

PROLOGUE



HOSTILE
HORIZONS

Galley Chase



327 A.D.

THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

THE DRUMBEAT ECHOED OFF THE WOODEN BULKHEADS, reverberating in a rhythmic staccato of flawless precision. The *celeusta* rapped methodically at his goatskin drum in a smooth yet mechanical fashion. He could bang for hours without missing a beat—his musical training based more on endurance than harmony. Though there was a recognized value to his steady cadence, his audience of galley rowers simply hoped that the monotonous performance would soon reach an end.

Lucius Arcelian rubbed a sweaty palm across his leggings, then tightened his grip on a heavy oak oar. Pulling the blade through the water in a smooth motion, he quickly matched strokes with the men around him. A young native of Crete, he had joined the Roman Navy six years earlier, attracted by lucrative wages and an opportunity to acquire Roman citizenship at retirement. Physically tested in the years since, he now aspired only to advance to a less laborious position aboard the imperial galley before his arms completely gave out.

Contrary to Hollywood myth, slaves were not used aboard ancient Roman galleys. Paid enlistees propelled the ships, typically recruited from seafaring lands under the empire's rule. Like their legionary counterparts in the Roman Army, the enlistees endured weeks of grueling training before being put to sea. The oarsmen were lean and strong, capable of rowing twelve hours a day, if need be. But aboard the Liburnian-type *bireme* galley, a small and light warship that featured just two banks of oars on either side, the oarsmen acted as supplemental propulsion to a large sail rigged above deck.

Arcelian gazed at the *celeusta*, a minuscule bald man who drummed with a pet monkey tied beside him. He could not help but notice a striking resemblance between the man and the monkey. Both had big ears and round jolly faces. The drummer wore his mug in a constant look of mirth, grinning at the crew with bright wily eyes and chipped yellow teeth. His image somehow made the rowing easier, and Arcelian realized that the galley's captain had made a wise choice in selecting the man.

"*Celeusta*," called out one of the rowers, a dark-skinned man from Syria. "The wind blows fierce and the waters seethe. Why hath we been given the command to row?"

The drummer's eyes lit up. "It is not for me to question the wisdom of my officers or else I, too, would be pulling an oar," he replied, laughing heartily.

"I would wager that the monkey could row faster," the Syrian replied.

The *celeusta* eyed the monkey curled up beside him. "He is a rather strong little fellow," he replied, playing along. "But in answer to your question, I know not the answer. Perhaps the captain wishes to exercise his talkative crew. Or perhaps he simply desires to run faster than the wind."

Standing on the upper deck a few feet above their heads, the

galley's captain gazed fitfully astern at the horizon. A pair of distant blue-gray dots danced on the turbulent waters, gradually increasing in size with each passing minute. He turned and looked at the breeze filling his sail, wishing that he could run much, much faster than the wind.

A deep baritone voice suddenly disrupted his focus.

"Is it the wrath of the sea that weakens your knees, Vitellus?"

The captain turned to find a robust man in an armored tunic staring at him with a derisive gaze. A Roman centurion named Plautius, he commanded a garrison of thirty legionaries stationed aboard the ship.

"Two vessels approach from the south," Vitellus replied. "Pirates both, I am most certain."

The centurion casually gazed at the distant ships, then shrugged.

"Mere insects," he said without concern.

Vitellus knew better. Pirates had been a nemesis to Roman shipping for centuries. Though organized piracy in the Mediterranean had been wiped out by Pompey the Great hundreds of years ago, small groups of independent thieves still preyed on the open waters. Solitary merchant ships were the usual targets, but the pirates knew that the *bireme* galleys often carried valuable cargo as well. Contemplating his own vessel's lading, Vitellus wondered whether the sea-borne barbarians had been tipped off after his ship had left port.

"Plautius, I need not remind you of the importance of our cargo," he stated.

"Yes, of course," the centurion replied. "Why do you think I am on this wretched vessel? It is I who has been tasked with ensuring its safety until delivery is made to the Emperor in Byzantium."

"Failure to do so would mean fateful consequences for us and our families," Vitellus said, thinking of his wife and son in Naples. He scanned the seas off the galley's bow, noting only rolling waves of slate-colored water.

“There is still no sign of our escort.”

Three days earlier, the galley had departed Judaea with a large *trireme* warship as escort. But the ships had become separated during a violent squall the night before, and the escort had not been seen since.

“Have no fear of the barbarians,” Plautius spat. “We will turn the sea red with their blood.”

The centurion’s brashness was part of the reason that Vitellus had taken an instant disliking toward him. But there were no doubts about his ability to fight, and for that the captain was thankful to have him near.

Plautius and his contingent of legionaries were members of the *Scholae Palatinae*, an elite military force normally assigned to protection of the Emperor. Most were battle-hardened veterans who had fought with Constantine the Great on the frontier and in his campaign against Maxentius, a rival Caesar whose defeat led to the unification of the splintered empire. Plautius himself bore a wicked scar along his left bicep, a reminder of a fierce encounter with a Visigoth swordsman that nearly cost him his arm. He proudly wore the scar as a badge of toughness, an attribute that nobody who knew him dared to question.

As the twin pirate ships drew near, Plautius readied his men along the open deck, supplemented by spare galley crewmen. Each was armed with the Roman battle accoutrements of the day—a short fighting sword called a *gladius*, a round laminated shield, and a throwing lance, or *pilum*. The centurion quickly divided his soldiers into small fighting groups in order to defend both sides of the ship.

Vitellus kept a fixed eye on their pursuers, who now stood within clear sight. They were smaller sail- and oar-driven vessels of sixty feet in length, roughly half the size of the Roman galley. One displayed pale blue square sails and the other gray, while both hulls

were painted a flat pewter to match the sea, an old disguise trick favored by Cilician pirates. Each vessel carried twin sails, which accounted for their superior speed under brisk winds. And the winds were blowing strong, offering the Romans little chance of escape.

A glimmer of hope beckoned when the forward lookout shouted a sighting of land ahead. Squinting toward the bow, Vitellus eyed the faint outline of a rocky shoreline to the north. The captain could only speculate as to what land it was. Sailing primarily by dead reckoning, the galley had been blown well off its original course during the earlier storm. Vitellus silently hoped they were near the coast of Anatolia, where other ships of the Roman fleet might be encountered.

The captain turned to a bulldog-shaped man who wielded the galley's heavy tiller.

"*Gubernator*, steer us to land and toward any leeward waters that may avail itself. If we can take the wind out of their sails, then we can outrun the devils with our oars."

Belowdecks, the *celeusta* was ordered to beat a rapid-fire rhythm. There was no talking now between Arcelian and the other oarsmen, just a low bellow of heavy breathing. Word had filtered down of the pursuing pirate ships, and each man concentrated on pulling his oar as quickly and efficiently as possible, knowing his own life was potentially at stake.

For nearly half an hour, the galley held its distance from the pursuing vessels. Under both sail and oar, the Roman vessel pushed through the waves at nearly seven knots. But the smaller and better-rigged pirates ultimately gained ground again. Pushed to the brink of exhaustion, the galley's oarsmen were finally allowed to slow their strokes to conserve energy. As the brown, dusty landmass arose before them, almost beckoning, the pirates closed in and made their attack.

With its companion ship holding astern of the galley, the blue-sailed vessel worked its way abeam and then, oddly, moved ahead of the Roman ship. As it passed, a motley horde of armed barbarians stood on deck and loudly taunted the Romans. Vitellus ignored the shouts, staring at the coastline ahead. The three vessels were within a few miles of shore, and he could see the winds diminish slightly in his square-rigged sail. He feared it was too little and too late for his exhausted oarsmen.

Vitellus scanned the nearby landscape, hoping he could put in ashore and let his legionaries fight on soil, where they were strongest. But the coastline was a high-faced wall of rocky bluffs that showed no safe haven to run the galley aground.

Speeding almost a quarter mile ahead, the lead pirate ship suddenly pivoted. In an expert tack, the vessel swung completely around and quickly veered head-on toward the galley. At first glance, it appeared to be a suicidal move. Roman sea strategy had long relied upon ramming as a primary battle tactic, and even the small *bireme* was outfitted with a heavy bronze prow. Perhaps the barbarians were more brawn than brains, Vitellus considered. He'd like nothing more than to ram and sink the first ship, knowing the second vessel would likely retreat.

"When she turns again, if she turns, follow and impale her with our ram at any cost," he instructed the steersman. A junior officer was stationed in the ladder well to await directional orders for the oarsmen. On deck, the legionaries held their shields in one hand and their throwing spears in the other, awaiting first blood. Silence befell the ship as everyone waited.

The barbarians held their bow to the galley until they were within a hundred feet. Then as Vitellus predicted, the adversary tacked sharply to port.

"Strike her!" the Roman shouted, as the helmsman pushed the

tiller all the way over. Belowdecks, the starboard rowers reversed their oars for several strokes, twisting the galley hard to starboard. Just as quickly, they reverted to forward propulsion, joining their port-side oarsmen at maximum effort.

The smaller pirate ship tried to slip abeam of the galley, but the Roman ship turned with her. The barbarians lost momentum when their sails fell slack as they tacked, while the galley surged ahead. In an instant, the hunter became the prey. As the wind refilled its sails, the smaller ship jumped forward, but not quick enough. The galley's bronze ram kissed the stern flank of the pirate ship, ripping a gash clear to the transom. The vessel nearly keeled over at impact before righting itself, the stern settling low in the water.

A cheer rang out among the Roman legionaries, while Vitellus allowed himself a grin in belief that victory had suddenly swung in their favor. But then he turned to face the second ship and instantly realized that they'd been had.

During the engagement, the second vessel had quietly drawn closer. As the galley's ram hit home, the gray-sailed ship immediately drew along the galley's port beam. The crunch of shattered oars filled the air as a fusillade of arrows and grappling hooks rained down on the deck. Within seconds, the two ships were drawn and lashed together as a mass of sword-wielding barbarians flooded over the side.

The first wave of attackers barely touched the deck when they were impaled by a barrage of razor-sharp spears. The Roman slingers were lethally accurate, and a dozen invaders fell dead in their tracks. But the invasion barely slowed, as a dozen more barbarians took their place. Plautius held his men back until the horde swarmed the deck, then rose and charged. The clang of sword on sword rang over the dying shouts of agony as the slaughter ensued. The Roman legionaries, better trained and disciplined, easily re-

pelled the initial attacks. The barbarians were used to attacking lightly armed merchants, not well-armed soldiers, and they faltered at the stiff resistance. Beating back the boarding party, Plautius rallied half his men to press the attack and personally led the way as the Romans pursued the barbarians onto their own ship.

The barbarians quickly broke ranks, but then regrouped at the realization that they vastly outnumbered the legionaries. Attacking in groups of three and four, they would target a single Roman and overrun his position. Plautius lost six men before quickly organizing his troops into a fighting square.

On the stern deck of the galley, Vitellus watched as the Roman centurion cut a man in two with his sword, mowing through the barbarians like a scythe. The captain had gamely turned the galley inshore during the fight, with its pursuer lashed alongside. But the pirate ship dropped a stone anchor, which eventually found bottom and ground both ships to a halt.

Meanwhile, the blue-sailed vessel had curled around and attempted to rejoin the fight. With flooding from its damaged hull slowing its pace, it aimed clumsily for the galley's exposed starboard flank. Duplicating the move of its sister ship, the vessel slipped alongside, and its crew quickly flung grapples.

"Oarsmen to arms! Report to the deck!" Vitellus shouted.

Belowdecks, the exhausted oarsmen rallied to the cry. Trained as soldiers first, the oarsmen and every other sailor aboard were expected to defend the ship. Arcelian followed his brethren in line as they gulped down a splash of cold water from a clay pot, then rushed to the deck with a sword in hand.

"Keep your head down," he said to the *celeusta*, who had passed out the arms and now followed at the end of the line.

"I prefer to look the barbarian in the eye when I kill him," the drummer replied with his trademark grin.

The oarsmen joined the fight none too soon as the second wave of pirates began storming the starboard rail. The galley's crew quickly engaged the attackers in a mass of steel and flesh.

As Arcelian stepped onto the main deck, he was aghast at the carnage. Dead bodies and severed limbs were scattered everywhere amid growing pools of blood. Untested in battle, he unwittingly froze for a moment, until an officer ran by and yelled at him, "Sever the grappling lines!"

Spotting a taut rope stretching off the galley's bow, he sprang forward and sliced the line free with his sword. He watched as the cut line whipped back toward the blue-sailed ship, whose deck stood several feet below his own. He then peered down the galley's rail and noticed a half dozen more grapple lines affixed to the pirate ship.

"Cut the lines!" he shouted. "Shove the barbarian clear."

The words fell on deaf ears, as he realized that nearly every crewman aboard was engaged with the barbarians in a fight for life. Only at the stern of the galley did he observe with encouragement that the *celeusta* had joined the effort, attacking a grapple line with a small hatchet. But time was short. Aboard the slowly sinking pirate vessel, the barbarians began making a determined effort to board en masse, realizing their ship had little time left afloat.

Arcelian stepped over a dying shipmate to reach the next grapple and quickly raised his sword. Before the blade came down, he heard a whistling through the air, and then a razor-tipped arrow bit into the deck an inch from his foot. Ignoring it, he swung the blade through the rope, then dove beneath the rail as another arrow darted overhead. Peering over the edge, he spotted his assailant, a Cilician archer wedged at the top of the pirate ship's mast. The archer had already turned his attention away from the oarsman and was aiming his next arrow astern. Arcelian looked on in horror as

he realized that the archer was aiming at the *celeusta*, who was about to cut a third grapple line.

“*Celeusta!*” the oarsman screamed.

The warning came too late. An arrow ripped into the little man’s chest, burying itself nearly to the quiver. The drummer gasped, then dropped to his knees, as a flow of blood turned his chest red. In a final act of allegiance, he slammed the hatchet through the grapple line, then fell over dead.

The barbarian ship began settling lower in the water, inciting a final rush to the galley. Just two grapple lines remained binding the ships together, a point lost on all of the pirates save the archer. Still perched in the mast, he took aim and fired again at Arcelian, sending an arrow whizzing over his head.

Arcelian saw that the remaining grapple lines were amidships, although the two vessels were touching at the stern and the fighting had drifted aft. The oarsman dropped to all fours and scurried beneath the rail to the first line. A dying barbarian lay nearby, his midsection a jagged mass of exposed flesh. The strong oarsman approached and nimbly hoisted the man over his shoulder, then turned and stepped to the grapple line. Immediately there came a thwack, and an arrow drove hard into the barbarian’s back. With his free hand, Arcelian swung the sword and sliced the line in two as a second arrow burrowed into his human shield. The oarsman collapsed to the deck, rolling the now dead barbarian off his shoulder while catching his breath.

Nearly spent from his ordeal, Arcelian surveyed the final grapple, which had clawed into a yardarm a dozen feet above his head. Peeking over the rail, he spotted the enemy archer, who had finally abandoned his perch on the mast and was descending toward the deck. Seizing the opportunity, Arcelian jumped up and ran down his own deck, climbing onto the rail where the grapple line sloped

down. Catching his balance, he started to swing the sword, but momentum beat him to the punch.

The force of the two divergent ships on the single line was too powerful to bear, and the iron grapple lost its grip on the masthead. The rope's high tension flung the grapple like a projectile, spinning it in a low arc toward the water. The sharpened barbs whizzed past Arcelian, barely sparing him a bloody demise. But the rope looped around his thigh and jerked him off the rail, throwing him into the water just ahead of the pirate vessel's bow.

Unable to swim, Arcelian splashed wildly, trying to keep his head above water. Flailing about, he felt something hard in the water and latched onto it with both hands. A chunk of wooden railing from the pirate ship knocked loose during the earlier collision, the flotsam was just large enough to keep him afloat. The blue-sailed pirate ship suddenly loomed over him, and he kicked frantically to escape its path. He was carried farther away from the galley in the process, catching a current that was just too much to overcome in his weakened state. Kicking weakly to hold his position, he watched wide-eyed as the pirate ship caught a gust of wind and accelerated toward the shore, its deck riding low above the water.

While Arcelian had freed the starboard grapples from the Roman ship, Vitellus and a junior officer had cleared the port-side lines, save for a remaining grapple near the stern. Leaning against the tiller with an arrow protruding from his shoulder, the captain yelled over to the centurion on the adjacent ship.

"Plautius, return to the vessel," he said in a weakened voice. "We are cast free."

The centurion and his legionaries were still battling fiercely on the opposite vessel, though their fighting numbers had diminished. Plautius pulled his bloodied sword from the neck of a barbarian and gave a quick glance toward the galley.

“Proceed with the cargo. I shall detain the barbarians,” he yelled, plunging his sword into another attacker. There were but three legionaries left standing with him, and Vitellus could see that their remaining breaths would be few.

“Your bravery shall be recorded,” the captain yelled, cutting the last line. “Farewell, Centurion.”

Free of the anchored attack ship, the galley leaped forward as its lone sail filled with the breeze. His *gubernator* long dead, Vitellus muscled the steering oar landward, feeling the grip turn slick with his own blood. An odd silence crept over the deck, prompting him to stagger to the forward rail and peer down. The sight below stunned him.

Littered across the deck was a mass of dead and dismembered bodies, Roman and barbarian intermixed, in a wash of red. A nearly equal number of attackers and crewmen had engaged one another, fighting to a mortal standstill. It was a scene of carnage like no other he had ever witnessed.

Shaken by the sight and faint from loss of blood, he stared at the heavens.

“Protect thee for thy Emperor,” he gasped.

Swaying back to the stern, he wrapped his tired arms around the tiller and adjusted its angle. Cries for help echoed up from men afloat in the water, but the captain’s ears fell deaf as the ship sailed by. With his eyes staring vacantly at the land ahead, he gripped the tiller with his last bit of energy and fought for the final moments of his life.



DRIFTING IN THE CHOPPY WATERS, Arcelian looked up in surprise to see the Roman ship sailing clear, suddenly bearing down on his own position. Crying for help, he watched in anguish as the gal-

ley slipped past him, ignoring him in complete silence. A moment later, he caught a profile of the ship as it turned and he saw with horror that not a single soul stood upon her main deck. Only the lone figure of Captain Vitellus was visible, slumped over the tiller on the raised stern. Then the ship's sails rustled in the wind, and the wooden galley darted toward shore, soon disappearing completely from sight.

JUNE 1916
PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND

THE NAVAL DOCK WAS ABUZZ WITH ACTIVITY, DESPITE the dampening effects of a cold drizzle. Royal Navy stevedores busily worked beneath a steam-powered derrick, hoisting huge amounts of food, supplies, and munitions aboard the gray leviathan moored at the dock. On board, the crates were neatly stowed in the ship's forward hold, while a throng of sailors in heavy woolen pea-coats readied the ship for sea.

The HMS *Hampshire* still maintained a spit-and-polish finish, despite more than a decade at sea and its recent action at the Battle of Jutland. A Devonshire class armored cruiser of ten thousand tons, she was one of the largest ships in the British Navy. Armed with a dozen large deck guns, she was also one of the deadliest.

In an empty storehouse a quarter mile down the quay, a blond-haired man stood by an open siding and studied the ship's loading through a pair of brass binoculars. He held the binoculars to his eyes for nearly twenty minutes until a green Rolls-Royce appeared,

crossing the dock and pulling up in front of the main gangway. He watched intently as a band of Army officers in khaki uniforms quickly materialized, surrounding the car and then assisting the vehicle's occupants up the gangway. From their dress, he judged the two arrivals as a politician and a high-ranking military officer. He caught a quick glimpse of the officer's face, smiling to himself as he noted that the man wore a heavy mustache.

"Time to make our delivery, Dolly," he said aloud.

He stepped into the shadows, where a weather-beaten cart was hitched to a saddled horse. Stuffing the binoculars under the seat, he climbed aboard and slapped the reins. Dolly, an aged dappled gray mare, lifted her head in annoyance, then shuffled forward, pulling the cart out into the rain.

The dockhands paid scant attention to the man when he pulled his cart up alongside the ship a few minutes later. Dressed in a faded woolen coat and soiled trousers, a flat cap pulled low over his brow, he resembled dozens of other local paupers who survived by the odd job here and there. In this instance, it was an acted role, embellished by a failure to shave and a liberal dousing of cheap scotch on his clothes. When it was deemed time to perform, he made his presence known by advancing Dolly to the base of the gangway, effectively blocking its use.

"Get that nag out of the way," cursed a red-faced lieutenant overseeing the loading.

"Aye got a d'livry for the *'Ampshire*," the man growled in a Cockney accent.

"Let me see your papers," the lieutenant demanded.

The deliveryman reached inside his jacket and handed the officer a crumpled page of watermarked stationery. The lieutenant frowned as he read it, then slowly shook his head.

"This is not a proper bill of lading," he said, quietly eyeing the deliveryman.

“It’s wot the general gave me. That and a fiver,” the man replied with a wink.

The lieutenant walked around and surveyed the crate, which was roughly the size of a coffin. On the top was an address stenciled in black paint:

PROPERTY OF THE ROYAL NAVY
TO THE ATTENTION OF SIR LEIGH HUNT
SPECIAL ENVOY TO THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE
C/O CONSULATE OF GREAT BRITAIN
PETROGRAD, RUSSIA

“Humph,” the officer muttered, eyeing the paperwork again. “Well, it is signed by the general. Very well,” he said, passing the paper back. “You, there,” he barked, turning to a nearby stevedore. “Help get that crate aboard. Then get this wagon out of here.”

Rope was strung around the crate, and a shipboard derrick yanked it into the sky, swinging it over the rail and depositing it in the forward hold. The deliveryman gave a mock salute to the lieutenant, then slowly drove the horse off the dock and out of the navy yard. Turning down a nearby dirt road, he ambled past a small port warehouse district that ended at an expanse of open farmland. A mile farther down the road, he turned into an uneven drive and parked the cart beside a dilapidated cottage. An old man with a game leg limped out of a nearby barn.

“Make your delivery?” he asked the driver.

“I did. Thank you for the use of your cart and horse,” the man replied, pulling a ten-pound note out of his wallet and handing it to the farmer.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but that’s more than my horse is worth,” the farmer stammered, holding the note in his hands as if it were a baby.

“And a fine horse it is,” the man replied, giving Dolly a farewell pat on the neck. “Good day,” he said to the farmer, tipping his hat without another word, then walking up the drive.

He turned down the road and hiked a few minutes until detecting the sound of an automobile headed his way. A blue Vauxhall touring sedan rounded a corner, then slowed to a stop beside him. The deliveryman stepped closer as the rear door of the sedan opened and he climbed in. A staid-looking man in the attire of an Anglican priest slid across the backseat to make room. He stared at the deliveryman with a shroud of apprehension masking his dull gray eyes, then reached for a decanter of brandy mounted to the seat back. Pouring a healthy shot into a crystal tumbler, he passed it to the deliveryman, then directed the driver to proceed down the road.

“The crate is aboard?” he asked bluntly.

“Yes, Father,” the deliveryman replied in a sarcastic tone of reverence. “They bought the phony bill of lading and loaded the crate into the forward hold.” There was no longer any trace of a Cockney accent as he spoke. “In seventy-two hours, you can bid farewell to your illustrious general.”

The words seemed to trouble the vicar, though they were what he had anticipated. He silently reached into his overcoat and retrieved an envelope stuffed thick with banknotes.

“As we agreed. Half now, half after the . . . event,” he said, passing over the envelope as his words fell away.

The deliveryman smiled as he eyed the thick stack of currency. “I wonder if the Germans would pay this much to sink a ship and murder a general,” he said. “You wouldn’t happen to be working for the Kaiser, now, would you?”

The minister firmly shook his head. “No, this is a theological matter. Had you been able to locate the document, this would not have been necessary.”

“I searched the manor three times. If it was there, I would have found it.”

“As you have told me.”

“You are certain that it was carried aboard?”

“We’ve learned of a meeting on the general’s schedule with the Father Superior of the Russian Orthodox Church in Petrograd. There can be little doubt as to the purpose. The document must be aboard. It will be destroyed along with him, and so the secret shall die.”

The Vauxhall’s tires touched wet cobblestone as they entered the outskirts of Portsmouth. The driver navigated toward the city center, passing block after block of tall brick row houses. Reaching a main crossroads, he turned into the rear driveway of a nineteenth-century stone church labeled St. Mary’s as the rain began to fall with intensity.

“I’d like you to drop me at the railway station,” the deliveryman said, observing the large motorcar bisect a churchyard cemetery and pull to a stop behind the rectory.

“I was asked to drop off a sermon,” the minister replied. “Won’t take more than a moment. Why don’t you join me?”

The deliveryman suppressed a yawn as he looked out the rain-streaked window. “No, I think I’ll wait here and keep dry.”

“Very well. We’ll return shortly.”

The minister and driver walked away, leaving the deliveryman to count his blood money. As he attempted to tally up the Bank of England notes, he had trouble reading the numbers and realized his vision was blurring. He felt a wave of fatigue sweep over him and quickly tucked the money away and lay down on the seat to rest. Though it seemed like hours, it was only a few minutes later when a mist of cold water struck his face and he pried open his heavy eyelids. The stern face of the minister looked down upon him amid a shower of rain. His brain told him that his body was moving, but

there was no feeling in his legs. He focused his blurry eyes enough to see the driver was carrying his legs, while the minister dragged him by the arms. A mute sense of panic rang within his skull, and he willed himself to retrieve a Webley Bulldog pistol from his pocket. But his limbs refused to respond. The brandy, he thought with momentary clarity. It was the brandy.

A canopy of green leaves filled his vision as he was carried beneath a grove of towering oak trees. The minister's face still swayed above him, a sullen mask of indifference illuminated by two frigid eyes. Then the face fell away, or rather he did. He heard more than felt his body drop into a trench, splashing down hard into a muddy puddle. Flat on his back, he gazed up at the minister, who stood high over him with a faint aura of guilt.

"Forgive us our sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," he heard the minister say solemnly. "These we take to the grave."

The back side of a shovel appeared, followed by a clump of soggy dirt that fell and bounced off his chest. Another shovelful of dirt tumbled down, and then another.

His body was paralyzed and his voice frozen, but his mind still operated with reason. With crushing horror, he fully grasped that he was being buried alive. He fought again to move his limbs, but there was no response. As the dirt piled high within his grave, his screams of terror blared only within his mind, until his last breath was painfully snuffed out.



THE PERISCOPE CUT a lazy arc through the boiling black water, its presence nearly invisible under the night sky. Thirty-five feet beneath the surface, a baby-faced German naval *Oberleutnant* named Voss slowly rotated the viewing piece three hundred and sixty de-

grees. He lingered over a few speckled lights that rose high in the distance. They were lantern lights from a scattering of farmhouses that dotted Cape Marwick, a frigid, windswept stretch of the Orkney Islands. Voss had nearly completed his circular survey when his eye caught a faint glimmer on the eastern horizon. Dialing the viewing lens to a crisper focus, he patiently tracked a steady movement of the light.

“Possible target at zero-four-eight degrees,” he announced, fighting to contain the excitement in his voice.

Several other sailors stationed in the submarine’s cramped control room perked to attention at his words.

Voss tracked the object for several more minutes, during which time a quarter moon broke briefly through a bank of thick storm clouds. For a fleeting moment, the moonlight cast a sheen on the object, exposing its dimensions against the island hills behind it. Voss felt his heart flutter and noticed his palms suddenly grow sweaty on the periscope handgrips. Blinking hard, he confirmed the visual image, then stood away from the eyepiece. Without saying a word, he sprinted from the control room, scrambling down the tiny aft passageway that ran the length of the sub. Reaching the captain’s cabin, he knocked loudly, then slid open a thin curtain.

Captain Kurt Beitzen was asleep in his bunk but woke instantly and flicked on an overhead lamp.

“*Kapitän*, I’ve spotted a large vessel approaching from the south-east approximately ten kilometers off. I caught a brief glimpse of her profile. A British warship, possibly a battleship,” Voss reported excitedly.

Beitzen nodded as he sat upright, flinging off a blanket. He had slept in his clothes and quickly pulled on a pair of boots, then followed his second officer to the control room. An experienced submariner, Beitzen took a long look through the attack periscope, then barked out range and heading coordinates.

“She’s a warship,” he confirmed nonchalantly. “Is this quadrant clear of mines?”

“Yes,” Voss replied. “Our nearest release was thirty kilometers north of here.”

“Stand by to attack,” Beitzen ordered.

Beitzen and Voss moved to a wooden chart table, where they plotted a precise intercept course and relayed orders to the helm. Though submerged, the submarine rocked and pitched from the turbulent seas overhead, making the urgent task more stressful.

Built in the shipyards of Hamburg, the U-75 was a UE-1 class submarine, designed primarily for laying down mines on the sea-floor. In addition to a large stock of mines, she carried four torpedoes and a powerful 105mm deck gun. Her mine-laying duty was nearly complete, and none of the crew was expecting an encounter with an enemy warship.

Under Beitzen’s command, the U-75 was on only its second mission since being launched six months earlier. The current cruise had been deemed a minor success already, as the sub’s mines had sunk a small merchant ship and two trawlers. But this was their first crack at a prize of major stature. Word quickly rippled through the crew that they were targeting a British warship, boosting the focus and tension to high levels. Beitzen himself knew that such a kill would guarantee him the Iron Cross.

The German commander gently guided the submarine to a position perpendicular to Marwick Cape. If the warship held her bearing, she would pass within a quarter mile of the lurking sub. The U-boat’s torpedoes had an accurate range of less than half a mile, necessitating an uncomfortably close firing position. In World War I, most merchant ships were actually sunk by the U-boats’ deck guns. The U-75 didn’t have that option against the heavily armed cruiser, particularly in the present rough seas.

Positioned for the kill, the captain hung to the periscope, waiting

for his quarry. Another flash of moonlight revealed that the *Oberleutnant* was close to the mark. The vessel appeared to be an armored cruiser, somewhat smaller than the fearsome dreadnoughts.

“Tubes one and two, stand by for firing,” Beitzen commanded.

The cruiser was now less than a mile away, its imposing size nearly masking the horizon. Beitzen quickly double-checked the torpedoes’ firing profile, then eyed the target once more. The vessel was quickly approaching their strike range.

“Open bow caps,” he ordered.

A few seconds later, a reply rang through the control room, “Bow caps open.”

“Tubes one and two ready.”

“Ready,” came the reply.

Beitzen tracked the cruiser through the periscope, waiting patiently while the crew around him held their breaths. He watched until the big surface ship appeared directly in front of them. Beitzen parted his lips to give the fire command when a bright flash suddenly filled his eyepiece. A second later, a muffled explosion rocked through the sub’s steel bulkheads.

Beitzen stared dumbfounded through the periscope as flames and smoke burst from the cruiser, lighting the night sky with a blaze of persimmon red. The big warship shuddered and shook, and then her bow burrowed under the waves. The stern quickly rose up, hung suspended in midair for a few moments, then chased the bow down toward the seafloor. In less than ten minutes, the mammoth cruiser disappeared completely from sight.

“Voss . . . you are certain there are no mines in this quadrant?” he asked hoarsely.

“Yes, sir,” the officer replied, double-checking a chart of mine-field locations.

“She’s gone,” he finally muttered to the anxious crew awaiting his orders. “Close bow caps and stand down.”

As the disappointed crew resumed their duties, the captain clung to the periscope, staring blankly through the eyepiece. A handful of survivors had escaped in lifeboats, but there was nothing he could do to help them in the turbulent waters. Watching the empty black sea before him, he struggled to find an answer. Yet none of it made sense. Warships just didn't blow up by themselves.

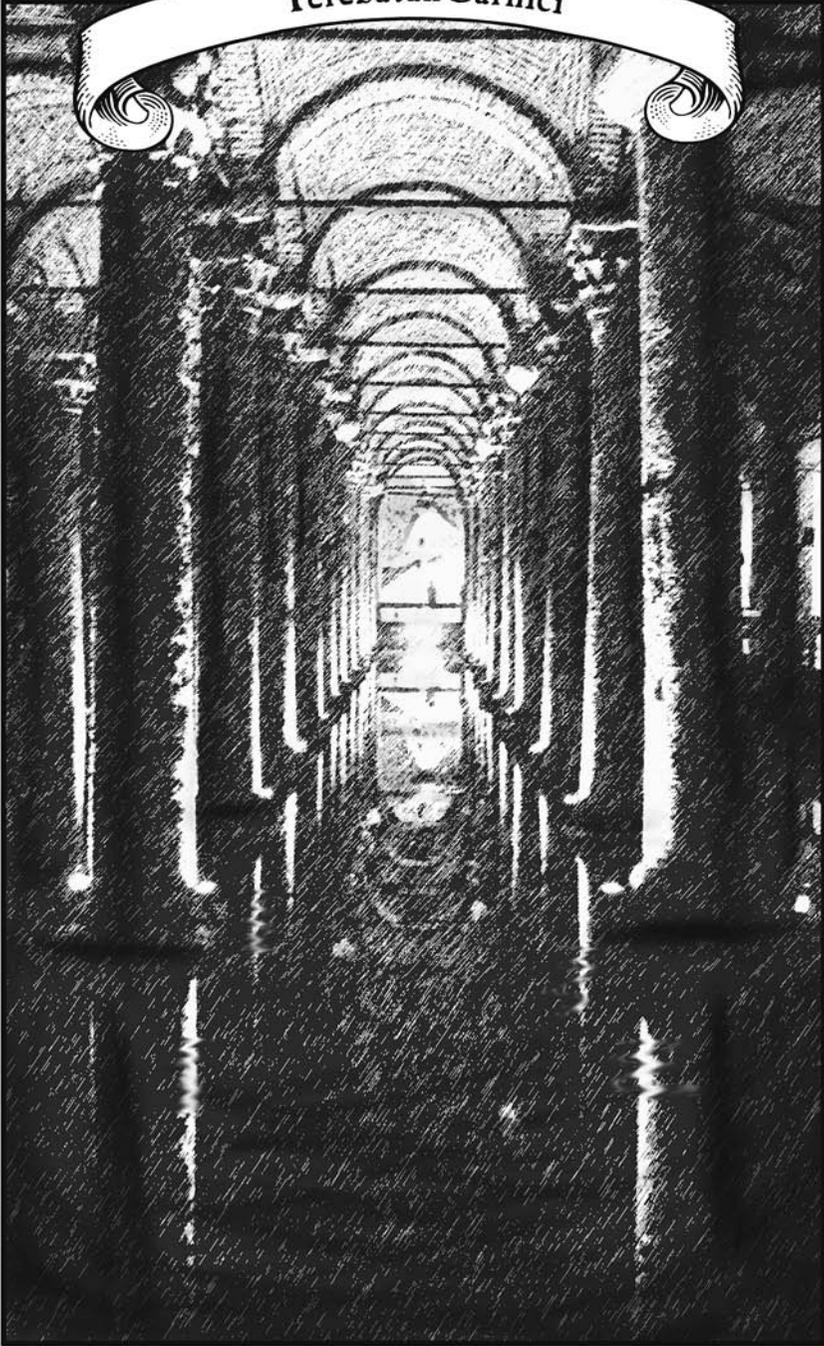
It was a long while before Beitzen pried himself away from the periscope and staggered quietly to his cabin. Fated to die later in the war, he would never learn the truth of why the *Hampshire* had blown up. But in his remaining days, the young *Kapitän* never shook the image from his mind of the cruiser's last minutes, when the massive warship seemingly died without cause.

PART I



OTTOMAN
DREAM

Yerebatan Sarnici





JULY 2012
CAIRO, EGYPT

THE NOONDAY SUN BURNED THROUGH THE DENSE LAYER of dust and pollutants that hung over the ancient city like a soiled blanket. With the temperature well over the century mark, few people lingered about the hot stones that paved the central court of al-Azhar Mosque.

Situated in eastern Cairo some two miles from the Nile, al-Azhar stood as one of the city's most historic structures. Originally constructed in the year 970 A.D. by Fatimid conquerors, the mosque was rebuilt and expanded through the centuries, ultimately attaining status as Islam's fifth most important mosque. Elaborate stone carvings, towering minarets, and onion-domed spires vied for the eye's attention, reflecting a thousand years of artistry. Amid its fortress-like stone walls, the centerpiece of the complex was a wide rectangular court surrounded by rising arcades on every side.

In the shade of an arcade portico, a slight man in baggy trousers and a loose-fitting shirt wiped clean a pair of tinted glasses, then surveyed the courtyard. In the heat of the day, only a small number

of youths were about, studying the architecture or walking in silent meditation. They were students from the adjacent al-Azhar University, a preeminent institution for Islamic learning in the Middle East. The man touched a thick beard that covered his own youthful face, then lifted a worn backpack to his shoulder. With a white cotton *keffiyeh* wrapped about his head, he easily passed as just another theology student.

Stepping into the sunlight, he trekked across the court toward the southeast arcade. The façade above the keel-shaped arches featured a series of ornate roundels and niches cut into the stucco, which he noticed had become favored roosting spots for some local pigeons. He walked toward a protruding central arch topped by a high rectangular panel, which signified the entrance to the prayer hall.

The call to midday *salat*, or prayer, had occurred nearly an hour earlier, leaving the expansive prayer hall nearly empty. Outside the foyer, a small group of students sat cross-legged on the ground, listening to a university instructor lecture on the Qur'an. Skirting around the group, the man approached the hall entry. There he met a bearded man in a white robe, who eyed him sternly. The visitor removed his shoes and quietly offered a blessing to Muhammad, then proceeded in with a nod from the doorman.

The prayer hall was an open expanse of red carpet punctuated by dozens of alabaster pillars that rose to a beamed ceiling. As in most mosques, there were no pews or ornate altars to provide orientation. Cupola-shaped patterns in the carpet, outlying individual positions of prayer, pointed toward the head of the hall. Noting that the bearded doorman no longer paid him any attention, the man made his way quickly along the pillars.

Approaching several men kneeling in prayer, he spotted the *mibrab* across the hall. An often unassuming niche carved into a mosque's wall, it indicated the direction of Mecca. Al-Azhar's *mibrab*

was cut of smooth stone and arched with a wavy black-and-ivory stone inlay that had a nearly modern design.

Moving to a pillar closest to the *mibrab*, the man slipped off his backpack, then lay prone on the carpet in prayer. After several minutes, he gently pushed his pack to the side until it wedged against the base of the pillar. Spotting a pair of students walking in the direction of the entrance, he rose and followed them to the foyer, where he retrieved his shoes. Passing the bearded elder, he muttered, “*Allahu Akbar*,” then quickly stepped into the courtyard.

He pretended to briefly admire a rosette in the façade, then quickly made his way to the Barber’s Gate, which led out of the mosque compound. A few blocks away, he climbed into a small rental car parked on the street and drove in the direction of the Nile. Passing through a dingy industrial neighborhood, he turned onto the lot of a crumbling old brickyard and pulled behind its abandoned loading dock. There he pulled off his loose trousers and shirt, revealing a pair of jeans and silk blouse underneath. The eyeglasses were removed, along with a wig, and then the fake beard. The male Muslim student was no more, replaced by an attractive, olive-skinned woman with hard dark eyes and stylishly layered short black hair. Ditching her disguise in a rusty garbage bin, she hopped back into the car and rejoined Cairo’s sluggish traffic, crawling away from the Nile to the Cairo International Airport on the northeast side of town.

She was standing in line at the check-in counter when the backpack exploded. A small white cloud rose over al-Azhar Mosque as the prayer hall roof was blown off and the *mibrab* shattered into a pile of rubble. Though the explosion had been timed to detonate between daily prayers, several students and mosque attendants were killed and dozens more injured.

After the initial shock subsided, the Cairo Muslim community

was outraged. Israel was blamed first, then other Western nations were targeted when no one claimed responsibility for the blast. In a few weeks, the prayer hall would be repaired and a new *mibrab* quickly installed. But to Muslims across Egypt and around the world, the anger at the assault on such a sacred site lasted much longer. Few could have recognized, however, that the attack was only the first salvo in a strategic ploy that would attempt to transform the very dominance of the entire region.