two men claimed to have seen deliberately 'stepping onboard' the destroyer while his fellow dockyard workers were scampering, and in some cases hurling themselves ashore. Of the two hundred and forty-three men who had steamed into the Battle of Malta the fifty-six men on parade today, plus Joe Calleja constituted the unwounded and walking wounded contingent of survivors. A further thirty-eight men remained in hospital or had been otherwise designated as unfit to attend this ceremony. As the initial impenetrable fog of war slowly cleared it was now apparent that one hundred and fifty-one men – including four civilian dockyard workers – had died during the Battle of Malta or were listed as missing in action presumed dead or had subsequently died of their injuries. Included in that number were eight of Talavera's ten divisional officers holding the rank of lieutenant or above. Several other men – as many as six - who had suffered severe flash burns or swallowed oil while they were in the water when Talavera had suddenly broken her back and sunk while still alongside the USS Berkeley, were not anticipated to survive.

Marija and Rosa were crying.

Peter Christopher would not allow himself to cry.

He swallowed hard.

"Many of Talavera's dead have no other resting place than the sea. Now it seems likely that the exigencies of the Service will prevent us attending the funerals of our comrades who died on land, or whose bodies were recovered from the sea by the brave, selfless acts of our American friends and allies." As many as a dozen of the USS Berkeley's crewmen had leapt into the iron grey waters ten miles off Sliema to save the dying, the drowning and to recover the bodies of dead Talaveras. Several US Navy men had gone overboard without safety lines in their anxiety to help their British allies and two young Americans had died when Talavera had finally given up the fight and broken. "At this sad time, we should also remember Midshipman Alois Karl Rendorp, and Seaman Casey O'Leary of the USS Berkeley who sacrificed their lives onboard Talavera courageously fighting to save the lives of *our* friends and shipmates."

He removed his cap; unbidden, his men followed his example.

"We will now sing the Navy Hymn."

The line of VIPs; with the two Cabinet Ministers, Admiral Sir David Luce and Air Vice-Marshal Daniel French to the front had doffed their caps and hats. The Naval Chaplain of Malta stood awkwardly apart. He had offered to officiate at this brief memorial; Peter had firmly, politely rebuffed him.

Peter looked towards the second bowed group of men paraded to the left of his Talaveras; thirty-one men from HMS Yarmouth. The Rothesay class frigate had gone into battle with one hundred and sixty-one officers and other ranks on her roster. Yarmouth's commanding officer, Commander John Pope had been killed early in the action and none of his eight divisional officers had survived the battle uninjured. By the time Petty Officer Stanley Bloom had run the burning wreck of his ship aground in St Paul's Bay over half her crew were dead. Others had died in the water and of their injuries since. Of her original one hundred and sixty-one men only seventy-eight had thus far survived.

"*We*, the survivors of Her Majesty's Ships Yarmouth and Talavera today share the honour and the glory of a battle fought to the limit of our strength and our powder; today we remember comrades and shipmates lost in battle. For all the days to come our two ships' companies will forever be united by

the travails of that battle. I salute you all!”

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,
Who biddest the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O Saviour, whose almighty word,
The winds and waves submissive heard,
Who walkest on the foaming deep,
And calm amidst its rage didst sleep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O sacred Spirit, who didst brood,
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
Who bade its angry tumult cease,
And gavest light and life and peace:
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

O Trinity of love and power,
Our brethren shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe,
Protect them wheresoever they go;
And ever let there rise to Thee,
Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

After the parade was dismissed Marija walked stiffly, trying not to limp and hobble in front of so many witnesses and rolling and clicking cameras to hand her husband his walking stick. His right leg was immobile, agonizingly swollen at knee and ankle; not that he would admit of any physical impediment.

Spying the approach of a pack of VIPs and dignitaries he smiled wanly,

dug out a handkerchief and gently dabbed at Marija’s tear tracks.

His wife had no care for the great men who thought to own her husband.

Marija buried her face in his chest and sobbed while the camera flashes exploded and the men from the Ministry of Information began to rub their hands in quiet satisfaction.

Chapter 74

13:07 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Great Hall, Christ Church College, Oxford

The last person who had tried to govern the United Kingdom from Oxford had come to an untimely end beheaded on a scaffold at Whitehall. Of course, Margaret Thatcher's position was only incidentally analogous to that of King Charles I. By the time Charles Stuart had retreated to Oxford his war had already been lost; he just did not know it at the time. She was confident that *her* war was only just beginning and she was fairly sure that *her* people did not want her head on a block quite yet. Not that she did not inwardly concede that such a day might not come for in this brave new World any leader who failed to consider that possibility was an out-and-out fool and basically, deserved everything he or she got.

In the absence of Iain Macleod, the Leader of the House, one of his protégés thirty-six-year-old James Prior, the Member of Parliament for Lowestoft had stepped up to the mark.

Margaret Thatcher had been impressed by how well the mild-mannered, rather staid man, whom she had never really got to know before or after the October War, had acquitted himself. Notwithstanding that the leftish factions of the splintered Labour Party and the more vociferous of the Powellite dissidents from her own Conservative Party had attempted to give him a rough ride; Prior had cut a decent, officer-like, gentleman farmer type figure and guided the house through the preliminaries without serious mishap.

"Statement by the Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher!" The Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Robert Grimston the sixty-six-year-old Member of Parliament for Westbury in Wiltshire called. He had stepped into the Speaker's shoes at short notice just before the session was scheduled to commence; the Speaker of the House Sir Harry Hilton-Foster having been discovered in a state of collapse in his rooms at Christ Church College by his clerks. Grimston's appointment as Deputy Speaker had been the subject of an appeal – a parliamentary objection - back in 1962 but he had been

dutifully ready to step into his indisposed predecessor's shoes for some weeks despite the fact that he was neither in the full flush of youth or good health.

Margaret Thatcher slowly rose from the front bench. She missed the rambunctious presence of Iain Macleod and keenly felt the absence of Airey Neave, the man who had stood by her shoulder and guarded her back the last year. Today she was flanked by a grim-faced James Callaghan, a large, lugubrious man on one side and by a solemnly hang-dog William Whitelaw on the other. Behind her the Party faithful had coalesced in a solid phalanx and had started to drum their hands on the hard pews installed in the Great Hall only in the last week.

The Prime Minister looked around.

Before the October War standing in the pit of the old House of Commons confronting one's political foes across the chamber virtually eye to eye had been a pipe dream; not a thing a woman, any woman might dream. When she had been appointed as Parliamentary Undersecretary at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance in 1961 she had been frankly, astonished. At the time she had been the first of the 1959 intake of MPs to be brought into Government and the youngest woman in Harold MacMillan's administration.

Before the October War she had never believed that a woman would be Prime Minister in her lifetime; the Party and the electorate were too stuck in their ways, too prejudiced and too narrow minded to ever install a woman in Downing Street. No matter what she had felt about it that was the way of things and there had seemed to be very little she could do about it. And then the night of the October War had changed *everything*. That night had robbed her of so much and yet ironically, opened up so many unimagined possibilities.

She had ridden the crest of the wave of her good fortune these last seventeen months. Edward Heath had recognised her true capabilities and promoted her, eventually, into his inner circle. Iain MacLeod – the man most people imagined to be Ted Heath's natural successor – had dropped the premiership into her arms before she knew what was happening. Serendipitously, at around that time she had briefly discovered a new, wise, brave soul mate who might, in happier circumstances have guided her through the struggles to come. But it had not been meant to be. Julian

Christopher was lost to her and the nation and today, her own future lay balanced on a knife-edge.

The Great Hall was not as packed as it had been for the great confidence debate – not every Member of Parliament had been able to get back to Oxford over the weekend – but the public gallery, cordoned off from the chamber at one end of the hall seethed with gentlemen of the press.

“I spoke to Her Majesty the Queen yesterday and again this morning. The purpose of these conversations was to keep Her Majesty abreast of fast moving events in the Mediterranean and elsewhere and to place at *Her* pleasure my resignation...”

Chapter 75

12:10 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
RAF Luqa, Malta

Marija's emotions were in turmoil. Moments ago, Captain Lionel Faulkes, the C-in-C's Senior Naval Staff Officer had breathlessly pressed through the crowd around her and her husband.

"Your mother and father are safe, Lady Marija," he had gasped, looking around for Joe Calleja as he recovered his breath. Lionel Faulkes was obviously been feeling his age, and Marija had taken his elbow to steady him. It was a hot spring day on Malta, the sort of day native Maltese regard as a balmy and cool demanding a coat or jacket but an Englishman would regard as a burning hot summer day back home. "Your father was slightly injured, a few scratches, nothing more before he took shelter. Your mother is unharmed and bar a few windows blown in their house in Sliema is in one piece."

Much to Lionel Faulkes consternation Marija had suddenly hugged him ecstatically before wriggling through the throng to find her husband who had been corralled by a cabal of pale-skinned; soon to be sun burnt men from the Oxford press corps. She had burst upon the group with her good news and he had attempted, very painfully on his part to sweep her into his arms.

Now Marija gazed thoughtfully at the RAF Comet 4 – one of four aircraft now loading or refuelling on the freshly laid, sticky black tarmac underfoot - to which she and her beau were making their limping, halting way; he because he could not trust himself to put any weight on his twisted and immobile right leg, she because well, her aching bones badly needed a long, long rest.

"I think I am afraid of flying, husband," she confessed lowly.

"How do you know, my love?" The man inquired as they struggled closer to the jetliner.

She squeezed his hand, said nothing.

"They say flying in one of these kites," Peter went on confidently, an act

because he had absolutely no happy personal memories or experiences of flying, “is like riding on the wings of a featherbed with four great big engines.”

Marija giggled, recollecting her husband’s tongue-in-cheek horror stories about his short trips in helicopters that he was convinced were about to fall out of the sky at any time, and one particularly harrowing flight in a storm on a transport aircraft whose pilot had mistaken the perimeter track at the Royal Naval Air Station at Yeovilton for the main runway and ploughed to a halt in a field only feet away from a barn.

At the top of the steps to the cabin of the Comet the couple took a deep breath and looked around at the ruined suburbs that ringed the airfield. They waited while the cameras rolled, Peter with his arm protectively about his wife’s shoulders, Marija with her arm about his waist, both smiling stoic smiles until their faces began to hurt. Nearby two other Comets, another Mark 4 in the livery of British European Airways, and an older, vaguely old-fashioned looking variant were also loading, the one walking wounded and the other stretcher cases on a hoist at the rear of the aircraft while other injured men and women were gently manhandled up the forward steps. Beyond the other Comets a Boeing 707 in United States Air Force livery was disgorging men and women, officers, doctors, nurses and presumably, miscellaneous Central Intelligence Agency spooks onto the apron from its front hatches and general cargo from the rear. Ambulances were starting to queue to transfer more injured and wounded men and women onto the jetliner, which was scheduled, like the three Comets, to return to the United Kingdom later that day.

Peter Christopher had been told that ‘their’ aircraft was a Comet Mark 4C, the long-range version of the fourth generation of de Havilland’s wonder machine of the late forties. The jetliner looked and smelled almost new. Peter had learned that several undelivered Comet 4Cs had been mothballed after the October War and only recently brought into service after the Operation Manna convoys eased the worst of the fuel shortages in England.

The short-range version of the aircraft could carry up to a hundred passengers but this Comet 4 had less than eighty seats. In the end twenty-seven Talaveras and a dozen of Yarmouth’s survivors took their seats in the rear half of the stuffy, humid, somewhat claustrophobic passenger cabin. The front of the compartment filled with VIPs returning to England, walking

wounded and several grubby and somewhat worse for wear men who refused to be separated from their cameras and recording equipment – apparently, a Ministry of Information film crew who had been in Valletta at the height of the bombardment - as the Comet's four Rolls-Royce Avon Mark 524 turbo-jet engines spooled up.

The cabin doors were dogged shut and immediately it was quieter although still just that little bit too noisy to be able to carry on a completely normal conversation without straining one's voice. Much to their disquiet Peter and Marija had been ushered to seats adjacent to that of the Cabinet Minister returning to England on this aircraft. It seemed Sir David Luce and Mr Airey Neave were returning to England on different flights; somebody back in Oxford having invoked a rule limiting the number of 'very important' VIPs who were permitted to fly together on any one flight. Marija had hesitantly moved into the window seat, while her husband had protectively lowered himself into the aisle seat where he could stretch his throbbing, immobile right leg into the aisle. Opposite him Iain Macleod wanted to conduct a briefing on what 'the order of ceremony' would be on arrival at RAF Brize Norton.

"I hate flying," Iain Macleod confessed irascibly.

"Me too," Peter concurred.

"Everywhere I go the PM insists we fly with the Royal Air Force and the blighters won't allow a man to smoke!"

The young naval officer refrained from murmuring 'oh dear, that must be a terrible trial for you, sir,' and contented himself with a sympathetic smile.

The aircraft jolted forward; Marija gasped and squeezed her husband's hand with momentarily superhuman strength.

"They've just pulled away the chocks, darling," Peter assured her gently, completely missing whatever it was that Iain Macleod had just said to him.

The public address crackled.

"This is Squadron Leader Guy French," an insouciant, marvellously relaxed and very, very old-school voice declared. "I have the honour to be captain of this flight to England. May I welcome our Royal Navy guests, heroes one and all onboard Flight Six-One-Seven from RAF Luqa to RAF Brize Norton. I am just awaiting clearance from the control truck and then we shall be on our way. The flight will take approximately five hours. We shall be heading west to get around Sicily and Sardinia without antagonising

the locals, then we'll mosey on up north over the Côte *d'Azur*, on over the Alps and the Rhineland and turn left for Blighty once we get to the North Sea. Over England we will be flying up the Thames Estuary and passing over London. I don't honestly know if it is a good sign but parts of the capital looked quite green the last time I flew this route a week or so ago. In the meantime, if you would secure all seat belts please. The weather back home is a tad *English*, I'm afraid. Showery and a little cool for the time of year, I am reliably informed." The pilot paused. "We've just been cleared to take off. I will speak to you again when we are in the air. Enjoy your flight. Pilot out."

Marija had seized her husband's left hand and was clutching it with grim resignation to her lap as the Comet 4 began to roll.

Chapter 76

12:14 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Great Hall, Christ Church College, Oxford

"I stand before you today," Margaret Thatcher declaimed, "at Her Majesty's pleasure to make a statement of record concerning the events of the last seventy-two hours."

There had been a minute or so of bedlam after she had uttered the word 'resignation'. On the benches opposite the Government there had been brief ecstatic jubilation quickly soured by the realisation that the Angry Widow was *not* about to step down. Behind her there had been gratifyingly loud, persistent and anguished cries of "No", and "Never!"

As always when the House of Commons was both enraged and frightened the hubbub subsided slowly, reluctantly.

Boys will be boys...

"What I say to the House today is based on the latest information that I have to hand. This morning I have received briefings from the Chiefs of Staff of our gallant armed forces, the Director Generals of the Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service, the United States Ambassador to the Court of Blenheim Palace, and of course, my Cabinet colleagues. I have resolved to communicate everything that we know to you to the limit of disclosing information which might be of aid to our enemies."

Margaret Thatcher had prepared notes that morning and committed them to memory in the thirty minutes before she walked into the chamber of the House of Commons.

"First, before I begin it may be helpful to Members of this House and to the gentlemen of the press to be aware of events scheduled after I leave this place later this afternoon." The chamber was very nearly silent now. "I shall be travelling to Brize Norton this afternoon to attend Her Majesty the Queen when she greets the President of the United States of America. Approximately an hour after the President lands Her Majesty will welcome home our brave heroes from the Battle of Malta. The men of HMS Talavera

and HMS Yarmouth will be weary after their ordeal and their journey home. After they have been received by Her Majesty they will be allowed to rest on their laurels this evening. Tomorrow morning there will be a grand parade in Oxford to celebrate their courage and peerless service to their country, and Her Majesty will award well-earned medals for valour at Trinity College. President Kennedy and his entourage will be our honoured guests at that *celebration*."

"Here! Here!"

"At approximately the same time our brave boys are landing at Brize Norton, a United States Air Force aircraft will be transporting the members of the so-called 'Irish Peace Delegation' to England. The Foreign Secretary plans to meet that 'delegation' when it disembarks at RAF Cheltenham and to conduct preliminary discussions with its members overnight *at* that air base."

There was no question of allowing essentially uninvited, unwanted visitors from the Republic of Ireland, to set foot on English soil outside the perimeter of RAF Cheltenham while President Kennedy and his entourage were in the United Kingdom.

Without being aware of it Margaret Thatcher smoothed down her skirt before stepping again to the dispatch box – in this new reconvened Oxford chamber the dispatch box of yore was a simple college lectern – and leaning a little towards her political foes.

"I will begin my briefing to the House with the situation in Ireland," she warned, her expression turning sour. "Over the weekend a major crackdown by Special Branch, the Security Service and the police has resulted in a large number of arrests. However, I have been warned that a small number of Irish Republican Army fanatics are still at large in *our* country. Moreover, I am informed that these *terrorists* may possess modern weapons including anti-aircraft missiles. The fact that the Dublin Government is as *apparently* exercised by this development as the UAUK is, in my view, a small shaft of light in the otherwise uniformly dark outlook for Anglo-Irish relations. The 'peace delegation' from Dublin comes to England at a time of heightened tensions in Ulster and indications that the IRA is on the verge of mounting a renewed terroristic offensive both in Ulster and on the mainland."

The spirits of Members of Parliament invariably dropped when Ireland or Ulster was mentioned. Two men sitting close to Enoch Powell rose to their feet to attract the Deputy Speaker's eye.

“I shall not be giving way!” Margaret Thatcher announced with a brutally dismissive wave of her right hand.

The ‘Unionist’, or Northern Ireland part of the former Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom had to a man walked into uncompromising opposition to the UAUK in recent weeks and she did not mourn their defection.

“The opinions of those members who worry about ‘Irish matters’ before they worry about any other deserve to be heard; but today we are here to deal with matters of great import not just to the wellbeing of the one-and-a-half million people of the six counties of Ulster, but to the wellbeing of the nearly forty millions who survive in the whole of the United Kingdom!”

This prompted angry and bitter retorts from across the chamber; which she ignored magisterially giving every appearance of never having heard them in the first place.

“In the South Atlantic you will have learned that the Argentine Republic, presumably believing that it could take advantage of our ‘distractions’ elsewhere in the World, has seized by force the Falkland Islands and South Georgia.”

Margaret Thatcher made herself slow down, and to take one, two, three slow breaths before she continued.

“I will say nothing more about this matter at this time other than that if the Argentine Government thinks, for a single minute, that I will let this monstrous invasion of British sovereign soil stand unchallenged, then they have made a very bad mistake. My Government and I will not forget, nor easily forgive what has happened in the South Atlantic. While our brave boys in the Mediterranean were fighting to preserve the values and the honour of our country the Argentine stabbed us in the back. I say again, this will not be allowed to stand!”

The Prime Minister was a little off put by the prolonged cheering and stamping of feet not just at her back among her own supporters but, to an extent, that which came from the opposite side of the House.

“In the Mediterranean I have the honour to report that Cyprus is now back in British hands. The Task Force Commander reports that organised enemy resistance has ceased...”

There was more stamping of feet and inane cheering.

“But now I must speak of Malta.”

The House of Commons fell quiet.

Chapter 77

12:22 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
3 Miles North of Cleeve Hill, Gloucestershire

Parcels of land around Cleeve Hill, the highest point of the Cotswolds at 1,083 feet, had been taken over by the Army during the 1945 war and never completely returned to cultivation, or to livestock grazing in the years since. However, trees grew and clumped in the valleys between Bishop's Cleeve, Prestbury and Winchcombe and patches of scrub and overgrown pasture provided cover of a sort for a man who did not want to be seen. However, none of this had been known in advance to Seamus McCormick as he drove away from the scene of the murders of the two Redcaps on the village green at Bishop's Cleeve.

The 'main' roads hereabouts in Gloucestershire were narrow, rutted ribbons navigating in careless loops around ancient field boundaries and hemmed in by unkempt hedgerows. In the dark he had swung the clumsy Bedford lorry off the Winchcombe Road at the first gate and begun to pick his way along a dirt track up the side of a steep hill. Once or twice he had thought the Bedford would topple onto its side, or slide back down the impossible incline but he had been in such a panic, in the grip of such an unreasoning desperate madness, that he had pressed on and on until the winding track ended in what had seemed, in the darkness, an impenetrable black tree line on the down slope of a ridge he knew the truck would never re-climb.

Normally, he was a man who carefully weighed the odds.

But now he felt hunted.

In the last darkness before the dawn he had shut his eyes and driven the Bedford straight into the woods until with a sickening thud it had come to a dead stop. He had been driving only at a few miles per hour; even so his head had cracked hard against the windscreen.

Seamus McCormick had recovered consciousness in the dawn half-light on the ground beside the driver's cab door.

Miraculously, the lorry was lodged so deep into the copse that it was invisible from outside the tree line, and as miraculously at full daybreak two Hawker Hunter fighters had swooped over the wood clearly making a final approach to RAF Cheltenham. Both aircraft had passed almost exactly over his head at a height he estimated as being about seven to eight hundred feet.

So low he could have taken out either of the fighters out with a point-blank tail pipe shot with his Redeyes!

Point, shoot and kill!

Chapter 78

12:23 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Great Hall, Christ Church College, Oxford

“Preliminary indications are that local defectors and traitors, mostly immigrants smuggled onto the Maltese Archipelago from Italy and Sicily since the October War, assisted by *Soviet* saboteurs landed by enemy submarines succeeded in disabling the air defence system of the islands in the thirty-six hours before the attempted invasion of Malta.”

Margaret Thatcher voice rang with outrage.

“It is clear that our enemies knew that Malta was denuded of its normal defences and therefore unusually vulnerable. I am informed that critical elements of the radar defences of the archipelago had been badly damaged during the December raid on Malta and rendered largely inoperative by the effects of the electromagnetic pulses emitted by the large atomic airbursts in the region in February, and were therefore more susceptible to sabotage, local disruption and sophisticated jamming than they otherwise would have been. However, this only partially explains how the garrison of Malta could be so completely taken by surprise in this day and age.”

It was all she could do not to shout to the rafters that the United States Navy had been supposed to have been covering the *known* gaps in the Maltese Archipelago’s early warning radar network.

“This is a question deserving of detailed further scrutiny but a question which pales into insignificance in the light of subsequent events.”

Margaret Thatcher’s tone was unapologetic.

“*Like the bloody Yanks leaving us in the lurch*!” A man bawled from the benches opposite. “*Again*!”

There was a massive outburst of agreement, angrily and repeatedly growled, bawled and rumbled from all around the Prime Minister.

She raised her right hand.

“There was never any formal understanding that United States Navy vessels would stand sentinel outside the Grand Harbour while Operation

Grantham proceeded!" She thundered at the heckler. "The US Navy undertook to maintain a force in Maltese waters at all times and that, strictly speaking, is exactly what it did! That it so happened that this force was exercising to the west rather than the east of the Maltese Archipelago at the time of the attack is merely a cruel trick of war. How often in the past have similar misfortunes beset out own fleets?"

There were more derisive cries from the drab men and women flanking the leader of the putative 'Socialist Labour Party', Michael Foot. Their leader was oddly silent, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

Margaret Thatcher wondered if her two greatest opponents in the Commons, Enoch Powell and Michael Foot understood that what she was prepared to say publicly about the causes of the catastrophe in the Mediterranean and what she was likely to say to Jack Kennedy's later that afternoon were two entirely different things?

"Wounded Malta is again a functioning base for operations. RAF Luqa is back in action; the Grand Harbour and the Admiralty Dockyards are open for business. Roads are being cleared and power and telephone services are being restored. Every aircraft which has left this country bound for Malta has carried doctors, nurses and other essential workers and vitally needed supplies of all kinds to the Mediterranean. A reciprocal airlift of badly injured men and women to hospitals in the United Kingdom has now begun. At the same time our American friends and allies," this she very nearly spat in the face of her detractors, "have instituted an 'air bridge' between the USA and Prestwick in Scotland accelerating the inflow of medical and other war supplies. In the Central Mediterranean the United States Sixth Fleet commanded by Vice Admiral Clarey from his mighty flagship, the USS Independence, is guarding Malta and American aircraft are now maintaining a two-hundred-mile air exclusion zone around the archipelago. Air Vice Marshal French, the acting C-in-C following the death in action of Sir Julian Christopher," the name caught in her throat for a jarring moment, "pays the highest possible tributes to our American allies for their part in assisting HMS Talavera and HMS Yarmouth and the ongoing selfless help to Malta that the ships of the Sixth Fleet are providing."

Aware that she had become hectoring Margaret Thatcher stopped talking for a count of five seconds.

"However, I have to tell the House that but for the heroism of the much-

reduced garrison of Malta, the fortitude of the Maltese people and the extraordinary feats of the men of HMS Talavera and HMS Yarmouth, we might today be debating how best to mount an operation to recover the Maltese Archipelago from enemy hands." She looked around the hall and over her shoulder to her own supporters on the Government benches. "And in that circumstance, I would no longer be your Prime Minister."

Chapter 79

13:31 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
RAF Luqa, Malta

Rachel Piotrowska saw the young Maltese woman watching the second Comet 4 rush down the runway and soar into the air and approached her, guessing that right now she probably needed a shoulder to cry on.

Rosa Calleja tried to put on a brave face.

“Hello, Clara,” she said forcing an unconvincing smile.

“Ah,” Rachel sighed, feeling guiltier than ever. “Clara’s not actually my real name.”

This momentarily distracted the younger woman from her melancholy. She frowned.

“I don’t...”

“Peter Christopher was right all along about me. Up until a couple of days ago I was ‘a spook’.”

This utterly baffled Rosa.

Seeing this Rachel took pity on her.

“I’ve been spying for the British since 1948,” she confessed. “But I just retired. I’m here to catch a plane back to England,” she lied. “What about you?”

“I was here to say goodbye to Marija, and...”

Rachel joined up the dots.

“And a certain dashing young naval officer?” She hoped her false smile did not betray her. The younger woman’s husband, the traitor Samuel Calleja, was presently being transferred to a cell at the damaged but still functioning Royal Military Prison at Paola less than two miles from where the two women now stood.

There he would be held overnight with the other condemned men.

Rosa blushed and looked down at her feet.

“Things are very strange,” she muttered, “but we have an *agreement*.” Her shoulders sagged and she glanced uncertainly at Rachel. “When he

returns to Malta I hope things will be simpler, but..."

"My name is Rachel, by the way."

"That's a nice name, it is..."

Rosa stopped speaking and felt foolish.

"Jewish, yes," the older woman confirmed, "I was born in Poland."

"Oh, I did not mean..."

"I know you didn't, my dear. Right now, you are missing your 'dashing young naval officer' and you have every right to feel sorry for yourself." Rachel took Rosa's arm. "What you need is a truly disgusting cup of tea and I know exactly where one can be had," she nodded towards the queue leading into the NAAFI tents erected on the other side of the ruined control tower. "And then you can to sit down and tell Auntie Rachel all about it!"

Chapter 80

16:12 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
RAF Brize Norton, Oxfordshire

A saluting stand had been erected adjacent to the hardstand allocated to SAM 26000, the flagship of the Presidential fleet of jetliners but unseasonal winds over the Atlantic and then several extra take offs and landing due to the 'air bridges' the RAF was attempting to build between England and both Malta and Cyprus had delayed the landing of the President of the United States of America's aircraft.

Queen Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, Ireland and the British Dominions beyond the Seas Queen, and Defender of the Faith, had used the interregnum to pick her Prime Minister's brain to ensure that she was appraised of the most up to date information. Her First Minister's private office was most punctilious, as befitted an institution supervised by the eminence grise of the Home Civil Service, Sir Henry Tomlinson, but in the Sovereign's experience of these things, there was no substitute for talking to the man, or in this case, the woman in charge. Moreover, in her relatively short acquaintance with Margaret Thatcher there had never been any doubt who exactly was *in charge* of the United Administration of the United Kingdom.

"We believe that there might have been as many as two thousand paratroopers dropped over the Maltese Archipelago," her Prime Minister explained. "After the Soviet ships had stopped shelling the main island and concentrated their fire on HMS Talavera and HMS Yarmouth," Margaret Thatcher continued with something akin to relish, "a large number of the parachutists were killed before they got anywhere near the ground. You see as soon as the bombardment ceased all our troops came out of their shelters and counter-attacked. Including members of the Malta Local Defence Volunteer force our garrison numbered about four thousand men. Obviously, many of our people were lines of communications troops but everybody had a gun. And then there were the Welsh Guards based in and around Sliema

who had missed out on Operation Grantham due to lack of transport ships, and the men from the various HQ companies and so forth."

Margaret Thatcher eyed the leaden skies and hoped the rain would hold off until the President's long-range Boeing 707 had landed.

"We have no reliable count for the Soviet dead. We, well, mostly the Americans picked up about forty survivors from that Turkish ship, and about a hundred bodies, too. We haven't picked up any survivors from the Soviet cruiser the Admiral Kutuzov. The First Sea Lord thinks the survivors must have been carried out to sea by the currents. Sir David thinks there might have been as many as three thousand men on the two ships. On land we've taken about six hundred prisoners, about a third of whom are injured."

In the distance the roar of jets engines came down to earth like a whisper of thunder.

Margaret Thatcher understood that to concentrate over much on what had been lost was a mistake, yet how could she not dwell upon the cost?

On and around a small archipelago that in total area was smaller than the Isle of Wight; nearly five thousand people had been killed or seriously injured and at least thirty percent of the population had been bombed out of their homes.

Around the parade stand the Royal Marine Commandos and the Scots Guards of the combined Royal and Prime Ministerial bodyguard dressed their lines and adopted the familiar implacable 'they shall not pass' expressions and postures that had become their hallmark.

The first big four-engine jet emerged from the clouds in the east after having circled twice around Brize Norton to allow other traffic to clear the airspace around the base.

At a distance the aircraft was no more than a black silhouette against a grey, gloomy backdrop in which the horizon merged with the land only a handful of miles away.

The roar of the engines approached; the aircraft sank towards the runway.

When it happened nobody quite believed it at first.

From somewhere beyond the north-western boundary of RAF Brize Norton, arching over the cluster of houses of the village which had pre-existed the airfield for centuries a brilliant blue-white flame trailed across the sky like a low shooting star. However, unlike a real shooting star this incendiary object seemed to veer, this way and that, as if searching,

searching...

The Royal Marines of Margaret Thatcher's self-styled AWP – *Angry Widow's Praetorians* – reacted first but only by a fraction of a second. Monarch and Prime Minister found themselves swept off the reviewing stand with their feet quite literally not touching the ground and carried by a posse of big men *sprinting* towards their respective armoured Bentley and Rolls-Royce.

A screamed warning and both gangs of bodyguards veered for the nearer Prime Ministerial Rolls-Royce.

The doors slammed shut.

The Queen and Margaret Thatcher looked at each other from six inches away, both crushed breathless and stunned beneath the bodies of several of their bodyguards.

Then there was a huge explosion.

A dreadful crunching, rending of metal.

And a wall of fire swept over the Rolls-Royce.

The car lurched onto its left-hand side and started to roll across the unforgiving, burning tarmac.

Chapter 81

17:32 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Royal Military Prison, Paola, Malta

Rosa Calleja was not in any kind of daze; it was a hundred times worse than that. The fragile walls of her new life had just collapsed around her and she just wanted to scream. Except no sound would come from her lips because no words could get past her rage, shame and despair.

Sam was alive!

The man who had betrayed her, his people and everything she and all those she loved held dear was *alive*!

'Samuel was captured at the Citadel in Mdina. When he was arrested he was holding a gun to Admiral Christopher's head and in the company of a senior KGB officer,' Rachel – the woman Rosa had known as Clara Pullman – had explained very, very gently.

It had not sunk in for a long time.

Rachel had led the younger woman to a corner where they could speak without being overheard or approached unseen.

'Sam was a Red Dawn – a *Krasnaya Zarya* – agent all along. He claims never to have actually been the man who pulled the trigger but he confessed to being implicated in several terrorist outrages and assassinations.'

'But,' Rosa had protested in a small, terrified voice, 'Admiral Christopher said he had been killed by *those people*?'

Rachel had tried to take hold of the other woman's hand; she had shaken off her attempt and turned her back.

'He believed Sam was probably dead. He saw no point in heaping unnecessary pain on you, or on Sam's family. He was trying to promote a sense of unity on Malta at the time. If the Calleja family had a bad apple in its midst, what family on Malta could claim it was loyal?'

'What will happen to Sam?'

Iron doors clanged noisily shut behind the two women as they were escorted deep inside the prison.

“If you would wait here,” a Redcap grunted, gesturing at two chairs placed in the gloomy corridor.

Rosa settled anxiously beside Rachel Piotrowska, whom she now knew to be her guardian and as ludicrous as it seemed, her bodyguard and to all intents, her ‘keeper’. The woman whom many of the surviving Soviet paratroopers called the ‘black widow of Mdina’ had been appointed by the C-in-C Malta to ‘keep her safe’ until the ‘storm blew over’. Rosa’s preferences in this matter were, it seemed, incidental and of no importance.

‘Can I see him?’ Rosa had asked.

Now that they were here at the prison Rosa was having second thoughts. What could she possibly say to the man who had humiliated her, who had destroyed her? And what, if anything, could he possibly say to her?

“You don’t have to put yourself through this?” Rachel murmured, touching Rosa’s arm.

“Does Marija know?” She asked, sniffing back fresh tears.

“Not yet. There will be no public announcement for some days. Perhaps, not for several weeks, or ever. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce has undertaken to break the news to Peter and Marija after the sentence has been carried out.”

The women lapsed into silence for several minutes.

“This way!” They were summoned.

Chapter 82

16:34 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Flight 617, 21,000 feet above Westbury, Wiltshire

Peter Christopher blinked awake. The last thing he remembered was the Secretary of State for Information talking animatedly to him. For a few moments he had no idea what had awakened him.

The bell sounded and Marija pressed his left hand, still – as before he fell asleep – clasped possessively on her lap.

"This is Squadron Leader Guy French again. I'm dreadfully sorry that we are going around and around like this. There has been some kind of 'local difficulty' at Brize Norton so we will be diverting to RAF Cheltenham." The Comet 4's pilot guffawed insouciantly. "There's not quite such a long runway at Cheltenham so don't worry if it seems as if we are breaking a little bit harder than normal when I put the old girl down on terra firma. Oh, yes, I almost forgot; if you care to look out of the windows Fighter Command has sent up a couple of little friends to escort us the rest of the way. It's quite exciting really!"

Peter Christopher chuckled.

"What is so funny husband?" His wife demanded. Marija was looking very pale and biting her bottom lip.

The man suddenly felt guilty, ashamed of his thoughtlessness. His wife was afraid of flying and he had fallen asleep when he ought to have been comforting her. Gently freeing his left hand, he leaned towards her and put his arm around her shoulders. Marija wasted no time moving as close as her seat would allow and doing her best to meld against him.

Her husband planted a kiss in her hair.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to fall asleep. I must have been more tired than I thought."

"It's okay," she murmured lowly, "I talked a lot with *Iain*. He is a very interesting man."

Chapter 83

17:59 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Royal Military Prison, Paola, Malta

There were two civilian prison guards flanking the chair in which the handcuffed man sat. The prisoner looked ashen but seemed, oddly, pacific and unconcerned by his surroundings or the prospect of this final encounter. There was no table in the room but the Redcaps brought in and positioned the two chairs which had been in the corridor about five feet in front of the prisoner.

Rachel went into the room first, holding Rosa's trembling hand.

Strangely, once she was in the room and had got used to the idea that the man handcuffed in the chair in the middle of the cell was in fact her missing, presumed dead husband; the younger woman found new strength. Detaching herself from her minder she stepped up behind one of the vacant chairs and stared at her husband until he flicked an upward glance towards her.

"I don't want to sit down," Rosa said, breathlessly. "It was a mistake coming here."

Samuel Calleja looked to her coldly, his lip curling in contempt.

"Aren't you even going to ask me why, wife?"

Rachel winced, stung by the cruelty of this scene. Air Vice Marshal French had said Rosa had the right to confront, or to at least see her husband before his execution but she had never thought this encounter was a good idea. Now her worst fears seemed to be justified.

"I am not your wife, Samuel Calleja!" Rosa blurted angrily. "You never treated me like your wife and I never felt like I was your wife. You expect me to ask you *why? Why* you will break your poor Papa's heart? *Why* your Mama will cry forever for your cowardly traitorous soul? You understand nothing! You are nothing! Marija and Joe are the best of these islands; you are the worst! What else is there to know?"

Rachel had not imagined the demure young Maltese housewife capable of such viperously focused coldly delivered hyperbole. It was more than the

angst of a woman scorned; it was as if Rosa was channelling the rage of the Maltese people.

The man opened his mouth to defend himself.

Rosa would not be interrupted.

"The people of Malta will spit on your name when you are dead!" This said – or rather, hurled in her husband's face – Rosa turned away and folded her arms across her chest as if she was chilled, shivering to the marrow of her bones.

Samuel Calleja ignored his wife and threw a feeble scowl at Rachel.

If Rachel had had a knife she would have gutted him without a second thought.

A few moments later as she hugged and unavailingly attempted to comfort Rosa in the corridor outside she got a grip of her anger; if she had put an end to Samuel Calleja then and there it would have been an act of mercy. It was better by far for the traitor to spend a sleepless night waiting to be marched out at dawn into the inner courtyard of Paola Prison, there to be chained to a stake to await his turn to be shot by firing squad alongside the first tranche of Soviet butchers convicted of war crimes against Maltese civilians.

Dan French was not wasting time or energy agonising over signing the death warrants of Soviet officers and senior NCOs who had been in any way complicit in the killing of non-combatants; they were in command of and therefore considered responsible de facto, for the actions and the crimes of *all* the men directly under their flag. As swiftly as the initial interrogation reports emerged from the Joint Intelligence Centre at Fort Rinella, the C-in-C was condemning the guilty. Likely Maltese and other civilian collaborators, turncoats and fifth columnists other than Samuel Calleja, whose guilt was transparent, would be subject to a more considered, quasi-judicial process in which some of the normal legal checks and balances might at some stage be allowed to intrude. But for the men who had commanded the murderous invaders there would be no half measures.

Nobody was going to be straining the spirit of mercy on account of the animals who had roamed the streets of the Citadel, Rabat and half-a-score of other towns and villages murdering women, children and unarmed men and boys.

Rosa extricated herself from the older woman.

She straightened, smoothed down her dress.
She sniffed, brushed aside her tears.
“Tomorrow morning, I will be free of *that* man!”

Chapter 84

16:59 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
3 Miles North of Cleeve Hill, Gloucestershire

Seamus McCormick knew he was a dead man when he heard the thrumming of the approaching helicopters.

Frank Reynolds and Sean O'Flynn must have carried out their 'demonstration' at Brize Norton. Now the bastards were clearing the air corridors into and out of RAF Cheltenham.

"Shit!"

He had had to booby trap the Bedford lorry and move up to the northern end of the wood – maybe two hundred yards away – just in case the truck was spotted. He had planned to go back and retrieve the second Redeye but by the time he had wrestled the first one up to the firing position he had selected around dawn there was a patrol parked up among the farm houses below the wood.

A 'ready to fire' Redeye and its M171 launcher weighed over thirty pounds and if he had attempted to move both at the same time, if discovered or disturbed, he would have had no chance of getting away with one under each arm or over each shoulder.

The helicopters were closer now.

Fuck it! He had not come all this way just to take down a fucking chopper! Any idiot with an assault rifle could take out a helicopter if it came close enough!

He had rigged the driver's door of the Bedford to a tripwire attached to eight ounces of plastic explosive positioned behind the truck's fuel tank so if the guys in that patrol he had seen found the lorry he would know all about it at exactly the same time they did.

Above the thrumming of the helicopters he heard another sound. The distant, unmistakable whistling thunder of multiple jet engines.

Chapter 85

17:04 Hours
Monday 6th April 1964
Flight 617, Final Approach to Runway 22, RAF Cheltenham

Peter Christopher looked over his wife's head through the window of the jetliner. The Hawker Hunter floating fifty to sixty yards beyond the de Havilland Comet 4's port wing tip had turned on its navigation lights.

For the first time he began to think about all the things which had happened to him since HMS Talavera had departed Portsmouth four-and-a-half months ago after a long, soul-destroying period tied up in Fareham Creek. He remembered – as if thinking about a different age – his fear that he might never meet Marija. Could it possibly be only November last year that Talavera had slipped her moorings and steamed out into the English Channel?

So much had happened to him that he half-suspected that if he met himself as he was back in late November of last year he honestly wondered if he would recognise that man. The last time he had seen England was when Talavera had taken on ammunition in Portland Harbour while a Channel gale blew the other side of the breakwater. He had been the Talavera's technical whizz, the man who had spent most of last year training the crews of all the ships hastily brought out of reserve how to make their radar and communications suites 'work'. Finally, in late November Talavera had gone to sea, and soon afterwards, to war.

Talavera had led the gun line off Santander and within the day been reduced to a crippled wreck fighting for survival in the teeth of a North Atlantic winter storm off Cape Finisterre. The scars from that action had barely healed by the time Talavera was in the thick of it again at Lampedusa. Somehow, he had gone from being the ships 'radar expert' to being her second-in-command and then her commanding officer when David Penberthy had been struck down. His friend Hugh Montgommery, Talavera's Executive Officer had died in the battle of Cape Finisterre; there had been no body, just a spray of bloody viscera after two unfired GWS 21 Sea Cat

missiles had exploded and the two A-4 Skyhawks that had left Talavera dead in the water after the first bomb run had strafed the helpless destroyer with their twenty-millimetre cannons.

The Battle of Lampedusa had been Talavera's last action before he had stepped ashore on Malta. That had been an odd thing. He had expected to find Marija waiting for him on the shore; and dreamed of such, but she had been nowhere to be seen. He had never met Marija and Alan Hannay's friend Jim Siddall, the Redcap who had been killed by Samuel Calleja's booby-trap in Kalkara. In retrospect he had known little and understood less about the love of his life than he had imagined. It was Margo Seiffert who had brought him to his senses; and in hindsight his father had probably played his part also in finally bringing him together with Marija. Once together they would never be apart again, that was the way of it and he had been too stupid to understand as much until it had happened.

By rights they ought all to be dead now.

Red Dawn, the Soviets, whoever the real enemy was, had fired nuclear missiles aimed at Malta in February. Those ICBMs ought to have killed them all. Instead, he had unhesitatingly followed Captain Nick Davey's HMS Scorpion into the wake of and under the burning stern of the USS Enterprise. Afterwards he had emerged an even bigger hero; notwithstanding he had only been doing his duty.

That was all he had done last Friday.

His duty...

God, was that only three days ago?

What was duty if it was not protecting the ones you loved?

The Comet was shaking and bumping through the turbulent air rising off the Cotswolds as the pilot bled off speed and lined up for the runway at Cheltenham.

Peter sensed Marija's terror.

He bowed his head, kissed her hair.

"It will all be over in a few minutes, sweetheart," he whispered.

She reached up to her shoulder, seized his hand for comfort and held onto it like her life depended upon it.

Chapter 86

17:05 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
3 Miles North of Cleeve Hill, Gloucestershire

What he had thought was the approach of two big jets was a single Comet and a pair of fighters. The jetliner was flying higher than the aircraft he had seen landing that morning but well within the kill range of the Redeye resting heavily on his shoulder.

One of the helicopters – a Westland Wessex – which had over flown the wood a few minutes ago had swung around and was hovering somewhere a few hundred yards to the south.

The bastards must have spotted the Bedford truck parked in the woods.

It did not matter, it was too late.

He stepped out of the tree line.

Track the target, let it go past, lead it by a few degrees and let the bird fly...

It all seemed so straightforward in theory but right now Seamus McCormick felt as if the whole World was pressing in around him, crushing the life out of him. His mind kept racing, every movement required almost superhuman strength as if he was pushing back against some invisible wall. The M171 launcher might have weighed a ton not thirty pounds.

WAIT! WAIT! WAIT!

Shoot too soon and the Redeye will fly harmlessly into space, fire too late and the same thing will happen and I have got only the one bullet!

Sweat stung his eyes.

Suddenly the Comet was almost directly overhead.

He felt the ground flinch as his finger tightened around the trigger mechanism.

The launcher made a soft *WHUMPH* sound and kicked at his shoulder.

The sound of the Bedford lorry blowing up raged through the trees behind him.

The Redeye, fired at an angle of some seventy degrees to the horizontal

appeared to stall about twenty feet above Seamus McCormick's head. For a split second he was afraid it was going to fall straight back down to ground within feet of him.

But then there was an incandescent blue white explosion and the missile was accelerating away at a speed that defied belief as the shadow of the jetliner scudded across the woods far below.

Chapter 87

17:07 Hours (GMT)
Monday 6th April 1964
Prestbury, Gloucestershire

The XM41 Redeye Block I surface-to-air missile had reached a speed of approximately Mach 1.5 when it buried its blunt nose into the wing root of the Comet. At that velocity the warhead, a blast fragmentation device built around twelve-and-a-half ounces of HTA-3, a powerful nitroamine high explosive chemically not dissimilar to RDX, did not actually detonate until after it had penetrated the crew cabin of the jetliner. Other than for the thirty or so lives that explosion snuffed out – some seconds before the impact of the shattered pieces of the compartment and the surrounding airframe on the ground short of the threshold of Runway 22 at RAF Cheltenham – the activation of the warhead was incidental. The initial impact of the Redeye travelling at supersonic speed had caused a sympathetic explosion in the inner port Rolls-Royce Avon Mark 521 J65 turbojet which had resulted in the separation of the port wing from the rest of the airframe. Around two seconds later aerodynamic stresses on the cabin compartment caused the intact fuselage and starboard wing to shed the forward section of the crew compartment spilling bodies, alive and dead, into the air over a thousand feet above the rolling Cotswolds Hills.

There were no survivors.

[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 *'Tales of Brave Ulysses – Book 6 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 *'Tales of Brave Ulysses – Book 6 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 state – unequivocally - 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.

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 the 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 addicted 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 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. One does not have to be a fully paid up chaos theoretician to know that apparently inconsequential small events can have massive unforeseen and unforeseeable impacts in subsequent historical developments.

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 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 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*.

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Cover artwork concepts by James Philip
Graphic Design by Beastleigh Web Design