

Destroyer

By Steve Fisher

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I

IT SNOWED in New York that winter, and the snow flakes, fat and shapeless, fell in a white curtain against the lights of the city. There were dance bands, just as there always are, and new musical comedies, and fine plays. A Pulitzer Prize was awarded, and there was the Theatre Guild and William Saroyan and Walter Winchell. Murders took place in Brooklyn, and Pegler wrote about labor unions. There was a kidnapping on the West Coast, a cold wave in the North, and a flood in the South. There were new pictures from Hollywood; and news bulletins from abroad came every few hours. There was always news, one move or another. There were rumors and conferences, panic and famine. The commentators came on the radio and told you all about it. They were still going on after all these months; and, of course, there was much talk about Canada.

All over the United States young men from the cities, the towns, and the farms were being trained under arms: you had war games in the mountains, and war games in the hills. The shipyards were busy. There was the clanking of steel, the hoarse thunder of a thousand buzzing rivet drills. Airplane factories were jammed with orders from years in advance, and one after another new army bombers came off the assembly line. In New Jersey, and elsewhere, powder factories were blown up and men were killed. Japan was running the Orient. We recalled our citizens from the Far East. There was a statement issued by the United States Department of War that comprised the next thing to a direct ultimatum—the American fleet was in Singapore at the time—but Japan, protected by the Axis Powers, ignored it, and nothing was done; we did not declare war. People talked; there were peace moves. There were radio forums where you heard fine speeches and gaudy patriotism flaunted freely, but no guns went off.

A month later a South American republic declared itself in line with the Axis Powers, and Germany and Italy moved warships—and troop transports, it was rumored—to the coast of this republic, literally rupturing the Monroe Doctrine. There were scathing editorials in all the newspapers, and the President spoke to the nation and used words like “*perilous situation*,” and “*we*

are prepared.” There was a Communist parade in Union Square, and a peace rally in Madison Square Garden, which ended in a riot and the deaths of two New York policemen who were trying to keep order. A congressional committee reported sabotage in seven different American gasoline refineries, and the price of first-grade gasoline went up to forty cents a gallon, and later to forty-three cents.

Then, simultaneously, Germany seized Dutch Guiana, and Japan made threatening overtures in the Philippines.

The United States immediately mobilized.

But only a small percentage of the new naval craft under construction had been completed. The air force of the combined enemy powers outnumbered American planes at a ratio of six to one. In total naval tonnage the ratio was slightly less. They had fifteen large tanks to every one of ours. Four million Americans were in uniform, but still there was no war. There was appeasement talk, which was not popular. Spain wanted a portion of Louisiana. Mexico wanted a hundred square miles of Texas. The United States stood alone against the world.

Another three million Americans mobilized, bringing the total fighting forces to seven million.

People did not sleep well at night. Anti-aircraft guns were being constructed on tall buildings. There was a slump on Wall Street. The value of gold went down. Business firms failed. Banks stayed open only by government order. Ten thousand people who were loud-voiced patriots in peace time fled for the Canadian border. But among the civilians who were left were new, alien, faces which had appeared, mysteriously, from nowhere.

Wherever you looked there were soldiers, and parades with bands, and tanks, and artillery; and squadrons of new planes roared overhead day and night. Dance bands still played, young women wept; and now, in March, there was no more talk of peace.

II

IN EARLY March the Pacific was green, bright, and hot with the sun, flecked white with

froth. For two days there was a storm, but after that it was calm again, marine-colored, and there were very many flying fish which made small flashes of silver lightning across the jade surface. On the submarines you saw these fish all the time and quite often they flew right up on deck. Here they flopped grotesquely on the black lattice-work, growing gradually weaker until at last they were dead. The tropic sun rotted them very quickly and twice a day sailors had to climb down from the conning tower and gather the putrid winged-fish and throw them over the side. The submarines were old and small and the trip was grueling for the men and hard on the engines, so that there were only four underwater dives during those entire twenty-two days. The remainder of the time they stayed on the surface following the *U.S.S. Holland*, a big auxiliary ship which was the tender.

There were fourteen of the submarines and they followed the tender like gray cigar-shaped suckling pigs. It would have been easy for a plane to spot them, but they kept a close watch and no planes were sighted.

The submarines were "S"-boats, not fleet craft at all; the new V-type moved with the fleet and were quite fast and very big. In the S-boats there were four torpedo tubes forward, and one aft. All of the torpedoes had been fitted with warheads and were in readiness for any eventuality. The S-boats' top speed was twelve knots; only five submerged. For a number of years they had been based at Pearl Harbor where they cruised around Maui, Molakai, and Oahu in the patrol of the Hawaiian Islands.

Below decks the ships were cramped and uncomfortable. They were outmoded pig iron boats that rattled and wheezed with the pounding of the big Diesel engines. There were air condensers in the compartments but nevertheless the air was foul and hot, and stank of an acid that ate your dungarees and made the skin on your arms and your face itch and burn.

One of these old submarines was the S-4 which sank a number of years ago with its entire crew; and was later brought up and reconditioned.

The submarines had sailed under sealed orders, and a strict radio silence was maintained. In the Pacific they saw only two other ships—both of them freighters bound for South America. All

fourteen of the submarines dove and the freighters passed the *U.S.S. Holland*, dipped their colors in salute to a man-of-war, and continued peacefully on their way, unaware that a fleet of small submarines lay beneath them.

The submarines had run short on all food and the men now ate non-perishable cereals mixed with powdered milk, and hardtack and jam.

But when they reached Panama they tied up and took on fuel oil and fresh provisions. A few hours later they proceeded through the canal. On the S-14 a man had died of acute appendicitis; and five others had been taken off the *U.S.S. Holland*, stricken with fever, and transferred to the Naval Hospital.

In the Caribbean it was cooler and there was rain and wind for three days. They saw an occasional island, leafy and green, and now and again an American cruiser crawled across the horizon.

On the fifth day the fourth dispatch of sealed orders was opened. Six of the submarines immediately turned back to Colon for repairs and over-haul, and the other eight disunited and sailed singly to the longitudes assigned them. The *Holland* moored off at a former British base.

Captain Knight on the S-60 said: "We're part of a blockade. *The iron net.*"

"Have you heard anything yet. Sir?"

"No. But you needn't worry. They'll inform us when hostilities commence."

"Do you imagine it'll be soon?"

"I imagine so, but there's no way of telling," Captain Knight said. "The entire fleet is engaged in war maneuvers: actually, or figuratively, *we are at war!* At least, we're taking positions against what must inevitably be a naval attack."

"Then we're going to wait for them to strike?"

"I'm afraid it's necessary. We're outnumbered. If we sought them out it's possible that we might fall into a trap—leaving our coast vulnerable to attack. Half their forces might bottle us up somewhere. No, *we're* the defenders, with our backs to the wall—we can do nothing but stick at our posts and wait for them."

"And have we any chance for a quick victory?"

"I'm afraid not," Captain Knight said bluntly. "Our fleet is small, many of the ships are old. Moreover, half our main line units are in Guam ready to strike at Japan. There'll be a major sea

battle out there in the Pacific worse than *anything* that took place at Jutland. But the Japanese are notably rotten marksmen and it may be that our Pacific fleet will annihilate them.”

“I hope so!”

“This I’ll say—*Tokyo’ll be bombed before Los Angeles or San Francisco*. But nothing that happens in the Pacific will affect us. It’s like a separate war.

We’re here on the Atlantic and our reduced forces face the biggest enemy fleet in the history of the world. Not only the navies of Germany and Italy, but the best large ships of several other navies—captured ships now manned by German seamen.”

“All heavy?”

“Yes, and God knows how many destroyers and submarines they have. Aircraft I won’t even discuss. They have almost more planes than men; hundreds of munition factories are turning out bombs for them. There is *nothing* exaggerated about this. If anything, I underestimate.”

“What is our job?”

“The iron net. The S-boats will do what they can. But it’s like setting bear traps to catch a herd of elephants. We know that sooner or later the enemy will violate these waters. We will lie directly in the path between the enemy flotilla and our own main Atlantic fleet.”

“We’ll lie between them, Sir?”

The captain nodded. “It is perfectly simple. You understand war maneuvers. In operations on land there are various lines of defense—first, second, and third. Last is the main line—which, in this case, is our Atlantic squadrons: battleships, and heavy cruisers. On land the first line of defense is the weakest, usually consisting of machine-gun placements, French 75’s, anti-aircraft, and anti-tank guns. The attacking force, as in the case of France, runs through this line—annihilates them. In such a defense there can be *no* opportunity for retreat.

“The attackers now meet the second line of defense. This is made up of heavier gun placements, tank traps, defense tanks, barb-wire, and all manner of equipment. The attacking spearhead penetrates through this—although now, the opponent hopes, somewhat weakened—and finally hits the main line of defense. Here, ordinarily, a tremendous battle occurs. The main

line of defense is heavy artillery and the full fighting forces of the opponents. The unscathed right and left flanks of the first and second defense lines are now supposed to close in on the rear of the enemy spearhead. The whole thing is beautiful! It’s gorgeous—on paper. This was the celebrated *Weygand* defense. I lost a month’s pay in wagers on the fall of Paris because I was sure that such a system (and basically, it is sound; with a few improvements we’ve borrowed it, in essence, for naval defense) couldn’t be defeated. But they *were* defeated—miserably.”

“To what do you attribute it. Sir?”

“The enemy had superior, overpowering force. It is *exactly* the same thing we’re up against!”

“I see!”

“Have you ever been in swimming and got stung by nettles?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Well, *we* are the nettles. The enemy fleet will enter these waters ready to engage our own fleet in battle. But to reach them they must pass us. We fourteen S-boats will go into action. We’ll torpedo as many of their capital ships as we possibly can. Hundreds of fighter planes and bombers will swarm out from near-by bases and give us a hand in the battle. They’ll bomb and dive at the enemy, but, of course, they’ll have to contend with enemy aircraft. We’ll have only one element in our favor—a *few seconds of surprise*. Like nettles, the submarines will sting and harass the enemy ships. With luck we may sink a few of them.”

“But to torpedo them we’ll have to be at periscope depth. What about the anti-submarine fleet—the destroyers? Won’t the enemy be protected by a convoy of them?”

“Yes—by hundreds of them!” The captain’s voice was calm. “And because we have our one job to do we will not be permitted to submerge to a safe depth until we have fired all our ‘fish’ and the tubes are empty. We have orders to ignore the destroyers.”

“But—that’ll be—*suicide!*”

The captain smiled wryly. “The first hub of defense is always in that position. War is worked out on charts. It is a game played with units. Although I am more than certain that we shall not survive this action when it comes, I cannot but see and admire the strategy that placed us here.”

“*Suicide fleet—*”

“Yes. There was a motion-picture of that title once, rather mild, I think; and certainly it wasn’t like this. This will be like nothing any of us have ever lived before. You see it *had* to be us, don’t you? It couldn’t have been the fine big V-type subs. They’re far too valuable to sacrifice in a preliminary show of this sort. I mean it. I make the statement with no bitterness in my heart. If I were in the admiralty I only hope that I should have had the acumen to arrange the same situation. We are fourteen creaky, over-age tubs; and this one action is the only decent excuse there is for the expense we’ve been to the government.”

“Nobly expressed, Sir.”

“There’s nothing noble about it. I don’t think any man minds doing what he can for his country. It takes no heroism—I doubt such a thing exists—because war makes you fatalistic. You have your job to do and you can but execute it as well as you know how.”

“Perhaps the attack won’t come for weeks.”

“It *can* be weeks, days, or hours.”

“And in the end, Sir, we shall give an excellent accounting of ourselves.”

“I am certain of it,” the captain said.

That night, after his conversation with the captain, Jeff lay on his bunk in the darkness of the S-60’s wardroom. He did not know if he had actually slept but now he opened his eyes and lay very still. The hot, filthy air stuck in his throat. He was garbed only in shorts but his body was sticky with sweat. He reflected on the captain’s words; and yet, even now, the war seemed removed from him. Reality is a hard thing to come by. He was here, on this ship, in the war zone; and yet to his incredulous mind it was more as though this were some grotesque play in which he was a participant. He was frightened that he knew no fear, and it occurred to him that this was because the thick air had rendered him physically listless. He performed his duties with a mechanical lassitude which really involved very little thought. The long grind at sea had worn him down.

Jeff’s consciousness had long ago been numbed by the heavy, ceaseless throb of the Diesel engines. *Pump. . . pump. . . pump.* Day and night, until at last, like a man who lives beside a waterfall, he no longer even heard it. Instead, at this moment, he quite clearly heard the sound of a violin. Jackie, a machinist mate, was in the

torpedo room playing it. A violin on a submarine: the only music aboard! Jeff had still not lost his ironic taste for the contrast that this offered. The violin played from Poor Butterfly.

“Propaganda,” Jeff said.

He flung out a long arm and groped in his locker for a cigarette. The wardroom was dark and very small. Only strips of dirty canvas separated its bunks, table and locker space from the forward battery compartment where the men slept. At sea you did little more than eat, sleep, and stand watch. There was no shower on board so that you couldn’t bathe; and if you shaved in cold water it was at your own risk. But the officers *would* shave. They had to set an example that only a few would follow. All of them were packed together below decks like sardines in a can.

Jeff was a junior lieutenant, and there were three other officers: two junior lieutenants and one senior. The senior was Lieutenant Knight and by virtue of being commanding officer he was called “captain.” Jeff wiped the moisture from his lips and put a cigarette in his mouth. He lit up, puffed, and at the same time stretched the muscles in his legs.

“I’m decayed,” he thought, “the damn acid is decaying me!”

The S-60’s blunt bow rose in a rocking motion, and fell; it climbed to the peak of every land swell, and descended into every watery canyon. Jeff snapped on the dim overhead light, and rolled out of the upper bunk. He hit the deck with a thud and stood there in his bare feet, his blond hair ruffled, his sunburnt face mottled. The steel deck-plates were hot and oily under his toes. He shoved his feet into leather sandals and approached the tin washbasin.

There was half an inch of water in it, and it was muddy with twice-used soap; but he knew the condensers had been five times on the blink, and a good officer didn’t waste fresh water. He slapped what there was there over his hot, sweaty face. It refreshed him a little. He glanced at the clock taped to a shelf, 11:20. He had forty minutes before he took the midnight watch. He decided to shave.

“I look like hell!”

The mirror was warped and steamy, and he rubbed his hand across it. He was tall, well-built;

he leaned forward, peeling sunburnt flecks of skin from his nose.

When he'd finished the shave he put on dungaree trousers, a clean undershirt, and an old blue tunic which he left unbuttoned. He slapped a greasy officer's cap on his head and left the wardroom. He moved through the narrow companionway of the forward battery to the torpedo room.

The bow of the boat sloped downward toward the shiny discs of the torpedo-tube doors, and the machinist with the violin stood crouched there playing. He wore dungaree trousers, a tattered skivie shirt, and straw go-aheads from Honolulu. He glanced up at Jeff, and kept playing.

Long torpedoes were strapped to the bulkheads where they lay in iron cradles; they were slick with grease and glistened dully. The sailors sat around on bunks, some crouched on deck playing Acey Deucey. They were all listening to the violin. Six of the crew were civilians caught in the draft, but the long trip had molded them so that they were no longer green boots, but like everyone else. Jackie finished playing now.

"Anything special you'd like to hear, Sir?"

"No," Jeff said. "Thanks. I've got the mid to four. I won't be able to stay."

As he left the torpedo room he heard the violin again, and it sounded strange, he did not know why. He entered the cramped, squarish control room. The periscope was secured in a steel stump in the middle of the deck. An escape hatch—built in within the last few years—took up much of the COC's precious room; and against either bulkhead the riveted overhead was so low that you had to duck. Jeff climbed the ladder, up through the air-compression room, and into the conning tower.

Captain Knight was here, and Lanny Morris, the executive officer. Morris had the watch. A coxswain operated the small iron steering lever, and a signalman, binoculars in his hands, sat up on the oak rim of the cuplike tower. The night was hot, and the stars in the sky looked white and naked. The moonlit sea was a rippling purple.

"Good evening. Sir."

"Hello, Jeff," the captain said. He was a good-natured, thick-set man. He wore dungaree trousers, and a blue tunic. "We've just decoded a message from the division commander. It's good

news, I believe." He turned. "What would you say, Mr. Morris? Wouldn't you say it was good news?"

"I would say it was damn good news," Mr. Morris said.

"We're going in," the captain announced. He didn't sound displeased. "Unless there's an emergency we'll be in for four or five days. You'll be able to go ashore. You've a friend in Cristobal, haven't you?"

"Yes, Sir. Nick Waters, the writer."

"Well, tomorrow morning—we'll be out of this zone by that time—you can radio him you'll be in. We're officially relieved from duty for a while and there's no necessity for keeping a radio silence."

"That'll be swell," Jeff said.

"I thought you'd like it. I've read all of Nick Waters' books, you know; and I think he's very good. I'm going to let you and Mr. Morris have leave—to freshen up. God knows we *all* need it; and it may very well be that this is the last shore leave any of us'll get."

"I hadn't thought of that," Mr. Morris said. "I daresay I will once I get in Cristobal."

The captain chuckled. "I imagine the two of you'll raise merry hell."

"Aren't you going ashore, Sir?" Jeff asked.

"No. The engineer and myself will have to stay aboard and take care of the ship. They're going to give us an overhaul job, and it's up to us to supervise."

"But couldn't I take your place, skipper? I mean—"

"No—and don't worry. This S-60's Old Man'll get over for a glass of beer all right."

When Captain Knight and Mr. Morris had gone below Jeff stood in the bridge and watched the dirty gray bow of the submarine slowly rise and fall. The captain had written his instructions for the night, and laid out the course that would bring them in. They would arrive in Colon about six tomorrow evening. It was late now and the breeze dried the sweat in Jeff's dungarees.

He began to think of Nick Waters. Nick wasn't in Panama without reason. He was up to something, and whatever it was, it would be dangerous. That was the way Nick lived. He had traveled abroad for years. He was an international figure. He'd been in Madrid during the Spanish

war, and in Paris when it fell. He had been in the last war, also, but Jeff knew very little about that.

Jeff had met him at the races in Milan that summer the Middies were in Europe. There'd been a party, they'd gone drinking, and Nick had taken an immense liking to him. Once in a while two men meet who are bound to become deathless friends. It was like that. Both Jeff and Nick were men of action. They shared similar tastes and opinions.

Each could handle himself in a brawl. Among writers Nick was rated as one of the finest realists in literature, and Jeff was flattered that Nick, a celebrity, should like him. On the other hand the exploits of a submarine officer intrigued Nick and he never stopped asking questions about undersea navigation. The second time Jeff saw him was in Honolulu and he had shown Nick the town. Women went crazy over Nick, and they had very good times. But it had been a year now since Jeff had seen him and he was anxious to renew the friendship.

He leaned on the rail of the conning tower, and looked off across the purple of the desolate ocean. The Diesels were below decks and up here he could scarcely hear them. The air was fresh, and sweet, and there was in the wind the taste of the tropics.

III

CRISTOBAL was wet with rain, and smelled wet, the wet smell of wood in frame buildings; and the wet, sweet smell of grass in the parks and civic squares, and the whisper of tall, giddy coco-palms, shaking themselves. On the rooftops you could still hear them hammering anti-aircraft guns into place. In the streets there was the sound of rivet-drills and there were huge piles of bricks and dirt and mortar. Workmen were building air shelters. On the streets, too, there was the noise of bars, the marimba music, and there were soldiers and sailors, and cheap women; and white-clad tourists, and dark-coated alien refugees. There were peddlers, with gaudy shawls, crying their wares; and busy, black-skinned Panamanians. In Cash Alley pale and sick young women chattered of invasion and bombs. They washed down peanuts with gin, and spoke of total destruction.

Nick Waters sat very still in his hotel room, the shades half drawn, the windows rain-wet. Softly there came to him the music of his radio; a cigarette burned in an ash tray. To Nick it seemed that the room was very quiet. It occurred to him that if he listened with all his might it was possible he would hear the laughter of his comrades in Madrid; and if he concentrated properly he could sit again in the *Pam-Pam*, the one on the *Champs-Alyses*, gay French girls around him, their yellow hair piled high on their heads, kitten eyes bright, and their striped silk dresses tight on their bodies. But then he'd remember that day in May. The goose-stepping troops that swung through the *Place de la Concorde*, and finally around the *Arc de Triomphe*. The tired, worn-out victory army of Austrian and Bavarian farm boys. And then, when they had been sent to a new front, the steel, gray-faced Nazi army of occupation that moved in upon the city.

He stirred. None of these memories could matter now. In retrospect he could perceive that there was really very little in his life that mattered—except Kathie. It must have been that he'd loved her ever since Madrid. And she'd disappeared. He caught up with her a week later in Barcelona, but she only laughed. And months afterward, in Paris, she had taken all the information he had to offer—for one of her news-magazine articles—and once the exclusive story was on the cables she left him again. He remembered racing alone in a taxi to the *Gare St. Lazare*, and then standing desolated on the platform because her train had already left. Always he pursued; always she eluded him. She gained whatever material she wanted—he had ways of discovering important information now and then—and then she vanished.

He had tried hating her. One night in a pub in London (he remembered it was a wet night, and afterward, because he was drunk, he got lost in the fog in Trafalgar Square; and he had stood clinging to a lamp-post, listening to the scream of an air raid warning), he had tried hating her. But it hadn't been any good. He always thought he'd find her someday again, and he always did. But that would only make it worse. It would turn from a pain of nostalgia into torture.

She meant no harm. It wasn't her fault she didn't love him. It was true she got her news stories in devious ways, but she was absolutely independent. He remembered reading an article she wrote from Finland. There was a picture of her in white ski togs, and he had thought, looking at the picture, that she was the prettiest girl alive!

Sometimes it seemed incredible to him—ego was his stock-in-trade—that he should be disappointed in love. Nick Waters! He must have known a hundred women, and he'd even loved some of them. (There was that nurse in France—how many years ago had that been?—he'd met in a ruined chateau the time he lay wounded with shrapnel after the show in the Somme.) But he realized that Kathrine was unlike any of the others.

He glanced at his watch. She was due to arrive in Cristobal tonight. She had radioed him, and he had deliberately avoided meeting the boat. She had been aware, of course, of his feeling toward her, but there was no point in letting her know the condition was still acute. At any rate he had an excuse to stay in his room, and here he had remained, so that when she arrived on the dock she would look around, and, not seeing him, be disappointed. Yet in his heart he realized she was too cosmopolitan to be upset by the smite of such a midget revenge. She had always been able to see through his subterfuge and now she would only laugh, and think him infantile for being so peevish.

No matter how complex a web of intrigue he wove to trap Kathie, it was always himself who, in the end, became helplessly entangled.

He glanced around the room. The wallpaper was faded, and the ceiling was low. Tacked on one wall there was a huge map of Panama, showing both the Pacific and Atlantic sides, extending as far as Haiti. Martinique was outlined in red crayon as were several other islands in and through the West Indies. All of the bases acquired from the British were circled with blue. There were special, penciled notations around St. Thomas, Guayana, Barahona and Port-au-Prince. On an opposite wall was a huge map of the Eastern seacoast of the United States, showing portions of Mexico.

There was a table near the front windows and on this was Nick's portable typewriter and several

pads of paper. "I do everything in longhand and revise it on typewriter," he explained to people. There was a pile of old maps and several dusty tomes on the table.

Nick was a linguist. He played a dangerous and usually profitless game against the wars of the world. Profitless, because his only gain was an occasional short story of some experience or other. Novels were more difficult and he didn't often write them. It was a lonely life. He was so constituted that he could not live without excitement, and he went from war to war, like a weary soldier of fortune.

"It's funny I haven't been killed," he thought.

There was a knock on the door. He jumped. He was ashamed of the wild excitement that surged through him. Then he opened the door, and he was staring at Kathie. His tight, creased face broke into a grin.

"Hello, baby!"

She was refreshingly young, and beautifully radiant. Her reddish hair came to her shoulders, and her eyes were green, her lips dark crimson. She was only twenty-five, and looked like a smart young business girl of nineteen. She wore a mustard-colored skirt that was tight on her hips; and a blouse that was open at the throat. Her skin was tan but the blouse revealed a tiny portion of white at the breasts. She wore a green rain slicker thrown loosely over her shoulders; and her feet and shapely ankles were booted with galoshes.

"Hello, Nick, you old dog!" she said lovingly. She came into the room, shedding the slicker. Nick closed the door, and leaned back against it. He wore gray trousers over his long legs; they were held up by English-leather suspenders. Kathie was glancing around the room.

"It looks the same, darling. Do you always carry your hotel rooms with you? This looks *exactly* like the one you had in Shanghai!"

Nick was smiling. "The only thing I ever change is the maps." He nodded his head. "Over there is a map of the United States."

She sobered. "Oh, Nick—isn't it terrible?"

"A thing is always a thousand times worse when it comes home," he said.

She nodded. "How have you been, darling?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"But I call everybody that."

"I know."

“Nick—grumpy! Aren’t you glad to see me?”

“No.”

“Darling, you make such a charming liar!”

He kept watching her, sick and ashamed because seeing her made him want to cry; and yet his face was unchanged. “You’re beautiful, Kathie,” he said. “Do you know that? Each time a little more beautiful than the last.” He paused, and went on quickly, as matter-of-fact as possible: “Where you going to live?”

“Next door to you.”

“What?” He thought that he had heard wrong.

“Yes, next door to you. They’re putting my luggage in there now. You know, Nick—the way it was in Warsaw when we were in that siege together!” She laughed. “And I’m going to have secret dictaphones installed all over your room and write my articles about everything you find out!”

“Sure,” he said, “the way it *always* is.”

“Yes, that’s it! Good old Nick. I don’t know what I’d do without you, darling!”

“I’m glad I have my uses,” he said. “Anyway, you’ll have some one’s shoulder to cry on when the bombing starts.”

“Did I ever cry during a bombing?”

“No.” He thought it over. “I don’t think you ever cry, Kathie. Over *anything*.” He paused. “Sit down and I’ll make you a drink.”

She sat down, tapping a cigarette on her polished red thumbnail. Nick crossed the room and moved into the dinky pantry. He tapped ice cubes out of a tray, and poured rum into tall glasses. He noticed that his hand shook, and it occurred to him that he was not quite well. He didn’t know why he always went to pieces when he was near her. It was plain that she liked him only because he could give her information for an article. She spoke now.

“I missed you at the boat.”

He didn’t turn. “I wasn’t there.”

“That was the conclusion I came to. I waited an hour. There was no telephone on the dock or I should have called you to come and get me.”

He squirmed miserably. “I have an important appointment here at the room. I had to stay here in the event my party called.” He entered with the drinks. He was awkward and spilled rum on the mustard skirt. Her eyes came up and met his. He pretended he hadn’t noticed. He went to a chair,

and sat down. He wound one long leg over another, coddled his drink, and stared at the windows. There was a wind blowing, and a few drops of rain splashed across the dark panes.

Later, when he and Kathie had talked for an hour and re-acquainted themselves, he said: “About Panama. I’m wherever war is, you know that, Kathie. Panama City and Cristobal will get the hell bombed out of them. The first strike will be here, and I have information that it’ll come within forty-eight hours. Possibly it’s cockeyed information, since the source isn’t very good. But at any rate it won’t be long.”

“If the enemy wins the battle of Panama—then what?” Kathie asked. She was very clever on the typewriter. Nick knew that she was memorizing every word he said. He shifted uncomfortably.

“After Panama I believe they’ll make a stab at the East Coast cities—Philly, New York, Boston, and Newark. The first three have navy yards, the fourth munitions factories. They’ll mix military objectives up with a little terrorist bombing. The United States has only half a navy in the Atlantic and if the Axis Powers can bottle it up, sink or cripple it—they’ll land a million men and the Big War will be on. So their first objective will be the United States Atlantic Squadron. Until they’ve wiped that out they can’t make any moves without being so harassed as to stand a chance of a military set-back.”

“What about Mexico?”

“It’s too big, messy and decayed for them to run troops across. They may try and make use of native Mexican troops—attacking Texas; but that is largely a matter of diplomacy. The Mexicans will hold off until they see which way the war is going. They’ll talk a lot, but they’ll hold off.”

“And you think Japan *will* attack on the West Coast?”

“I’m certain of it!”

“Then the United States is circled!”

“That’s the way they fight nowadays,” Nick said. “When you’re down they all pile on. They think as long as they’ve got the Nazis to lead them they can’t lose.”

“Nick—who are you working for?”

“Nobody,” Nick said. “Did you want me to say I was working for the government?—I’m not.” His glass—the third one—was empty, and he put it down. The wind had blown the window open

and he got up and closed it. Outside there was the pattering of rain. "But I'm finding out things the government'll be glad to know," he went on. He returned to his chair.

"What angles do you work?"

"I play along with all the German importers—and their clerks. With the alien refugees, and that lot. In every ten I contact there's one that's a spy and maybe three in the Fifth Column—paid to commit sabotage and create panic once the war starts. I play along with all of them."

"What do they think you can do for them?"

"I give them maps," Nick said, grinning. "Old maps that are no damn good. But they send them to Europe and don't know that until months later. I have other angles along the same lines. They're underpaid wretches and it's easy to fool them. Of course, they're suspicious, but they can't be sure just where I stand. I tell them I worked for Franco in Spain and they believe it. Franco is a good Nazi. They all make fine, stirring—and *empty*—speeches. All of them—except a choice few—can be bought. For two hundred dollars they'd turn traitor to their country—so long as they felt they wouldn't be caught. I tell you, Kathie, they're a wretched, scheming lot! They're the army that enters and decays a country—rots it from inside—so that it's ripe for invasion!"

"But if they ever find out—"

He nodded. "If they ever discover my only purpose in mixing with them is so I can inform the United States Government—I'll get a bullet in the back. And they're bound to find out once the war is declared!" He paused. "It just happened that I was in a good position to get to know these agents, being a linguist, and known as a writer, and my contributions to the cause—whatever its worth—will be to help bring about their arrests."

"But Nick—what about *you*?"

"I can take care of myself," he said. "There's only one man—a Mark Stohl—who's any good. I think he's the Nazi Intelligence Chief here. I know him only by hearsay. He'd have seen through my simple strategy, so I didn't go near him. Stohl may be dangerous." He smiled. "But if you put any of this on the wires before I'm ready to break it, Kathie, I'll be a dead man tomorrow."

It had been agreed long ago that she'd cable whatever news he could give her only when he was ready to release it.

"And you can't use my name," he said. "I'm known as a writer—I hope—and I'll be damned if I want any *By Kathrine Winters* publicity as a G-man."

She was looking across the room at him. "Why do you do all this, Nick? Risk your life and—"

"Because I *hate* them," he said. "I've got a burning hatred, and I fight them every way I know how!"

"Why don't you have these men arrested now?"

"Because some of them have minor diplomatic connections. Proof would be hard to get. There'd be trials and red tape. And until war does start there's little damage they can actually do. But once hostilities begin it's a different matter. We grab them—give them a military trial—and take them out and shoot them!"

Nick was silent now and he and Kathie sat and looked at one another. It was like old times. The room was full of stale cigarette smoke. Her second drink was scarcely touched and the ice had melted in it. There was a tray full of red-smeared cigarettes in front of her. Rain beat against the windows, and the radio played low. Now, carefully analyzing all he had told her, she asked a question.

"You said you had a party coming here to see you tonight?"

"Yes, a government man. He's late."

"You must be going to give him some information."

Nick grinned. "You don't miss a trick, do you?" All the same he felt a little cold about it. He supposed it was futile to wish that she would like him more for himself and less for his intrinsic value.

"Is it something you haven't told me?"

He nodded.

"What?"

"I can't reveal it, Kathie. I trust you, but I can't. This is quite big. It was information I just stumbled on, and—"

"It must be very important!"

"It is," he said. "If it's true, it is."

"Nick, you actually sound frightened!"

"I *am* frightened," he said.

IV

SHE had gone to her room to unpack. Nick stood alone at the wet, dark windows, his hands in his pockets. The world was different with Kathie here, and it occurred to him that even his thoughts were different. He wiped his hand down over his face, and now he turned.

Remembering the time, he was alarmed. Of a sudden he was furious with the government! What he had to say *seemed* important. It at least behooved them to hear him out! He picked up the telephone and called a number he knew to be Intelligence Headquarters,

"This is Nick Waters," he said. "I was told one of your men would be here to see me."

"There was an emergency, Mr. Waters. At the last minute he was called elsewhere."

"You might have phoned."

"We intended to," the voice said, "but we've been busy. Suppose *you* come down *here*?"

It was clear that they were not much impressed with him and if the news had not been so important Nick would have told them to forget it and banged up the receiver. Instead, he said: "All right. I'll be there."

He put on his short pea-jacket, and went into the hall. He never wore a hat.

Outside, the air was crisp and wet and the palm trees that lined the street were sinister and blowsy, like a tall woman who has neglected to comb her hair. The shuttered frame buildings which squatted opposite one another across the cobblestone canons were (from the smell, at least) ancient with decay. It irritated Nick that on the outskirts of Cristobal there flickered from the street corners no more than gas-light. He drove his car swiftly over the bumpy streets. The rain had turned to a thin drizzle and his windshield wiper squeaked as it moved back and forth over the pane of dripping glass.

Intelligence Headquarters were in a shabby building on the other end of town. Electric lights shone down over the dirty red-brown entrance, and there were several cars parked in the street.

Inside, it was somewhat like a police precinct with carpetless, unpainted, wooden floors. A navy yeoman sat at a desk, and when Nick had given his name he was directed to an office down the hall. He entered without knocking.

A grizzly bulldog of a man looked up from his desk. His eyes were small and black. They seemed to look through you. His hair was tousled, a mixture of jet black and salt-gray, the contrast of which gave an odd effect. He had John L. Lewis eyebrows; and the thing you noticed about his white face was the thick lips, and that jowls seemed to protrude from either side of his jaw. His expression was unpleasant and at once suspicious. But at the same time he seemed busy and harried, his desk littered with papers.

"You're Waters, I suppose?" He nodded to a straight chair. "Please sit down." Nick was about to speak, but the other went on: "It occurred to me while you were on your way over that there is a writer named Nick Waters. Do you know him?"

"Yes, very well," Nick said. "I wrote many of his books."

"Then you are he?" He indicated neither surprise nor pleasure, in fact the scowl on his face had deepened; but it seemed to Nick that he was at least a trifle mollified. "My name is Barton Craig," he went on. "I am in charge of a certain branch of undercover operations in the Panama Canal Zone." Nick could not help but admire the fact that the Intelligence Chief wasted no words on cordiality. "If you have any information we should be pleased to use it. In fact we are enlisting new agents wherever we can find them. When we've finished the business at hand perhaps we could discuss an arrangement by which you can be of service. I think a man in your position—your reputation as a writer is a perfect cover-up—could find a way of being a good deal of help."

"I hope so," Nick said.

"Then you're interested?"

"Yes."

"All right," Barton Craig said. "Now what is it you've come to report?"

But Nick wasn't going to be rushed into anything. He carefully explained what he had been doing. "I've worked only for myself. It's because I wanted to. This is the first war in which I've ever had an ax to grind. The experiences I had in all the others were only grist for the mill. Here in Panama I've rubbed elbows with some of the worst men alive. In one way and another I've gained information—names and addresses—and once war starts I think I can help round up the most dangerous of them."

Craig nodded.

“From two of these underpaid foreign agents I think I’ve learned something of vital importance. Neither man knows the other, and neither is aware that he revealed anything meant to be secret. One story I heard was rumor, the other fact. It was only by coupling them that the thing took on significance.”

Craig seemed more interested now, and he adjusted his chair and prepared to listen.

“It concerns an enemy base,” Nick said. “I don’t pretend to know military business, but from what I have been able to find out, all of the enemy bases are quite a distance flying time even from Panama.”

“That’s true.”

“If they could operate from a small temporary base closer to the canal the attack would be *much* easier.”

“Do you know of such a base?” Craig asked. He had plucked a hair from his shaggy eyebrows, and was looking at it. But now he glanced up.

“I think that I do,” Nick said.

Craig looked skeptical.

“If it does exist,” Nick went on, “it is an island, barren and rocky. Because it is in an out of the way place—one in an archipelago along the coast of Colombia—it probably hasn’t been carefully patrolled. However, the enemy has discovered that this one island has miles of hard, flat beach suitable for aircraft take-offs. And the information I have is that for the past two days they have been assembling hundreds of airships here for a tentative raid on the Canal Zone.”

“Incredible!”

“I don’t think so,” said Nick. “They could operate from such a base until we discovered it. Small tankers could bring fuel oil. Portable tents could be set up inland for a pilots’ barracks. It’d be an ace in the hole that—in the opening phase of the war—*might* cost our forces a hell of a lot!”

The Intelligence Chief stared at Nick for a moment, studying his face. He spoke sharply.

“By your own confession,” he said, “this is simply rumor! Panama’s full of that. If what you say is true it’s damned well important. But I hope you’ll give me something more definite to go on. Do you have any notion of the longitudes of your hypothetical island?”

“Just a general idea,” Nick said. “But I think I could locate it by air. I’d like to try anyway.”

“First tell me how you came across the information,” Craig said.

Nick explained: “The man I learned about it from is named Weil. He says he discovered it one day by accident when a boat he was in blew miles off its course. He noticed the island’s geographical possibilities, and though he was not very excited about it, thought it worthwhile to mention it in a report to the Axis Powers. After that it slipped his mind. The fool had literally struck gold and didn’t realize it! Even when he received a cable in code instructing him to give further details he discounted it as routine, and without even visiting the island again, wrote from his memory a report of as much as he could remember. He imagined if his chiefs saw any possibilities in this new report they would order him back to the island for a survey. But instead, he heard absolutely no more. When he spoke to his boss here in Cristobal, he was told the whole thing was absurd. Instead of being commended, he was severely criticized for taking up the valuable time of his chiefs with such nonsensical drivel.

“The reason is clear. They trust *none* of their men too much, and since he is a minor agent it seems obvious that this thing was so important they were anxious that he should learn no more about it! On his part, Weil was hurt that his bosses considered him blundering. He regarded as gross mistreatment his being raked over the coals simply for reporting a thing which, *at least*, might have had significance. One night in a bar, after he’d had several drinks, he told me about it. He said it was a hard life. He was obliged to file a daily report, and yet only one in fifty actually contained information of tangible worth. He cited the business about the island as an instance where he had put in a great deal of labor only to be told, rather harshly, that he had wasted his time.”

“But about the enemy moving planes?”

“This I picked up from a Russian in the pay of the Nazis who badly needed a hair-cut. He was boasting of the strength assembled against us—and he mentioned a number of blood-thirsty rumors. Among them was one of a nearby secret base. He had no facts, and probably ninety per cent of everything he said was untrue. But this

one statement stuck in my mind. I pumped him about it. He'd heard it somewhere; he forgot the source. By putting it together with Weil's story—

Craig had reached for a telephone, and broke in on Nick. "I should like Lieutenant Williams sent for." There was a pause. "I don't care if he is on leave—recall him and have him report to this office at once!" He banged up the receiver. "I don't believe your tale at all. Waters," he said.

"What?"

"No, I don't believe you. It's fantastic. We get rumors like that all day long. But the fact is, I can't take the chance that you might be right. It's a thousand to one—but this government can't afford to gamble. I'm putting at your disposal a navy sea-plane and a pilot."

"Well, I—"

Craig raised his hand. "I told you earlier tonight that the appointment in your room wasn't kept because we were busy. That wasn't *exactly* true. We try to keep all appointments. The truth is, I cabled Washington for a dossier on you—if *any* existed. You see I was pretty sure that you were Waters, the writer. Just before you phoned I had my reply. Your record seems to be clean. This is a time when we need agents very badly and a man of your caliber can be a good deal of help." He paused. "You're working for your government, Waters. A yeoman is already making up a service record for you, and preparing papers."

"But I—"

"Tomorrow you can go through the routine of being fingerprinted and sworn in. I hope you'll volunteer for this service, because otherwise I'll have to draft you."

Nick grinned. Craig had been a dozen jumps ahead of him all the time and he couldn't help but admire him for it.

"I'll be glad to do what I can," Nick said.

Craig leaned back and folded his hands. "The island secret base is your first assignment." He considered. "*It may be your last.*"

"What do you mean?" Nick asked.

"Isn't it obvious? If the enemy is fortifying such a base—mind you, I don't believe it—they wouldn't be fools enough to leave it unguarded. Once you come down to observe them you'll be spotted. And I don't think they'd let you get away alive!"

"I guess you're right."

"So if you find the island," Craig said, "you have *one* job and I depend on you to do it—radio us the longitude and latitude. If you can escape after that, fine."

Nick saw that Craig considered him no more than a unit in the prosecution of war. If he were fortunate enough to locate the island his only possible reward would be certain death. The cold-blooded aspect of the thing amused him.

"At least if I *do* find it, they could say I was the first man to die in action in the new war."

"Yes," Craig replied. "They could say that of you and Williams. It'd make a good military obituary. But personally I don't believe in tributes. In time of war *everybody* risks death—even the civilians these days. I should think it much harder to die of poison gas in a street two blocks from home—than in the execution of a maneuver you know to be of value."

Nick had thought of death very often without qualm; and now Craig's logic made him ashamed for having been so squeamish.

"I'm beginning to like the old goat," he thought.

Craig returned to the work that was piled up on his desk. He had a number of reports to read and act upon. Now and then he picked up the phone and gave an order for this man or that. Nick sat with his hands in his lap.

At last the door opened and a young navy flier walked in. He was introduced as Lieutenant Williams and Nick shook hands with him. The proposed trip was roundly discussed and it was decided that Nick and Williams would go over a number of charts and lay out an exploratory course. They were to take-off as soon after this was done as possible.

Nick left the room and followed Williams out of the building. The lieutenant lit a cigarette. He didn't want to seem anxious, and yet it was apparent that he wished to know what their chances were. At last, he said:

"Do you think we'll come back?"

"No." There was no point in lying.

Williams flipped his cigarette into the street. "It was just that I wanted to call my wife," he said. He looked a little sheepish. "She arrived in Panama only tonight. We were having dinner in my cottage when the Intelligence sent for me." He

smiled boyishly and showed Nick a picture of his wife. She was very pretty. "I'll call her, then we'll go somewhere and get down to business with these charts." His wife's name was Hannah. When they were in the car, he said: "Hannah's swell. Gee, it was sure good to see her again!" He fell silent, and Nick, driving, said nothing.

It was ten to four in the morning, and Nick was ready to go. He sat on the edge of his creaky bed, wearing a leather jacket, a cigarette dangling in his mouth. At last he picked up the phone and asked the operator to connect him with Kathrine's room. She answered at once.

"I hope I didn't awaken you," he said. "I saw a light in your transom as I came by."

"I've been up," she said. "What is it, Nick?"

"I'd like to see you for a minute. Are you decent?"

She laughed. "I think so."

He entered her room from the hall. She wore a fluffy white zipper robe, and white mules, and she sat on the bed, playing solitaire. The make-up had been scrubbed from her face and she looked amazingly like a little girl. The soft red hair flounced on her shoulders as she turned her head.

"What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said. She scooped the cards into her hand. She was sitting with her legs folded under her. It was the way she always sat. Nick remembered because it was a feat he was unable to accomplish without breaking both of his legs. He thought there was very much he remembered about Kathie.

"It's different this time, isn't it, Nick?"

"What?"

"The war," she said. "It's different for *us*. Before it was always some game we played. It was somebody else's grief and none of our own. We did what we could in those wars, but there were times when we had fun—and there was a glamour about it. This time there's no glamour."

"You shouldn't think," he said. "It only makes you a little crazy to think, Kathie."

"But it's our country this time, Nick. You asked me why I couldn't sleep. I—"

"I'm going away, Kathie," he said.

She stopped talking, looked up at him.

"I'll probably be back in a couple of days," he said. He was conscious that he was overdoing it.

"I just thought I'd tell you," he went on quickly. He started backing to the door.

"Nick, you came to say goodbye!"

"Yes," he said.

"Oh, Nick—" She jumped off the bed.

"I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Of course. Anything!"

He fumbled with a radiogram. "I got this downstairs just a little while ago. A friend of mine is due tonight about six—a young submarine officer. I wondered if you'd meet him for me."

"I'll be glad to."

"His name's Jeff Barret. Lieutenant, Junior Grade."

"Do you know him well?"

"Yes," Nick said, "*quite* well. He's my best friend."

He looked at her, and there were eloquent ways he wanted to say goodbye. Instead, he said: "So long, kid." Then he moved out through the door and down the hall. The street was wet, and in the gas-light it shone blue. Lieutenant Williams was waiting for him.

V

JEFF BARRET came off the S-60 wearing immaculate tropic whites, his officer's cap on the side of his head, his face darkly sunburnt. He was in step with Lieutenant Morris. They both saw the girl. She wore a white twill skirt and jacket, a light-texture navy blue sweater, her sharp young breasts pouting against it. Her hat was white, off the face; and her reddish hair, rolled at the ends, brushed her shoulders.

"She's lovely," Jeff breathed. "Isn't she lovely, though!"

"The answer to a sailor's prayer," Mr. Morris said. "Mister, I'll match you to see who speaks to her!"

But the girl was approaching.

"Which of you is Jeff Barret?" Her voice was soft, and low.

Jeff was beaming, incredulous. He could scarcely speak.

"*He* is, lady," Mr. Morris said. "I don't know where he gets all the luck!"

That was the way it was, and Jeff knew that he would always remember. She had told him about

Nick; that he had gone off on a government mission, and from there they went on to other subjects. They walked along the road, chattering furiously. They passed streams of soldiers and sailors who were carrying stocks of green bananas, tiny parrots, and Spanish shawls. The sailors, in whites, scuffed along, laughing and talking, strewing peanut and cocconut shells in their wake. Now and again a cart clattered past.

It didn't occur to either Jeff or Kathie that even now, at dusk, the scarlet sun was hot, or that they had walked over a mile, wholly engrossed in one another, oblivious to everything else. They were both perspiring and Kathie's nose was shiny.

"Why sure," Jeff said, "I've read your articles."

"I've always wanted to do one about a submarine sailor," she said.

"Well, I'm your man! That's a terrific sweater you're wearing!"

"It's especially for the navy, did you notice the color?"

"Yes," he said. Then: "Hell, why haven't we met before? You're not Nick's girl? Tell me quick that you're not Nick's girl!"

"No, I'm not his girl!"

"I'm glad," Jeff said. "I hate triangles. Aren't triangles ugly, though?"

"Yes," she said, "they're very ugly." Then: "Isn't it funny how we hit it off?"

"It's something that never happened to me before," he said.

"Me either," she replied.

It was dark now, starlight darkness, and there was music in the night, and dark Panamanians, and shuffling feet. They were tired, and they went into the nearest bar. There were white leather stools, and soft, frosted lights—there was air-conditioning which nearly froze them.

"I'm going to catch cold," Kathie said.

"No. Don't, please! I shouldn't like you to catch cold."

They ordered drinks, and looked at one another, trying to accustom themselves to each other's personalities, trying to come down to earth.

"I don't know what happened to me!"

"It's the war fever," she said. "War is always like this."

"Then I like the war!"

"No, you don't."

"Well, I like you."

"Yes," she said, "I can tell that."

He sobered. "What about Nick? Is there much danger in this mission?"

"I don't know," Kathie said. "He was very secretive. But I found out this much from the Intelligence—he's off somewhere flying."

"Sounds ominous. If the war should start he'd be—"

"Yes, I know," she said. Then: "Nick's a *very* old friend of mine."

"And mine."

They became conscious now of the man at the next table. He pretended to be occupied with a sandwich but it was obvious that he was listening to everything they said. It struck Jeff's ironic sense of humor. It was a little like the lurid spy tales he'd read when he was a boy. And yet it suddenly occurred to him that there were times when fact was precisely like melodramatic fiction. After all, he was not a fool, and he realized that Cristobal was infested with every manner of secret agent. He supposed these fellows had to pick up scraps of information as best they could.

He thought very little about it, but he couldn't help but notice now that Kathie's face had paled. She was staring at the man and he was looking at her. He was a hard, gray-faced older man, slim and lithe, with military shoulders. The hair at his temples was iron gray. Responding to Kathie's unfriendly gaze he rose from his table and came over,

"Kathrine Winters, I believe," he said.

Jeff rose.

"Yes, *Herr Stohl*," she said. She introduced Jeff. "This is Mark Stohl. I met him several years ago in Berlin. He was an officer in the Gestapo at the time."

Mark Stohl shrugged with a sort of sad eloquence. "Yes, but since then—you are aware of how unbearable it has become in the Reich. I had the bad luck to make a political mistake. I spent a year in a concentration camp—and upon my release I fled the country!"

"I presume you could prove that," Kathrine said.

"What was that, *Fraulein*?"

"I said I don't believe it! You no doubt have papers to prove your statements should local

authorities request it. But I nevertheless disbelieve you, *Herr Stohl!*”

The charming smile did not leave his hard, white face.

“You Americans are very suspicious these days.” He turned to Jeff for pity. “An alien has a very hard time of it, I can tell you!”

“I shall report you to the police, of course,” Kathrine said.

“That is most patriotic of you, *Fraulein*. But I have seen the police, and all manner of secret-service agents. They are quite satisfied with the documents I have been able to present on my behalf.”

Kathrine was silent.

“I think,” *Herr Stohl* said, touching his lip, “that you have been talking with Nick Waters.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. But I think he is a dangerous man. By some curious circumstance he is able to have a dozen political affiliations at once!” He paused. “It would be frightful if any accident should befall Mr. Waters.”

“Listen—” Jeff said.

“*Auf Wiedersehen!*” *Herr Stohl* bowed curtly. He returned to his table.

Jeff looked at Kathie. “Would you like that Nazi’s head bounced against the wall?”

“No,” she said. “There’s nothing we can do. You see how they protect themselves!” She gathered up her purse. “But let’s get out of here!”

They went to a quaint cafe on the outskirts of town. The tables were hard-grained wood and candles flickered from them. In the background there was the soft strumming of a string trio. Fat, gaudily dressed women, wisping greasy hair back off their faces, served the hot food in wooden bowls.

Kathie was sulky at first. She said that Nick had spoken of *Herr Stohl* but at the time she had not realized he was the Gestapo agent she had met briefly once in Berlin. She declared it was a shame *Stohl* couldn’t be removed from Panama. It seemed to her obvious that he had observed Nick’s movements, to have known that Kathie had seen Nick. The candle-light flickered on her grimly serious face as she talked and Jeff silently studied her expressions. He saw that she was a girl who had few illusions about war, and he imagined she was capable of taking care of

herself. She ceased talking about *Stohl*. There was a little silence, then her eyes came up and met Jeff’s. She seemed to search his face. Her partly open lips glistened red, then she laughed.

“Oh, darling, I’m glad that you’re here!”

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘*darling*.’ Don’t mind me. I call every one that.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But—I—I wanted to say it then!”

He gazed at her.

“Really, I did!” she said. “Isn’t it silly? I’ve had to knock around with newspaper men and the like; and a girl has to be a good fellow, you know.” She glanced down at her polished nails. “I suppose you’ve heard of girls like that,” she said ruefully. “Men usually slap them on the back and call them ‘sis’ or something. Only with you I feel—” she paused, “—it’s ridiculous! I hate to use the word!”

“What?”

“Feminine,” she said. “With you I feel feminine.”

“Do you, Kathie?” He couldn’t take his eyes off her. He did not know why but the moment seemed very tense to him. “I suppose it’s because I’m not in the trade,” he went on. “Not a *journalist*, or anything.”

“Perhaps. But it’s the strangest feeling!”

“Keep talking,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re lovely when you talk. Your cheeks are like apple puffs.”

She laughed. “What distorted flattery!”

“I guess I’m awkward,” he said.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it *that* way! Really I didn’t!”

“You see, the trouble is—”

“Yes, darling?”

“The trouble is—I’ve never fallen in love before.”

“Oh, Jeff!”

He felt terribly clumsy and embarrassed. He pushed back his chair and came around the table. She rose. For a moment they just looked at one another, and then he took her in his arms. Her lips were wet and parted; and afterward, as he held her, she was crying and saying his name. The fat woman in the gaudy calico was rattling the dishes as she cleared them away.

They rode in a horse-drawn buggy, and it began to rain, big, fat drops of warm rain. The coco-palms swayed, and the downpour was silver. There was no moon. Only the night, with lightning, and the deep roar of thunder. But it was a tropic storm, and after a while it went away. Gradually, the blue came back into the sky, and the night was cool and starry.

Kathie sat talking, because she was nervous. This was different. The world was changed. They had to get acquainted all over again. "People used to say it can't happen to Kathie Winters. Now *there's* a girl with a head on her shoulders, they'd say. She'll go far—and I went far, all right. I went to all the shabby corners of the world. I imagined I was gay and reckless and care free. I built up a deliberate defense against all men—you have to. . . . Then tonight—in just a few hours—"

He kissed her, and she was soft and tender in his arms. The buggy wheels rattled on the cobblestone road.

At two in the morning they went to a smoky night-club. There was a small dance floor, a marimba band; the tables were covered with checkered cloths. People were talking boisterously above the sound of the music. Two couples were dancing. A Spanish girl in a gay red dress moved from table to table: "Cigarettes. . . cigars. . ." Kathie and Jeff sat opposite one another, grinning like fools, happy with themselves.

Then suddenly from the street there was a terrific wail from the newly installed air-raid sirens. The music stopped. Conversation died in mid air. Waiters with trays of dishes became statues. Patrons stared blankly at one another. No one moved. Faces became chalky. The sirens wailed pitilessly. Now—all at once—there was movement. Chairs were being pushed back. There was a babble of voices. The manager of the club arrived in the middle of the dance floor and held up his pudgy hands.

"I have a grave announcement to make! Amigos, you must listen! It has just come over the radio. Hostilities have commenced. Planes are over Seattle! The United States has issued an automatic declaration of war against Germany, Italy, and Japan!"

But people were scrambling past him. The manager began to shout. Kathie stared at Jeff.

"What of Nick? Out somewhere in a plane! He'll be—"

"Don't say it!"

There was a stampede of feet past them. The manager of the club had been knocked down in the rush. Then there was the dulled, booming crash of bombs! The whole building began to shake. Fragments of the ceiling rained down. Another bomb rumbled from the street. There was panic and hysteria. Kathie and Jeff were pressed in the mob at the door. Jeff was holding Kathie, and she kept sobbing, over and over: "Nick'll be killed!"

VI

LIEUTENANT WILLIAMS was a good pilot and Nick was able to work very well with him. But not with-standing that, they had flown for hours, and their quest had been fruitless. All day long they flew. They came down near half a dozen islands on the wild chance of discovering the one for which they were looking. But it was no soap; and at dusk they returned to Limon Bay and refueled.

The sun had gone down now and the sea was deeply scarlet. It was like an endless ocean of bright blood. Even the white sand on the beach was tainted, and the tall coco-palms were dressed in the lengthening shadows of night. A breeze rippled over the bay, and Nick climbed back up into the seagoing Vought. Both he and Williams were tired, worn out.

"We start again?"

"We have to," Nick said.

"Okay, pal," Williams said, and he smiled faintly. His young face was white and drawn. He adjusted his helmet and goggles. Now the motor roared.

Nick wore goggles, and his hair was blowing in the wind. The motor was warm, and Williams lifted his hand. Nick nodded. The seaplane moved swiftly across the vermilion water. It lifted gently, and began to climb. Nick looked down at the water. It fell away rapidly, and the rushing air was cold against his face.

On this trip they had better luck. They found an island (it was miles closer to Panama than the vicinity in which they'd been searching all day)

that Nick thought likely. Under the cover of darkness now they came down five miles off the island's southern tip.

Little by little they taxied closer. When they were two miles off shore they silenced the Vought's motor. Nick climbed up on the wing. He sat cross-legged, operating a pair of powerful binoculars. Williams was in the cockpit, ready to give the ship the gun. The minutes passed endlessly. There was no sound but that of water slapping against the pontoons. More than half an hour passed. Nick sat tensely, unmoving. Through the binoculars he saw the dense island foliage, very dark. He kept panning his focus along the desolate shore. Then—quite suddenly—something yellow flared up. A soft cry escaped Nick's lips. He was conscious that his heart was beating fast. Now there was another flare. He leaned forward, his whole body taxed.

"What is it?" asked Williams.

"Flares, I think!"

He watched, constantly adjusting the glasses. Now he went on: "There's something doing inland! We're apparently on the wrong side of the island. If they have planes they're inland, and on the opposite beach." For a moment he was silent. The torches became brighter. There was some kind of action taking place on the island. But as yet it proved nothing that was really definite.

"We've got to move closer in."

Williams didn't protest, though both of them knew it was dangerous. "All right."

The sound of the motor was like a shouting in an empty canyon. Nick held tightly against the wing and they skimmed over the water rapidly, taxiing in closer to the island.

"All right. Let her coast!"

"OK," Williams said.

The motor was shut off. The plane drifted bumpily across the choppy water. Nick had the glasses to his eyes and watched steadily without speaking. It seemed to him that certain shadows which he could only now and then catch, were the figures of men. But now, to his profound amazement, a beaming white searchlight screamed silently up through the sky. A second, and then a third searchlight followed it. Nick put the glasses in his lap. Now he climbed back into the observer's seat in the Vought.

"Holy Christ!" Williams said.

"All at once the lights go on," said Nick.

"It's the McCoy, isn't it?"

"What do you think?"

"Yeah; it's a base, all right!"

Nick's blood was pumping hot. "You know what our next operation is, don't you?"

"Escape?" Williams asked.

"No. If you put the motor on now we're caught. When you put the motor on, I should say. Switch on the radio!"

"Oh! Sure!"

"They'll have a portable set over there . . . and *they'll* hear it," Nick said. "But we can't help that."

Williams had the radio on now. He was trying to raise the big navy station at Guantanamo Bay. He kept trying. Nick watched the shore.

"*I've got through!*" Williams whispered. "Give me the bearings!"

Nick read off their position as quickly as he could.

Williams transmitted it. The whole thing shrieked priority. Now he snapped off the radio, his head came up.

"How do we stand?"

"They're coming out after us!" Nick said. He was conscious that his voice was hollow.

With nervous fingers Williams got the motor going again. The trim ship pulled forward, began skipping over the swells. Waves splashed into the cockpit. Now the wings lifted it. Ten feet, then twenty, thirty. They were going up fast. Nick watched behind them. He had thought it possible there might be one small chance for escape. But now a searchlight combed down from the sky. It roved the water where they had been. But it did a hell of a lot more than that, Nick thought. It outlined three, roaring, low-flying Messerschmitts. They were speeding across the place where the Vought had lain in the water. Nick did not know when the enemy had become aware of their presence. It was probably the sound of the motor that had attracted them—just before they had turned it off for the last time.

The Vought was rising, but the Messerschmitts, able to discern now that the Vought had taken off, spotted them and started chase.

"They're on our tail!" Nick said.

The Vought was flying without lights, and now Williams banked it sharply in the wind. But it was futile. They were bathed in light from the island. The Messerschmitts were roaring fast behind them. Now their guns opened up. They chewed angry red holes out of the night sky. Nick bit his lip, and cursed bitterly. The Vought could fire forward, or from either flank. But it could not fire from the rear. Bullets hummed over the cockpit. The screaming Messerschmitts came like charging stallions. You could see the Swastikas, and the glassed-in cockpits. Their guns painted long yellow streaks toward the Vought. Nick could stand it no longer.

“Wheel around,” he shouted. “We’ll face the bastards!”

Lieutenant Williams nodded grimly. In the next moment the American ship was making a wide turn. It threw the Nazi planes off their angle. But the three of them, like crack, performing stunt planes, banked simultaneously, their wings tipping heavily starboard. It was as though they worked in a single unit!

Nick’s hard-boned face was very white, his lips thin. His itching hand massaged the gun-lever. The muzzle spewed furious reprisal. Nick kept the gun going. He was cursing and talking all the time. He was calling them names, and shooting. All of the hatred he possessed, he was hurling through the night at them!

One of the Messerschmitts rose slightly, then came diving at them. Nick licked his lips. Through the goggles he watched, timed everything with exact precision, then jerked back the handle of the gun. He felt the active weapon shaking under his grip. Then he saw the belly ripped out of the Nazi plane. He saw flames roar up around it! Only Williams’ sharp left bank prevented a crash with the stricken ship. It wound down through the night, wrapped in gaudy flames, a hideous siren rising in a swirling cry from its descent.

But bullets were rattling a tattoo against the side of the Vought. Nick whirled the gun around. For a brief moment it was a ship to ship duel. It was a running battle. Nick’s noisy gun shattered the glass in the Messerschmitt cabin. Williams gunned the Vought, and they turned, roaring up at the Nazi opponent. The frightened Nazi pilot whirled away so quickly that it sounded as though

his wing was cracking. Again they had avoided collision by inches. Nick observed this and sat coolly peppering at the plane. Now he shouted. A flame began licking along the side of it. He saw the Nazis struggling to bail out.

The remaining Messerschmitt attacked them with blind, wild fury. Its pilot lost all sense of caution. It was probably, Nick thought, the first air battle of the war: and he was incensed beyond all reason at the prospect of a Nazi defeat. At any rate, the pilot literally flung his ship toward them. Sweat dripped from Nick’s face. For years he had been an expert gunman. But watching this ship rush toward them he knew what it was to look at death. He jerked his hand back. The gun roared in a spasm of fire.

But the Messerschmitt swerved away, and Nick’s fire went wild. The Nazi ship veered off, in a short, terse maneuver: now it swung back. Nick turned the guns on it. But to his sudden horror he was conscious that the Vought was losing altitude! Williams seemed limp in the cockpit. Nick saw blood on his face. One arm hung loosely over the side of the ship. They were plunging downward!

The lone Messerschmitt came winging after them, like a vicious hawk, his guns chattering.

“The hell with you!” Nick said.

He aimed at the diving wings. He ripped at the whirling nose of the vulture. He kept the gun going until it suddenly stopped. He jerked it twice, but it didn’t fire any more. Nick’s cold hand released it. With a sick dread he turned to see the Nazi.

But the Messerschmitt was going around and around in a circle. The pilot had been hit! It kept going around, crazily. It was a queer, unearthly sight that chilled Nick’s blood. But now his head nodded as his eyes followed it downward. He saw white parachutes open in the night sky. All of the three planes were gone!

“Jesus,” Nick thought, and he began to tremble. “How’d we ever do it!”

In the cockpit Williams was shaking his head groggily. The Vought leveled off, now it began to climb. But Nick was convinced that Williams wasn’t even conscious! He was flying from sheer instinct. It was the way a drunken man will drive a car. The Vought kept going faster and faster, and the island disappeared. Nick looked down. It was

a seaplane, and they seemed to be flying over mountains. The Vought's speed was increasing. Wind howled through the wings. Faster . . . and faster the Vought went. Over mountain crags, and valleys. "Hey," Nick said, "for God's sake—" But Williams was conscious, after all. He was muttering something. His eyes were heavy-lidded under the goggles. His face was bloody.

"Short cut," he whispered hoarsely. Then there was the trace of a smile on his white face. "We're—going—home!"

Nick was there when Lieutenant Williams died, Williams was on a cot in the Red-Cross tent, and an oil lamp burned dimly. An army doctor stood by wearing a fine khaki uniform. Williams' pretty young wife was beside the cot, sobbing. Outside, the rain dripped from the tent, and there was the far off echo of boat whistles from the harbor. Williams' eyes were closed, and he was whispering through dry lips.

"Short cut," he said, and once again there was a wan smile on his tired face. "We're—going—home!"

He was dead then, and the doctor pulled a sheet up over his face. Nick went outside. Somebody told him war had been declared.

VII

IN CRISTOBAL, searchlights combed the sky at right angles. From the streets it was possible to see the raider planes quite clearly. They were small, black shadows moving against a storm-washed ceiling. The anti-aircraft guns set up a terrible din from every direction. They flashed orange-red, their explosions raucous and ear-splitting. People could not find air shelters and they ran in the streets screaming. The anti-air shrapnel began coming down like rain of iron, clanking dismally across rooftops, and on the cobblestones. Men lay flat on their bellies in the gutter. Women stood against buildings, holding either arm stretched out to pin their children back. A dazed old man was staring up at the sky. Jeff saw a horse lying on its side, its guts streaming out. Somewhere a dog was yelping. There was the crash of bombs, and the slow, awful, splitting noise of buildings cracking in two. Debris littered

the streets like trash. The anti-air guns kept up a thunder.

Jeff stood against a building, holding Kathie in his arms, doing what he could to protect her. Now he saw Yankee fighter planes taking the sky. But the bombers still came. Nazi fighters, flying low, engaged the Americans. It was the job of the fleet German fighter ships to prevent the heavy bombers from being attacked. Vicious dog-fights occurred everywhere. The staccato screech of sky guns sang shrilly into the din of noise. There was the low, throbbing whine of plane motors, now and then drowning out even the anti-aircraft guns. Jeff saw two planes falling, encased in flames. One was a bomber.

Tons of bombs still fell, exploding pitilessly. On the street the confusion grew. A big black Panamanian was shouting: "Air shelter, this way!"—unaware that his wildly waving arm pointed only in the direction of a heap of smoking ruins. A chalky-faced prostitute, in mad flight with two Filipinos, stopped and shook her fist at the sky. An old woman sat in the middle of the street, sobbing. Two goats had escaped some one's back yard and ran about aimlessly. A fat, linen-clad tourist rode past on a wobbling bicycle. The entire scene was absurd, tragic, and horrible. Near the corner a man lay mashed beneath a ton of bricks, both his arms stretched out. People moved everywhere. And all the time, like the roll of a thousand giant drums, the anti-aircraft guns were going.

Incendiary bombs began to fall. Flame burst from various sections of town, lighting the gaudy sky. Suddenly the building Jeff stood against was hit. It shuddered, swayed. Jeff picked Kathie up in his arms and ran. The building crashed in the street behind him. Jeff crouched beside Kathie in a gutter. They stayed there until it was over.

The manager of the hotel unlocked the door and Kathie followed Jeff into Nick's room. Jeff's uniform was muddy and smeared. There was an unshaven shadow on his jaw. His eyes were hot. He sat down on the bed and picked up the phone. He jiggled it several minutes before any one came on. Kathrine went into the dinky pantry and his eyes followed her. On the phone he was connected, after a long wait, with Captain Knight.

"Today's the day they give babies away," Captain Knight said.

“What do you mean, Sir?”

“I don’t know. All my life I’ve said that whenever I was excited. We sail in three hours. The ship won’t be ready before then. Be aboard, Jeff.” The captain—it seemed to Jeff that he was incredibly cool—chuckled, and added: “If you’re with a girl you’d better say your last goodbyes.” His voice sobered. There was a long wait. “And Jeff?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“It’s pretty rotten, you know. I never *did* get over for that glass of beer. So—say goodbye to Cristobal for me, will you?”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” Jeff said,

“Good boy!”

Jeff hung up and sat there numbly. Kathie came in with a cup of warmed-over coffee for him. It was very black and rank. The room seemed still, and outside there was no sound at all. Kathie was pale. Jeff sipped the coffee and she turned on the radio.

“—of crack flying squadrons successfully fought off all attempts to bomb the locks of the Panama Canal. . . Citizens of Cristobal, which fared less fortunately tonight, are warned that another raid is expected hourly. . . A large waterfront fire was started in Colon. . . And several tenements in Panama City were reduced to ruins. . .”

“Oh, darling!”

“I love you, Kathie.”

“—was also demolished in this, the first attack of the war in the Western Hemisphere. The declaration of the United States was automatic with the start of hostilities in United States territory—”

“What of Nick?”

“I don’t know!”

“I’ve got to go pretty soon, Kathie.”

“You’ll be back, won’t you?”

“Sure, I’ll be back.”

“Be careful. Oh, how silly! How can you be careful?”

“I’ll be careful,” he said. “It’s you I’m sorry for. It’d been better if we hadn’t met.”

“Darling, don’t say that!”

“It’s true!”

“No it’s not!”

“—from Seattle, Washington: Enemy planes were sighted over the city, but no bombs were dropped. Tacoma: Enemy aircraft was thrown back after an attempted raid on provision sheds and power-plants near Puget Sound . . . Bremerton, Washington: by United Press—Navy planes hurled back enemy bombers in a raid on the Bremerton Navy Yard. . .”

“Maybe you could pretend we never met.”

“I’m not very good at pretending,” Kathie said.

“Bulletin: Tokyo, Japan: Japanese troops have been landed in the Philippines and have clashed with American land forces near Manila. Tokyo: American aircraft—believed to be bombers from the United States Base at Singapore—flew high over Tokyo tonight but no bombs were reported dropped. Japanese military authorities announced that swift reprisals on a scale of twenty to one would be inflicted on American cities if any Japanese nationals are bombed in non-military cities and towns—such cities to be later designated by the Nippon government. . . Washington, D.C., by AP. The United States Pacific Fleet has steamed out of Guam. A large-scale naval battle is expected when the U.S. fleet meets the main fighting force of the Japanese navy which is believed to be somewhere in the vicinity. . .”

“It’s like a nightmare,” Kathie said. “And yet we’ve always known it would come!”

“Berlin, Germany: In reply to the United States declaration of war it was announced here tonight quote: ‘War with the United States has never been the intention, or the end, desired by the Third Reich. It had been hoped until the last minute that agreement could be made regarding fair-trade practice in South America, and the urgent problem of German-American minority groups residing in the United States. But if America wants war the Nazi Iron Fist will answer her blow for blow unquote.’ Berlin, by United Press—the Bureau of Propaganda has issued the following statement, quote: ‘The United States alone is guilty of bringing about the recent horrible famine

in Europe in which thousands of German-protected citizens met death in France, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Since the beginning of the present government in Germany the United States has shown toward it a vicious, intolerable hatred. Germany can no longer close her eyes on the openly hostile attitude of the American Government. This war has been thrust upon a Germany which wanted only peace! America has for years materially aided Germany's enemies! Its Monroe Doctrine has closed the door to food on countless millions of starving Europeans. The Jew controlled Capitalism in America has spread poisonous propaganda against the German people for which it must now pay!' unquote. . . Rome, Italy: In answer to the United States declaration of war—"

The door opened, and Nick walked in. The leather jacket was slung over his arm. His face was white, lined, his eyes bloodshot. Kathie got up, and Jeff switched off the radio. Nick greeted them with a tired, glad smile. He rubbed his hand down over his face and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. Kathie was telling him how worried they had been. Her words came in a rush of half-finished sentences, asking if he were all right: how had he fared? She wanted to know everything at once. Then she warmed coffee over for him and Nick was grateful. He sat down and the three of them discussed the war. Their voices were soft, their observations casual. "Well, we're in it now," they said, and they spoke vaguely of the future. No one mentioned victory. Even to them it was a thing which seemed far away. Finally Nick said:

"All I really know is that I haven't slept for two days—and there's work to do." He swished what was left of the coffee around in the cup. "I've already been in touch with the Intelligence Chief." He glanced over at Jeff and grinned. "You wouldn't know me, kid, but I've got a badge now. I'm in something known as the secret service." He paused.

"You'll get your article, Kathie. But they'll probably censor the hell out of it."

The scene, strung on wires of tension, somehow, for just a moment, Jeff thought, glowed with a sense of domestic serenity. Kathie was Jeff's girl, Nick was his friend. Jeff wished that

the moment could be suspended in time: the intimate, sacred pleasure of having about you the two people you loved. Jeff sat very still, as though he were afraid he might break the spell. With his thumbnail he aimlessly flaked off some of the mud that had dried on his uniform. It seemed good, too, to be away from the throbbing of Diesel engines.

"I see that you and Kathie met," Nick said.

"Yes, we met."

But Kathie was more thoughtful. She studied Nick's hard, creased face, and then she said, as though she were wiping the words off her mouth, "Darling, we have a surprise for you."

Nick looked up guilelessly.

"We're in love," Jeff said.

"And terrifically!" said Kathie.

Nick looked from one to the other, then back again. His expression was only half formed as though he expected them to say it was a joke.

"Kathie *never* falls in love with anybody," he said. "Not her, Kathie is—"

But his hollow words came to an abrupt end. He realized they were in deadly earnest. Kathie was looking at her polished nails. Nick stared at Jeff with hard, bitter eyes. Jeff was suddenly conscious of the situation and his cheeks flushed.

"Listen, Nick—"

"Save it!"

"But I—"

"Forget it!" Nick said. He rose. "You don't think I give a damn, do you?" He said: "You're crazy if you think—" He broke off. "Hell, I'm a lot older than Kathie, anyway." He walked to the end of the room. "If I'd gotten married I'd have kids this high by now." He hitched up his trousers. "Well, what are you sitting there for? Why don't you say something?"

"Nick, I—"

"Listen, kid. This girl doesn't mean anything to me! What has she been telling you anyhow?" He turned his head. "What have you been telling him?—Hell, she always left me in railroad stations, and on docks. I remember once in Cairo, Egypt, when—" he broke off again.

He sat down on the bed between the chairs in which Jeff and Kathie sat. He was talking fast, smiling, his words thick, sometimes blurred together. He slapped Jeff's knee.

“Listen, this is swell! You’re the two luckiest people in the world! I want to be there when you get married. I’ll have a bucket of rice, see, and—”

“Stop it,” Kathie said.

“What?”

“I didn’t know you still felt that way, Nick.”

“What way?” And before she could reply: “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” His voice was almost shrill.

“I don’t want to—hurt you, Nick, and—”

Jeff was trying to get a word in.

“Hurt who?” Nick said. “Christ, who do you think you’re hurting?” He glanced at Jeff. “She’s a nice kid, but she’s got one of these complexes women get that make them think every man in the world’s in love with them.” He got up and walked into the pantry. He stayed in there a long time. He kept running water in the sink, and rattling dishes. When he came out he was smiling.

“Let’s have a drink. I think the occasion calls for one!” Then, because it seemed obvious that he was still talking about Kathie: “The United States doesn’t get in a war every day, does it?”

Kathie laughed. “For a minute, Nick, I thought—”

“That’s silly,” Nick said. “It really is!”

Jeff was relieved. He watched Nick’s bright expression and at last it seemed to him that such gaiety must be sincere. Nick had been rattled, that was all. He’d been up for two days. He was pouring drinks now, saying a lot of bright things, and Jeff noticed that his hand shook as though it had palsy.

The streets were dark and empty, and the two of them, walking, did not speak. Here and there were piles of debris, and the shadow of distant fires flickered ruby-colored against the roof-tops. Jeff felt Kathie on his arm, and he was conscious of nothing else. They stopped at a small, dimly lit all-night cafe and sipped cocktails. There was very little to say and after a while they walked again. Kathie was trembling, and he could feel her trembling. As they neared Colon there were many sailors on the road, and once a company of soldiers marched past. Three streets away they heard the rumble of tanks and heavy artillery shifting in the night from one position to another. There was no blackout here and the street lamps still glowed. The air was wet and cold and it was nearly dawn.

There were marine sentries on the docks, and sailors, and a few women saying goodbyes. The sky was turning a dirty gray and all the people were like shadows. A fog was blowing from the harbor, and the sound of ships’ whistles was very clear. There was a silhouette of a warship moving past in the distance, and closer by a sea-gull flapped its wings. The voices all around them were low.

Kathie turned to Jeff and looked up into his face. She was very pale now, and dry-eyed. He was conscious that afterward the scent of her perfume would cling to him, and there would be powder on his lapel, and strands of red hair on his shoulder. He would remember a million fine things he should have said. But now he only kissed her lips and pressed her very close to him. The S-60’s whistle blasted, and Captain Knight’s megaphoned voice echoed from the bridge: “Stand by to cast off!” He had discerned Jeff in the foreground. There was the throbbing sound of the engines. Kathie said something.

“What?”

“I said I’ll be waiting for you, dear.” Her voice was very small.

“Kathie—”

“Yes?”

“Someday there won’t be any war! There won’t be *anything*, see! There’ll just be—you and me. Goodbye, Kathie—”

He kissed her hands, and then because this was pain and he could endure it no longer, he rushed off. He leapt to the submarine’s deck. Lines were cast off. Jeff climbed the outside ladder up to the conning tower. The whistle shrieked, and then they were backing down. Jeff waved. Kathie held her hand to her face and she did not wave. It struck him all at once that she was crying. Overhead there was the sound of American planes. The captain gave his orders, and the ship began to swing around. Dawn was bleaching the dark sky. This was the farewell.

Jeff’s lips were mute. Already the smell of the ship was in his nostrils.

“This is the first day of the war,” the captain said.

“Yes,” Jeff said.

When he looked back Kathie was gone.

VIII

LATE the next afternoon Nick walked along the streets of Cristobal. The sun shone mildly on the debris which was being cleared, and there was a tense, harsh serenity over the city. There had been no air raids since the first one nearly fifteen hours ago. But the nerves of the population had been kept on edge by warnings that the enemy would strike again at any minute. Huge trucks rumbled past, heaped with rubbish; and it was reported that all fires started by the raid had been extinguished. So far there had been no further news from the other war fronts.

Nick's face was hard and white, his eyes hollow. The crowds that swept by him he scarcely saw. He had slept badly: and awoke with a vague, foreboding awareness that the hours before him would be crammed with activity. He had sent downstairs for his breakfast—it was then three in the afternoon—and was only half through eating when the phone rang. He didn't recognize the voice.

"Your cousin arrived in town last night. He said he would like to see you, and as he is busy he asked me to call."

"My cousin?"

"Yes. He'll be in his usual apartment on Mission Street. He requests that you look him up at your earliest convenience."

There was a click and the line was dead. The Intelligence office was on Mission Street and it was, of course, Craig who wanted to see him. But Nick was no little amused that a man as hardboiled as Craig would use such dramatic precautions. It was very possible that Nick's line had been tapped. Cristobal was full of spies: they trampled over one another like beetles. But Nick didn't believe that there was one in twenty from whom you had anything to fear. He dressed as quickly as possible and showed up at headquarters. It was then he discovered Craig was not present. Instead, he was confronted by a navy yeoman who had him sign a number of official government papers including one in a brand-new service record. The moment this was accomplished Nick was taken down the hall and into the office of a captain. Here he was obliged to hold up his right hand and swear an oath of allegiance to the United States. It was all

perfunctory and done with a minimum of delay. Only once did Nick have an opportunity to reflect that he was no longer a free man. He was as much in the service as any buck private in the army. If some future order displeased him it was no longer his right to argue. His fingerprints were taken, and after he washed his hands the yeoman gave him a slip of paper on which there was an address. No word was exchanged between the two men and Nick was amazed at the efficiency, and secrecy, of this office which on his first visit had seemed so casual.

Moving along the street now, he saw the growing shadows of the coming dusk. Street lamps were flickering on, and shop lights were bright as far as the eye reached. Then, across the street, he saw the address that had been written on the paper. It was a bar, and a red neon sign was going on and off.

Nick crossed and went inside. The bar was dark and nearly deserted. There was sawdust on the floor, and the stale odor of whisky. Craig was sitting at a small table. He wore a white linen suit, peppered with a dark weave, and his face was as grizzly as before. With his hang-dog jaw, and his shaggy eyebrows, he was imposing. Nick took a chair opposite him. Craig looked up, he started to speak, then he seemed to stare at Nick.

"What the hell is it?"

"What's what?" Nick asked.

"Something's wrong with you."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Nick said.

"I know better. And don't say it's fatigue. It's not that. You look white and haunted. It's in your eyes."

"Maybe it's the war."

"It's not that either. You were aware there was going to be war when I saw you last. I wish you'd tell me the truth!"

"You'd only laugh."

"I wouldn't laugh," Craig said. "Is it a woman?"

"Yes."

"Does it mean very much to you?"

"Yes," Nick said, "it does."

"I'm very sorry for you."

"It's all right," Nick said. "She was never in love with me anyhow. It was just—"

"I understand." Craig paused. "You know, I *really* didn't expect to ever see you again."

“You didn’t? Why?”

“I was in the office when word came that your message giving the direction of the island had been picked up—I thought sure that the Nazis would get you.”

“Well, they didn’t.”

“No—they only sent three planes,” said Craig. “They should have sent a squadron after you.”

Nick grinned.

“I don’t often waste time in flattery,” Craig said, “nor in sympathy either, for that matter. But we have reason to feel you deserve something in the way of praise. You notice there have been no air raids on Cristobal since the first one? That’s because our planes blasted the secret base to hell! The *next* time they raid it’ll have to be from a greater distance.”

Nick lit a cigarette, and Barton Craig watched him speculatively.

“Maybe you missed your calling. Are you by any chance a pilot?”

“I’ve flown a little,” Nick said.

“And you’re a fine gunner. The air force badly needs men, you know.” He paused. “But never mind the air force. For the next few days (until we’ve cleared some of the human muck out of Cristobal) I’ll need men myself.”

Nick glanced around.

“You needn’t worry,” Craig said. “The only other civilians you see are my own men; including the bar-tender.”

Craig was in a much friendlier mood than he had been in before and Nick could not guess why. They ordered drinks, and then the Intelligence Chief leaned his huge frame forward.

“The rumor about the secret base was something I’d been trying to run down for weeks! When you walked into my office and told me what you did I was very nearly beside myself. Of course, it wouldn’t have done to tell you *then*—and even so I wasn’t at all sure you were right.”

There was silence as they finished their drinks. Nick’s was Overholt straight and he signaled for another. When it had been delivered, Craig continued:

“I suppose you wonder why I took such precautions when I had the office phone you today?”

“It did cross my mind that you were being rather careful,” Nick said.

He felt that Craig was about to reveal the reason behind his exuberant good humor, and he was anxious to know what it was.

“The fact is,” Craig said, “the Nazis have an eye peeled for you. I’ve learned from certain sources that it’s generally believed you are the possessor of much dangerous information. If we’d phoned and asked you in so many words to come to Intelligence Headquarters—it’s not at all unlikely that you’d have been killed some time after you left your room. The only thing that’s prevented your murder so far is that they’re still unsure where you stand.”

Nick was unable to restrain himself: “What is there about that that pleases you so much? You have the pleasant air of a well-fed cat!”

Craig chuckled. “I don’t deny it. You must be a fool if you don’t see that the fact the Nazis consider you dangerous *enhances* your value to me! If they’re thinking of killing you, you must have a mine of information—more than I imagined any civilian could possess. I find that I’m not at all sorry we met. I mean to work with you, and between us we can make a coup that’ll nip in the bud a lot of dirty things that have been going on here. You said you had names and addresses. If you have them with you we’ll start making arrests tonight. Every minute that passes is important.”

“I have the complete list,” Nick said. “I typed it off at daylight, just before going to bed.”

“Good!”

“But what are you going to do for evidence?”

“Damn the evidence!” Craig said. “Your testimony in a military tribunal will be enough to cook any number of them. Until last night we had our hands tied. But now that war’s declared it’ll be a different story.”

“If we’re going to round them up—I’ll need a gun,” Nick said.

“That’s one of the reasons I asked you to come here. We have an armory downstairs. We’re going to be accompanied tonight by the two *gentlemen* sitting at the bar.”

Nick glanced up at them.

Suddenly Craig asked: “Do you know Mark Stohl?”

“Only by hearsay.”

Craig glanced down at his short, hairy fingers. “He knows you—this order that may go out to kill

you will come from him. I've just discovered that he's the head of the Nazi secret service in this section. He's the one key man! If we could arrest him our job would be simple."

"Then why don't you?"

"We tried," Craig said. His florid face flushed. "Stohl escaped. We can find no trace."

"You tried to arrest him?"

"Yes. We knew where he was and we thought we had him cornered. But he got away. He killed one of our best men, and wounded another." Craig pushed back his chair. "Someday I'll get him. I think that's one of the things I live for." He looked past Nick for a moment; then he pulled out his watch and glanced at it.

"We'd better get going," he said. "We've a lot to do tonight."

Nick rose slowly. It was all like a dream. For a few minutes he had even forgotten Kathie. But his soul was lacerated, and now the void and the ache returned to him. He could not forget. A long, tedious night of war lay ahead, and through the hours to come he had a number of grim, dirty jobs to do. But now and then he would think of her. In the midst of the most terrible violence there would ring in his ears her laughter, her voice saying: "*Darling, we have a surprise for you!*"; and Jeff saying innocently: "*We're in love.*" It occurred to Nick for the first time that he would probably be in love with Kathie Winters until the day he died.

"Ready?" Craig asked.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Come along to the cellar then—I'll get you a gun."

"All right," Nick said.

Out in front of the bar the red neon sign kept going on and off.

IX

THE S-60 was at periscope depth.

They could not risk the chance that a stray enemy plane might spot them and all day long the submarine lay twenty-five feet below the surface of the ocean. The ugly little pipe-head alone stayed above water, turning around and around in a constant watch of all horizons. Below deck it was very hot, and the air had long since become

foul. The Diesels, turned off, were silent. The main motors sucked juice from the batteries.

Everything was in readiness against all eventualities. The war-heads, with their tons of TNT, were in the torpedo room. In the COC men stood under the dim lights at their diving stations, skivie shirts soggy wet with sweat, eyes always alert, watchful, and yet tired. The minutes seemed endless, and the hours passed one after another in a slow and dreary procession. As the carbon dioxide percentage increased in the air the atmosphere grew steadily in density, and a heavy, sluggish lassitude sapped precious strength from every one. The desire simply to lie down and go to sleep was almost overpowering. The men shook their heads, and massaged their faces. In this shallow depth the boat rocked gently against every whim and mood of the sea.

At noon it seemed unendurable that another six hours under water lay ahead. Time became endless. Minutes stagnated. Jeff took the captain's place at the periscope. He flung his arms over the crossbars, and slowly walked it around and around. The men at their stations watched bleakly, eyes dulled. An oxygen tank hissed, and whispered; and hissed. A bead of water rolled lazily down from the overhead. The captain took off his hat, and sponged sweat from his blistered forehead.

"When do we come up?"

"At six," the captain said.

"Does the sun *ever* set?"

"You might as well get used to it," the captain said. "It may continue this way, day after day, for weeks. During the nights we'll lie on the surface and charge batteries. At any rate, we have to stay in our own eight mile radius."

"The iron net."

"Yes, the net."

"Does it seem sound, Sir, that they'd risk two divisions of subs to annihilation—just to create a first line of naval defense?"

"It does to me," the captain said. "No matter how it turns out, the damage we inflict is bound to be greater than the loss of a few obsolete submarines."

"Yes, but a navy needs her submarines!"

"To harass commerce, you mean? The navy's got them. V boats. We call them new, but some of

them are twelve years old. Can you imagine how decrepit that makes us?"

"Are there plenty of those big subs left, in case these divisions—"

"They'll get along without us very well," Captain Knight said. "You see, we've *always* been based at Pearl Harbor—never stayed out many days at a time. Do you know the reason for this?"

"No."

"Because these subs aren't going to hold up much longer. A war makes necessary the most grueling of maneuvers—three months of that and these pig-boats will begin cracking up one by one!"

"Yes, I guess so. Even in peace time they were always in for repairs." Jeff paused. "So they're going to make use of us while we've still got a little juice left?"

"Exactly!"

The captain went into the wardroom, and Jeff kept walking around and around the periscope. His shoes squished on the oily deck plates. His legs grew tense, and the muscles bunched up. He continued walking. The sun dazzled on the calm, endless surface of blue, and it hurt his eyes to keep watching it. But rigid vigilance had to be maintained. There was danger in every second that passed. Breathing these sluggish fumes it was sometimes difficult to remember that; but you dared not relax!

Water brushed hollowly against the hull. The control room was so small that twice Jeff nearly collided with sailors as he walked in his confining circle. He kept walking. . . walking. . . walking.

The moment the sun set the S-60 broke the surface. The conning tower hatch was flung open. Then, because the sea was calm enough to warrant it, the torpedo room hatch was temporarily opened up on deck and a canvas air induction made. They had begun at once to charge batteries. The sea was desolately empty, and the 60, without lights, hovered obliquely in the shroud of coming night. The order "darken ship" was rigidly enforced, and you could not smoke on deck, or in the conning tower.

Jeff, who all day had been unable to smoke, itched for the taste of a cigarette. He was in the bridge now filling his lungs with fresh air. Mr.

Morris had the watch. The blond young man grinned affably.

"Hell of a war, isn't it? It seems swell to be up now, but before morning we'll be damn glad to dive back down to safety."

"It's the waiting that's tough," Jeff said.

"Yes; but on the other hand, when the attack *does* come, we'll probably be wiped out."

"It's a nice thought," said Jeff.

"Yeah, it's a sweet thought."

"Are you scared?"

"No. You?"

"No," Jeff said.

"What sweet liars we are," said Mr. Morris. "I don't mind, though. It's funny, but I don't. Only I wish it was on the other coast. I'd like to fight the Japs. Boy, how I'd like to fight those little yellow—!"

"I guess *any* white man would," Jeff said. "I wonder how the war is going?"

"We'll never find out—with this radio silence."

"No, I guess not."

Captain Knight climbed up into the bridge. He glanced around. "Is the deck gun in order?"

"Yes, Sir."

"The shell hoist needed repair."

"It's been done," Mr. Morris said. "And there's plenty of live ammunition. Do you think we'll ever have a chance to use the deck gun?"

"Probably not. But we have to be prepared."

At midnight they were cruising very slowly when Jeff climbed into the conning tower. The chill silence that hung over the vast, rippling ocean was ominous. The captain had written his instructions for the night and retired. A signalman and a quartermaster sat up on the edge of the tower, scanning the water with binoculars. From below there came the muffled sound of the throbbing Diesels.

Because the engineer officer was hard at work with the black gang on the engines which there had never been time to overhaul properly in Cristobal, Jeff and Mr. Morris were temporarily standing watches six hours on, six off.

"She's all yours," Mr. Morris said. "Yours until dawn. Then I daresay you'll have breakfast and sleep 'til noon."

"I'll try and sleep 'til noon," Jeff said.

"Good night. Barret."

“Good night,” Jeff said.

There was a stiff, wet breeze, and Jeff, so hot a moment ago below decks, shivered a little. He ached to light a cigarette. Instead, he listlessly watched the horizon. Now and then he glanced at the compass in its binnacle.

At four in the morning the quartermaster suddenly grew tense. He leaned forward, focusing the binoculars. Now he said something inaudible. He handed the glasses to Jeff. Jeff put them to his eyes.

On the horizon there was the shadowy and blurred outline of a fighting top! There in the distance the moonlight reflected it. The big ship was coming swiftly through the night. Jeff’s heart crashed. It was an enemy battleship! For a stunned moment he could not take the glasses from his eyes. And now he saw that behind the first ship there sailed in neat formation vessel after vessel. On either flank of the main parade, zig-zagging in and out like colts, came the enemy destroyers! The whole sea was alive with dark, crawling ships. Jeff handed back the glasses. He reached for a voice tube. “Rig for diving!”

X

HERR MARK STOHL sat on a creaky bed, in the half light of a dingy, fetid room. The room was one in a shabby water-front hotel. Its wallpaper was faded and stained; the screenless windows admitted mosquitoes, and there were bedbugs in the mattress. The floor was bare and dusty, and a rocking-chair, trembling with age, sat in a corner. *Herr Stohl* had rented the room one hour ago, but he knew now that he would not stay.

It irritated him, but he did not understand how the American Intelligence had discovered his mission. He supposed that with such an abundance of agents in the Zone—of which only a picked handful of crack former Gestapo men were under his command—there was bound somewhere to be a leak. It outraged him that all agents were not under Nazi supervision. The lack of cooperation made for disunity, and too many agents were hired without their backgrounds being thoroughly checked. Quality was sacrificed for quantity. The theory was quite simple: if there

was reason to suspect that an agent was not doing his best, he was quietly shot through the back.

Perhaps there was logic in that, after all, but *Herr Stohl* did not see why the Axis Powers had to operate their Intelligence services separately. It only caused wild and hopeless confusion. His own activities would certainly not have been discovered—so that he had to shoot his way out of a jam—so quickly, if the forces of espionage here had been under his sole command. A member of the Gestapo for years (he had worked tirelessly in Poland—evacuating Jews from their homes, and sending them out of the country packed in box-cars) it was only natural that he should resent (no, hate!) the Nazi Army High Command. Those swaggering Storm Troop officers were forever trying to tell him his business—he, who had been a police detective in Berlin long before Hitler ever came into power—and now he blamed them, indirectly, for their sheer, piggish obstinacy in not having decreed an absolute order that all foreign spies work under the jurisdiction of a single unit—Nazi, of course.

To grant the Axis partners equality in this, or any other situation, was absurd and laughable anyway! Certainly the Army was aware of this. Germany used the military strength of the Axis powers when it was needed for an offensive thrust. But did those powers actually believe that, in the end, they would share in anything? They were no more than pawns of the great Third Reich, and in the final stanza their own weakling’s greed would devour them. Germany used their military power to wage war on—and ultimately destroy—the next strongest nation in the world—the insufferable, egoistic democracy of the United States. But when it was over, the bloody victory at hand, was it not perfectly obvious what was to happen to the Axis?

Germany would be ruling all of Europe, most of Asia, and the Western Hemisphere by puppet government. The Italians would stand no show. When the Reich turned against Italy—it was a thing the Nazis had been promised since the beginning—*Herr Stohl* doubted they would even fight. Long experience would have taught them they were no match for the Nazi troops. In the rout of Caporetto during the World War six divisions of tired Austrians had thrown back the entire Italian army and sent them in wild,

cowardly retreat—which continued until Allied forces rushed to their aid. No, the Fascists had learned their lesson. They fought only when they were on the side of superior force. The whole world knew that. They would surrender to the dictates of Germany without firing a shot—and a certain portion of world history would be completed.

Japan would rule China and the Asiatic possessions and Alaska—Germany would rule the rest of the world. *Ach*, it had always been possible! Only the worst kind of diplomacy had prevented it from happening during the World War—and even then Germany had stood alone for four years against insurmountable odds and opposition.

Now, at last, a proud Teutonic race of Aryans was fulfilling its destiny. In this, the final march, the Huns would win the war they had waged spasmodically through long, dusty centuries of time—since the fifth century, when those first fierce hordes had swept down from the north of Europe to loot and burn Rome!

Herr Stohl stirred on the bed. He neither drank nor smoked, and this dream, this contemplation of what was now certainly an ultimate future, was the only sweet intoxication in which he indulged. At this precise moment, so recently escaped from the enemy, a hunted fugitive in a dark hotel room, it soothed his pride; it inspired in him a blind, loyal courage without which the Nazis never would have been victorious, even in that first march across France.

Think of the centuries through which France had resisted and thrown back the German forces! It was true the Germans had reached Paris—overthrown Napoleon III—but it was unlike this, the total destruction. There is a sense of justice in having defeated and trampled one's worst enemy. It was this love for the Fatherland: for its Righteous Cause, that gave the young Nazi soldiers the undying patriotic fervor, and the proud, fearless strength that made them lock their arms together and march singing joyously to their deaths! Incredible! Ah, but the enemy had seen it. The French had witnessed that horrible and stirring spectacle of wave after wave of German soldiers, arms locked, singing as they marched into battle! Was it any wonder that the dissension of national opinion—which is the sole basis of

democracy—failed to stand up to these unconquerable young Nazi battalions, which fought only through love and devotion to *Der Fuhrer*!

Herr Stohl never wept except when he thought of that, and by its example no German alive could show fear in the face of the enemy. Whether he lived or died *Herr Stohl* could not remain in hiding. He would know shame so great that he would prefer to kill himself by his own hand than to cringe from the enemy of a nation he knew to be already crumbling.

Now in the darkness he rose and went to a battered mirror. Yes, he was old. His face was lined and hard. It was a gray Nazi face, and he supposed that to a good many people he was a villain. But they could not see the vigilant flame that burned in his heart! This one thing more than force of arms was the secret of the Nazi war, and until America, or any other nation, did not simply perceive it, but learned it, and united with the same (yes, even hysterical, there was no cause for shame in it!) fervor, they could not hope to win.

Herr Stohl picked up his Luger and dropped it into his pocket. His coat had been torn in the escape—the seam was ripped open at the shoulder—but that did not matter. He knew that he still had his job to do, and until a bullet stopped him his was no other choice than to continue.

He was aware that Nick Waters had mingled with a number of his agents and *Herr Stohl* was now afraid of what Waters knew. In the beginning he had carefully investigated and found out that the writer had no official connection with the United States Government. But now he had reason to believe—from the report of a minor agent to be exact—that the situation was changed.

Because Waters was capable of causing the most damage among the men under *Herr Stohl*—and because this job entailed no more than a clear-cut and direct murder—*Stohl* knew that he must kill him. *Tonight*. He had meant to send another assassin. But now he had to keep under cover, and because it was important that Nick Waters die it was only sensible that he commit the homicide himself.

He opened the room door and glanced into the empty hall. Then he stepped out. He walked swiftly, and the gun in his pocket rose and fell on his hip.

Outside, he walked along side streets. Belatedly, Cristobal was making preparations for a blackout—such things were so useless in this war when the planes had fires and searchlights and anti-aircraft guns to guide them—and it was to go into effect at ten o'clock. A few miles away, Panama City had been blacked out since darkness, as had Colon. Cristobal was of less strategic importance. A blackout favored *Herr Stohl's* plan. He would wait until Nick Waters was out—there was a bell-boy in the hotel in the pay of the Italians—and he would then slip into the room and wait for his return. When Waters had been killed *Herr Stohl* could affect his exit by the fire-escape.

The wind was chilly, and it was not at all a good night. He saw that the street lamps were going out. One by one, the shops were becoming dark. Gradually, the darkness became intense, and the streets were hollow and empty. At midnight there would be a curfew clearing them of civilians. *Herr Stohl* moved more swiftly.

Nick was out, and the bell-boy quietly let *Stohl* into the room. Heavy black drapes hung over the windows, shutting in the dim light that glowed from the night stand.

Herr Stohl walked around Nick's room. He glanced at the huge maps that were tacked to the walls, and at the papers that littered Nick's writing table. Then, systematically, he began to ransack the place. Almost at once he found a carbon copy of names and addresses. His avid eyes ran down the list. Four of his own agents were named! He recognized six Italian agents from the addresses given for their places of residence. *Stohl's* face turned to cold steel. He jammed the paper into his pocket. He was certain now that Waters was an American agent—and he could only hope that he wasn't too late to prevent most of the trouble the writer could cause!

Quickly, he opened and closed drawers. He pored through Nick's endless files. He held up a piece of yellow paper on which something had been scrawled. He could scarcely make out the writing and he had to study the letters with great care—*idea for short story—fanatic nazi in rome wine cellar frothing with typical uncontrollable german rage—inadvertently reveals his nations true hatreds for the italians—is shot by hot-headed fascists, afterward fascists (the dumb*

bastards) bewildered by the german's statements, look down at the body—he must have been crazy, yes, says the other, he must have been—end all dialog.

White hot with anger, *Herr Stohl* ripped the paper to shreds. It was such baseless, unfounded, lying propaganda as that that had brought America into war! How dare they imagine any German would lose control of himself in such a contorted fashion? The Germans had only love for the Italians!

He banged shut the drawer in unreasonable fury, and opened another.

But now he heard someone at the hall door. A woman's voice spoke.

"Nick—is that you?"

Herr Stohl slipped into the small pantry. He could not risk being discovered here. It was quite clear to him that if she entered he would have to kill her. He had no qualms about killing a woman. Duty came before anything else. In Poland he had shot and killed two women in cold blood. He waited, tensely.

The door opened and Kathrine Winters entered. He recognized her at once. She must have suspected something was amiss because she had a small revolver in her hand. She came carefully into the middle of the room.

What rotten luck! He would have to kill her and flee! He could not take the chance that the sound of the shooting wouldn't attract attention. *Herr Stohl* felt a surge of bitter disappointment that he would be unable to wait for Nick Waters' return.

Kathrine was moving toward the pantry. *Herr Stohl* lifted his gun. Then she saw him.

He fired.

XI

Colon, Canal Zone; at the same hour:

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Craig said.

"But you were shot," said Nick.

"It was only a scratch, we can't stop now. We can still make another address before morning."

"Maybe you'd better see a doctor first. Certainly we can take time for that."

"No, time is the essence, my boy."

"You might get gangrene."

"To hell with that, too," said Craig.

"Okay," Nick said. "If you want to continue, that's okay. What time is it now?"

"It's one-thirty in the morning."

"I guess we'd better go to the Padre Hotel," Nick said. "That's where Frip Weil lives. Do you remember Weil?"

"Weil is one of Stohl's men, I think," Craig said. "He's next on the list, isn't he? How many have we rounded up so far tonight?"

"Only five."

"It seems like five hundred."

"I know, but it's only five," Nick said.

"The boys took them in, did they?"

"Yes, they're in the clink."

"Tomorrow they'll get shot," Craig said.

"I hope I don't have to see that."

"I want you to see it."

"I'd rather not."

"No, I want you to see it. I want you to see them for the rats they are. I'm your commanding officer and I order you to see it."

"I *know* what rats they are," Nick said.

"Then it won't turn your stomach to see them die."

"No. I can see them die and still eat a good breakfast. But I still don't *like* it."

"You're squeamish."

"Maybe," Nick said. "I wonder how Kathrine Winters is?"

"Who's she?"

"She's a girl," Nick said.

They were standing on a dark, gloomy street corner, under a striped awning. There was a blackout, and the curfew had cleared the streets. There were khaki-clad marines patrolling with rifles and bayonets. If you failed to halt the moment you were challenged they shot you. On a nearby roof there was a low-toned echo of voices from soldiers standing a night-long watch on an anti-aircraft gun. But for this, there was only the sigh of the March wind, cold and wet from the harbor. The cobblestone streets gleamed like hard ivory in the night.

"I guess we'd better get going."

"I guess so," Nick said.

"I heard Stohl came to Colon when he escaped. I'd like to find him."

"I'd like to find him," said Nick.

"He's probably gunning for you."

"Yes," said Nick, "so you told me."

They climbed into an open car. Craig had made a tourniquet on the fleshy part of his arm with a handkerchief, and it was Nick who drove. They were stopped five times by marines. The last time an excited marine shot the back tires off the car. They rode on the shreds of rubber that remained, and on the rims of the wheels. This made a great deal of noise and everywhere people opened windows and looked out to see if planes were coming. Nick stopped the car a block from the Padre Hotel and he and Craig walked the intervening distance.

In the hotel they showed their identification and the clerk, ringing a night bell, tried to stall. Craig put handcuffs on the clerk and opened the front door of the hotel and pushed him out into the street. He locked the door so the clerk could not reenter. The clerk would try to flee and the marines would arrest him. He would be tried tomorrow in a military court with the others. It was very expedient. The handcuffs made him at once suspicious and at the same time rendered him harmless against the patrol.

Nick and Craig walked laboriously up two flights of stairs. But it seemed too late. It was something they sensed rather than saw. The hall was pitch dark. There were no transom lights. Weil had been warned and he would either try to escape, or (if he had someone to help him) lay a trap. If he attempted to escape he would only be caught on the street. The trap seemed more likely.

Nick flashed his light on a room door. He nodded at Craig and snapped off the light. With his naked hand he tried the knob of the door. It turned easily. He pushed it open, and he and Craig stood against the wall in the hall. Each palmed a gun. There was no sound from the room. The door stood wide open. Three minutes marched solemnly off the clock.

"The police should be here by now," Craig said, in a loud voice.

"Yes," Nick said.

"What if the windows are locked?"

"The cops'll break them in," Nick said.

"There *are* four of them, aren't there?"

"Yes," Nick said, "four cops."

Their voices had carried quite well. Now there was silence again. At last Nick tossed his flash-

light through the dark room. It smashed a window-pane.

Gun shots ripped through the splintering window, and Nick and Craig stepped into the room. Nick turned on the lights. The Nazi Weil—thinking the room attacked from both the door and the windows—threw up his hands gibbering “*Kamerad!*” But a big Italian, his mind less agile, opened fire on Nick. Craig shot the Italian through the heart. Nick was not hit. Weil, his short hair like bristles, submitted. Looking with terror at the dead Italian, he glanced now at the window. He saw the flash-light.

“You play tricks on me, Nick!”

“Oh, shuddup,” Nick said tiredly.

“Nick, I’m guilty of nothing! I tell you that I am! No court can prove anything against me. It was because of this Italian there was gun-fire tonight. You notice I didn’t shoot!”

“Keep still,” Nick said.

“When I tell you I make reports—” Weil laughed nervously, “—I lie. It wasn’t true. I brag. All the time I brag like that, and talk too much. What will I get, Nick? You must not let them intern me! I cannot stand jail!”

“You won’t be in jail long,” Nick said.

“*Ach*, Nick, you are my friend! Brave soldier of Franco! What good times we’ve had, Nick: drinking Bock, you and I; and talking of the pretty blonde *frauleins* in Berlin. Surely, Nick, you know how innocent I am!”

“You’re on the wrong side in this war, Fripp.”

“But Nick—”

“Yet I feel an especial attachment toward you,” Nick said.

“It was this boy who inadvertently tipped you off to the island base, wasn’t it?” Craig asked.

Weil stared in dumb horror.

“Yes, he’s the one,” Nick said.

“I’ll take him in,” Craig said. “We’ll call it a night with this one. Come along. I’ll give you a ride to Cristobal. We’ll get breakfast somewhere.”

“What about this Fascist corpse?”

“The authorities can do with it what they please,” Craig said.

In his own hotel, Nick moved wearily down the hall. It was a rotten business at best. He was thoroughly sick of it. For nearly twenty years he had followed the echo of gun-fire and lived in the

atmosphere of war, and at last he was fed up. For him this conflict held neither freshness nor vigor. And yet this was the first war in which the outcome mattered. He saw ahead a grim, terrible fight, and so long as Craig needed him he would devote himself to its prosecution.

But after that he wanted to go somewhere and lie in the sun. His ambition was stale, and his spirit flagged. He had existed so long under tension that he was spiritually shop-worn. He wanted about him, before he died, some of the music and the laughter that he had missed. Was it anywhere in the world? Ah, yes, he knew now where it was—all of it was in Kathie’s smile!

He thought he must be crazy to think things like these. Something was wrong with him—the long night of gun-fire and turmoil. He put his fingers against the bridge of his nose and opened and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. He always got wacky like this, and depressed, when he was tired. It’d be all right in the morning. Was there any morning? Yes, there was always morning. Even in a war there was morning. He glanced at his wrist-watch, 4 A.M.

He opened the door of his room. A light shone from the night stand. Nick’s face was incredulous with horror.

“Kathie!”

She was lying on the floor, and there was blood on the carpet.

XII

ON THE S-60, the three sailors who were in the conning tower silently disappeared through the hatch, and Jeff, alone for a moment, glanced out across the dark and blowsy early morning sea. His sun-burnt face was immobile, his eyes cold. The greasy officer’s cap was pushed back on his head. He was at this moment conscious of no emotion. He slid down the ladder into the compression room, reached up and bolted tight the round disc that was the hatch. He did not know if it would ever be opened again. But there was no time to think of that. Lethely, he dropped down into the controls room. A sailor swung shut the hatch, and turned a winch, securing it.

The small, squarish controls room was damp, the lights dim. Sailors had already moved to their

stations. Captain Knight was just coming in. He shouldered into a dungaree jacket. Lanny Morris had gone forward to the torpedo room where sailors had already taken their firing positions.

"We've got a few minutes before they'll be in range, captain," Jeff said.

The captain nodded, and he took the periscope. The lights on the control board changed from red to green. A chief electrician's mate appeared.

"All rigged forward, Sir."

The engineer officer, his face grimy, came in from the after battery. "All rigged aft. Sir."

The main ballast flood valves were closed, the main induction open.

The pounding Diesels went off, and as their echo died away, a chill came over the boat. In the silence the controls room was like a small, cramped cave in the catacombs. The batteries were on. Outside the hull, iron planes spread like giant fins, and now the boat rocked up for a last time, and plunged down. Water crawled over the bow, climbed with a hungry swirling up over the conning tower.

"Up periscope," Captain Knight said. Now he spoke into the motor-room tube: "Two knots. . ."

Jeff's heavy shoulders were hunched over the chest-high plotting table, and instruments were scattered around. A small light shone down on the board. The captain spoke to him without turning from the periscope.

"What is their course?"

Jeff twisted the bakelite dials. "Three two zero, Sir."

A "listener" sat on the greasy deck, his knees pulled up, earphones over his head. His face was concentrated. The oscillator hummed. The listener bent his head between his knees, and now he said:

"Main enemy flotilla bearing at eighteen knots. Sir, dead ahead of our bow."

The captain glanced at Jeff. "We'll calculate their range as soon as possible—then silence our main motors. But we'll have to wait. We can't risk firing long range—too much chance that we'd waste the 'fish.'" He paused. "They won't expect us here—and unless we're detected we can hold fire 'til they're nearly on top of us."

"Suppose the big ships are using submarine screen?"

"I doubt the possibility. They're not expecting attack *this* far out. Their scouting planes have

probably already sighted the main body of our fleet, and they'll scarcely expect an action until they reach it. Certainly they have no notion they'll run into anything of *this* sort!"

The idea pleased Jeff. Until now he had failed to appreciate the precise logic in the maneuver. But the thought of fourteen submarines lying in wait for an unsuspecting enemy made a cold thrill run down his back. He was suddenly glad to be part of it! He glanced at the men, from face to face. He saw they were excited, not scared. At last they were going to fight!

The minutes ticked by, and the range of the enemy kept closing in. The S-60 lay as silently as death itself twenty-five feet below the surface. The chief electrician's mate, at the diving controls, watched the voltmeter. A sailor moved past with a small lead-encased hydrometer box to check the batteries.

The silence was tense; the ticking seconds raced past. Captain Knight was looking through the periscope. Now he sucked in his breath.

"I've sighted them!" The men looked at one another. The chief electrician's mate licked his dry lips. The dim lights flickered. The captain's voice came again, steadily: "Range ten thousand yards. Bearing: zero six six! They're not zig-zagging."

"Their course is two one one," Jeff reported. "Periscope angle for the bow shots zero one nine!"

"Our position is fine," Captain Knight said. He had begun to sweat. His sweaty hands gripped the steel cross-bars on the periscope. "First ship in line is a Nazi pocket battleship—Hipper class." His tense voice stopped . . . went on: "Range approximately two thousand yards . . . closing in fast." He paused again. "There are any number of heavy ships in the formation. Our subs will be torpedoing them from both their port and starboard sides."

"What about destroyers?"

"The sea's alive with them!" He waited. Then his voice cracked out: "Stand by all tubes!"

Jeff's blood pumped.

"Coming on the bearing, captain!"

"She's beautifully cross-wired," Captain Knight said. "*Fire one!*"

The bow lurched. Jeff could hear the ton of steel and TNT as it left the tube. It would make a

white wake over the surface of the ocean. But it was not yet dawn and the visibility was bad. That was one thing in their favor, Jeff thought.

“Fire two!”

A second “fish” lurched out of her oily bed.

“Fire three!”

The listener was hunched over, the stethoscope phones in his ears. His face dripped with sweat.

“Destroyer starboard. Sir,” he said. “She’s bearing this way. There’s two others on our port bow!”

The destroyers would blast the S-60 to hell. But Captain Knight clung grimly to the cross-bars of the periscope. It was as though he hadn’t heard. There was no flicker of emotion on his leathery face. This was the suicide fleet and no man on board knew it better than he. He had another torpedo to discharge.

“Fire four!”

The tubes were empty now. The bow, tons lighter, was nosing up. The destroyers had detected the S-60’s position. You could hear the loud pounding of their whirling screws.

“Down periscope,” Captain Knight said. “A hundred feet. Crash dive. . .”

The boat swayed, the bow dipped, the hull began to sink. Water roared on the other side of the bulkheads. The depth-gage needle began to climb. The periscope pulled in her long iron neck. It was secured into its deck space.

“Two direct hits!” Captain Knight said. “I saw them myself. That pocket battleship is a cooked pig! I think our third shot got a destroyer.” He paused. “But we got a battleship, boy! We traded this heap of useless pig-iron for a new Nazi battleship!” He wiped sweat from his face.

In a radius miles long, the other S-type submarines were engaged in a similar and singular operation!

For a moment the sailors’ faces looked grim and hard. There was in their eyes the sweet taste of victory. . .

The needle in the depth-gage kept climbing. The sound of destroyer screws was directly overhead. Now the first depth charge came.

It hit with a shattering roar. The submarine shook violently from stem to stern. Men crashed over one another. Somebody cried out. The lights went off. Darkness. Pitch darkness. Voices. Jeff was shouting: “Resume your stations!”

But another depth charge seemed to rend the very iron of the hull. There was the ghastly noise of steel tearing. Part of the conning tower had been ripped off over their very heads! It was still dark.

Jeff could see nothing. Somewhere there was the drip of water. Drip. . . drip. . . drip. . .

The boat was still going down. The roar of water on the hull was like a harsh siren. The air-pressure increased. The captain had not spoken. No one gave any more orders. Down. . . down. . . they were plummeting zig-zag like a fat silver dollar.

Now the electric-light globes turned a raw red. The wires inside grew brighter. Skivie-clad sailors groped through the shadowy little controls room to their stations. Two of the men sat on the oily deck, dazed. Another was holding his arm. It was broken, and the bone protruded half an inch. The bone was like a piece of chalk that is bloody. The sailor kept holding his arm, and biting through his lips to keep from screaming. Another man had cracked his head, and his neck was sopped with blood. Jeff glanced around. Then with sudden horror he saw Captain Knight.

The captain had been hurled backward, and his head had smashed against the periscope case. His skull had been shattered. He lay stretched out . . . unconscious. No, not unconscious! Jeff saw that Captain Knight was dead.

Jeff looked down at him. Then he shook his head, and looked around. He was automatically in command! From now on the S-60 was his burden.

The shiny bulkheads were dripping with moisture. Now the ship hit bottom. It hit with an awful crash. Almost at once there was a seepage through the sea-valves. The dim lights were flickering again, on and off.

The destroyers were still above them, racing back and forth across the surface, dropping depth charges. There was a small leak from the hatch beneath the 60’s wrecked conning tower. There must have been an oil slick on the surface—a target marker for the destroyers.

An oil slick was the only tombstone you got in the suicide fleet.

It must have been getting dawn upstairs. Down here, the hell had been blown out of the 60. But if they had reached a sufficient depth there was a

chance they'd escape further trouble from the depth charges. The gauge needle stood at 203.

The boat was thick and hard on the bottom now, and Jeff discovered almost at once that they could not move. He tried planing up, but it was no good. He thought if they could travel at a submerged speed they might escape the trap. The compartment was becoming insufferably hot. Jeff addressed a sailor:

"Take the air manifold, Harris. Open the regulator tank."

This was done. The hull quivered, and the bow lifted a little, but they were thick on a mud bottom and the straining battery motors could not pull them out.

Another depth charge exploded above them. The boat began to shake, and every one looked at the lights. The boat kept shaking. The rivets in the bulkheads rattled like loose teeth. The lights went down again until you saw only the burning wires. The bulkheads were dripping wet. The air stank. There was the taste of acid in the atmosphere. The motors were extremely hot and the flanges on the pump discharge overboard were leaking badly. The pump was leaking. The ship was seeping water everywhere. The pressure outside the hull was like a dull thunder.

"Back full," Jeff said.

He hoped to break the suction of the soft bottom. He prayed they could break it. The ship vibrated. The motors were whining. But there wasn't enough energy to pull the ship out. The gage needle was glued at 203. Still another destroyer charge exploded above them. The hull rocked as though in an earthquake. The sailors were groggy, gasping at the rank air. Sweat dripped from their bare waists. The underwater pressure kept burning in Jeff's eardrums. In the gloom of the dim lights the shadowy figures in the controls room made a ghastly picture.

Desperately, Jeff ordered the pump tried on the adjusting tank. But after eight hundred pounds had been pumped out, the fuses on the power line blew. They were replaced, but blew out again.

"Hell," Jeff said. He knew that unless something was done they'd be stuck here forever. He wanted only to get the boat far enough off the bottom so that they could cruise submerged.

The adjusting tank on the S-boat was made to withstand great pressure, so Jeff ordered this filled

with water from the auxiliary tank and blown empty with high-pressure air. In this way he slowly built up a tremendous pressure—so great that the needle of the barometer (used to record the pressure) was bent up tight against the top of the instrument.

There are two methods of reducing air-pressure in a submarine while the boat is under water. First, having the bilges pumped until the water is out, after which the pump takes on excess air through it. But the 60's pump was damaged and this could not be done. The other way is to turn over the air compressors which are hooked up with the main propeller shafts, and supply compressed air for the torpedoes and for blowing water from the ballast tanks. When air is compressed, heat is generated, and for that reason cooling coils surround the compression chambers. Before the compressor started, the cooler shell would have to be opened to the sea so that circulating water might enter the coils. Jeff understood that the shell would be subjected to terrific pressure but he decided to take the chance. He ordered the port compressor started. But it had to be stopped at once. The shell burst!

The engineer officer came in. His face was like chalk.

"There's a bad leak in the stem gland propeller."

"How bad?"

"Plenty! The bilges are flooded. Water's coming up through the engine spaces and motor room!"

Jeff nodded grimly. The air was already so thick he could scarcely breathe. He realized with sudden, sickening dismay that his plan to crawl out of the mud (still submerged, the ballasts full) and escape this vulnerable position on an underwater run, was no longer possible. The motors were useless; and the ship now leaked so badly it was only a matter of time before the compartments would be flooded. It had been a fine plan, all right, but this was the end of it. He had to abandon any hope of escape!

There were only two courses left.

They could blow all tanks (in the final hope that this would pull them off the bottom) and come to the surface. On the surface they would face annihilation by enemy destroyers. Or they

could stay here and within a very brief space of time die like rats in a sunken tin can.

Jeff did not even stop to reflect. "We're coming up," he said evenly. "Stand by to man the deck gun. Quartermaster, break out the machine-guns. Stand by with live ammunition."

Yet he was not even sure they could come up! It was now up to Jeff to play his last hand. A final shabby trump card had to win for him down here—if they were even to get off the bottom!

He ordered pressure put on the forward ballast tank. The safety line on the air valve blew. It was reset at fifteen pounds. Now came the test!

The boat lurched. The chief electrician's mate, his lips set, held the circuit breakers closed. The ship strained. The electrician's hands and arms were scorched black. There was the smell of scorched skin. The boat was straining. Sweat dripped from the electrician's red face. The stench of burning skin was awful. But he held tight.

The 60's bow rose to a twenty degree angle . . . then the hull broke loose from the mud. They were suddenly racing to the surface. The gage needle traveled rapidly. The pressure rang out of Jeff's ears. At ninety feet he blew the main ballast. The ship shot upward.

The chief electrician's mate was dead. He was still at his post. He was still standing there. His face had changed color. He was rigid.

The 60 broke the ocean's surface like a cork suddenly popping above water. It broke surface in the bright, hot tropic dawn. It came up in the middle of a wild, infuriated enemy fleet.

"Ahead full on the Diesels!"

The heavy, throbbing Diesel engines came on. The grinding of their gesticulating iron arms was like music. Sailors left their diving stations and raced forward. There was the clatter of feet. Machine-guns were being lugged toward the torpedo-room hatch. Puny pop-guns against turret guns and destroyers!

Jeff went forward, through the narrow companionway. He scarcely saw the destruction in the torpedo room. Two men were dead. The hatch was flung open. Jeff climbed up through it. Water still dripped from the black lattice work on deck. Half of the conning tower was torn away. It was a shambles. Sailors jerked the canvas fitting from the five-inch deck gun. The machine-guns were brought to top side and set up. Powder and

shells were being broken out below and brought up.

The sun was hot and new in the sky. Two destroyers off the port bow circled around, sighting the disabled submarine. The destroyers flew Italian colors. The closest was no more than five hundred yards away. The S-60's deck force was on top side. The gaunt, haggard men wore dungaree trousers; they were bare to their waists. The stiff breeze blew through their hair. Jeff saw a signalman race aft. He unbundled a small flag and ran it up. The stars and stripes unfurled from the tail of the submarine. The signalman returned.

The five incher, and the two machine-guns were now manned. Across the bright sea Jeff saw a cruiser sinking. The formation of battleships had been broken up. He could count only seven. There seemed to be general confusion among the enemy. A thousand yards away another small, nearly wrecked S-boat was peppering at two destroyers. Even as Jeff saw it, the submarine was torn to shreds with a heavy shell. Nazi scouting planes roared overhead.

It must have bewildered the enemy high command that such havoc had been wreaked since there was no opponent visible but a few old and battered submarines! Even a few of the subs must have escaped; and others, certainly, had been rent by depth charges and were on the bottom once and for all.

Jeff barked: "All hands. . . except those in the gun stations, abandon ship! Every man for himself!"

The order was relayed. There were a few life-belts, a small dory aft. Most of the men would have to plunge into the sea wearing only life-belts—and hope for the best!

The signalman tugged at Jeff's shoulder. "The destroyer's run up a signal. They want us to surrender."

Jeff laughed harshly. The five-inch deck gun spoke his answer. The destroyer, joined by another, bore down on them. The five-inch gun breach was opened, stuffed, slammed shut. Jeff stood behind it, directing fire. The pointer trained down on the bridge of the foremost destroyer, which seemed leaping forward.

"Fire!"

A shell burst from the muzzle; the gun recoiled. The breach was open, being loaded

again. Men were already leaping overboard. A destroyer shell seared off more of the conning tower. But the 60's gun crew kept working. The two machine-guns were chattering. The pointer on the five-inch gun cross-wired the destroyer again.

"Fire!"

The shell tore from the gun. Jeff watched with feverish eyes. Suddenly he shouted until his vocal muscles cracked hoarsely. The destroyer was veering off! Both the five-inch shells had crashed through its bridge. The bridge of the Italian ship was in flames. The sirening bells calling out their fire-control party rang across the water. The bells kept ringing shrilly as the big destroyer turned off. Jeff yelled until the tears ran down his face. The puny submarine and the big, bright destroyer!

But another destroyer was burning the water as it rushed at them. The 60's machine-gun fire broke the glass in its bridge. But it kept coming. Relentlessly, it kept coming. Even its guns were silent. It came crashing across the water at them making forty knots. The crew tried to bring the 60's five-inch gun in line. But it was too late! The destroyer was driving at them full speed ahead.

It was going to ram!

It grew closer. Its knife-like bow rushed at them. There was a terrible splintering of steel. The United States submarine S-60 was slashed in two! It sank immediately.

XIII

IT WAS five in the morning now, and Kathie was propped up on Nick's bed. Her face was very white, and there was a bandage wrapped tightly around her left forearm. A doctor had just left. Nick was beside himself. He still hadn't recovered from the scene.

"I'll make you a drink," he said.

"All right, darling, you do that."

"Kathie, I was so damned worried—"

"I know, Nick."

"Don't ever do that again."

She laughed. "I'll try not to. You see, I heard noises in here—somehow got the idea it might not be you—and, like a fool, in the excitement, I came in with a gun. I thought I'd surprise some one trying to rob you. But—it was—Stohl."

"He was here to kill me," Nick said.

"Was he? I saw him the moment before he fired. He had the most awful look on his face. I tried to jump out of the way—but the bullet hit my upraised arm. I'm afraid I was too scared to shoot. And, of course, like a sissy, I fainted. He must have thought he had fatally wounded me."

Nick nodded.

"Honest," Kathie said. "Nobody ever shot at me before! I went out cold. I must have been unconscious for hours."

"It's a wonder someone didn't hear the shots and come running."

"Well, I thought of that," she said. "But this room's at the end of the hall—the room next door is mine. You see—"

"You poor kid," he said.

"It's all right," she said. "It'll be something to talk about some day when we meet again—you'll say, remember that wound you got in Cristobal, Kathie."

"Someday—when we meet again," he echoed. He went out and made the drinks. His hands were shaking. That's what we'll say, all right: remember the wound you got in Cristobal? Only there won't be any more wars, and there won't be any next time. This was the end of something—and the beginning of something else. Nick could not define it; he knew only that it would never be the same again. There was in his mind an old, old melody, "Auld Lang Syne." Here endeth our dreams. He took her in a drink.

"You look tired, Nick."

"I'm not, though. I'm fine." He lit a cigarette nervously. "Miss Jeff?"

"Yes," she reflected. "And he seems—I can't explain it—very far away. Sometimes it's as though I never met him. I—wasn't the same Kathie that night—" She seemed trying to reason it out. "I was some girl I've never been before. Naive—and very happy."

"Like a Broadway song."

"Yes, as romantic as that!"

"You love him?"

"Oh, yes, I do. Very much! But—I'll have to change when I'm married to him. I've always been—well, independent. There's a lot of things I do he wouldn't understand. I'll have to become that other girl—subject myself to his personality. But it'll be worth it, Nick! You see, the real

Kathie is a sort of tomboy and I don't think he'd like her."

Nick was holding his glass in both hands, looking at it.

"I'd like her."

"I'm sure you would, you poor darling."

"We've been through a lot, Kathie."

"Yes, on planes, in boats, in trains—in Shanghai, Moscow, and Lisbon!"

Nick closed his eyes. "I remember once in Paris—we went to the Club Monte Cristo at five in the morning—and a white Russian sat at the piano and played 'Dark Eyes,' big tears running down his face."

"Do you remember that bombing in Nanking?"

"Do I? There were no air-raid shelters there. Just terrified Chinese running every which way!"

"I lived in a hotel on the Yangtse—miles away from you—but you came over to see if I was all right."

"Yes," Nick said, "and we sat in your room and played an old phonograph you'd brought from Shanghai. All night long the planes kept bombing Nanking—and south of the city we could see the observation balloons and the red flare of the land barrage—forty thousand Japanese soldiers lost their lives that night. But Nanking fell."

"Oh, Nick, I remember!"

"Next morning you went away," he said. "You didn't even say you were going."

"Darling, I was evacuated on an American destroyer."

"I know. You left the phonograph behind."

He reached under the bed and pulled the battered old portable victrola out. Hotel and steamer labels were pasted all over it. It was a souvenir Nick had always kept from that day in China when she left without saying goodbye. He set it up on the foot of the bed. His hands were shaking worse than ever.

"You see, I kept it!"

"Nick!"

"It plays all right. I had it repaired in Berlin." He was cranking it, and his face came up. "I had to have a new spring put in it. The one that was there—"

Outside, it was getting dawn, and now there came the sound of air-raid sirens. Nick left the phonograph and went to the window. He drew back the heavy drapes. The sky was red-streaked

with the early sun, and the sirens kept shrieking. People began running toward shelters. In the distance there was a black cloud of planes. Nick turned mutely, the sirens wailing in his ears. Kathie looked up at him.

"We'd better get out," Nick shouted.

But he saw that there were tears in her eyes. "I'm not afraid."

The anti-aircraft gun on the roof started up. All over town guns began to scream. The first bomb shuddered the earth. He kept looking at her.

"Aren't you, Kathie? Aren't you afraid?"

"No," she said.

He saw the phonograph again now.

"Shall I play it?"

She nodded.

Nick crossed the room. He put on a record, spun it, and fixed the needle. He turned the volume up loud. "*St. Louis Woman*—"

Outside, the sky guns exploded; there was the whine of fighter planes; the siren wailing of stricken aircraft—

"*with a diamond ring.*"

Bombs were falling everywhere, and thunder shook the wretched windows—

"*tied to her apron string.*"

Nick looked at Kathie. They began to laugh. The bombs fell everywhere. The whole building shook. People were screaming, dying. The phonograph throbbed.

"Like Warsaw," he shouted.

"Like Madrid," she said.

"Like London, Shanghai, Helsinki!"

"The destroyers are here again, Nick!"

"Yes," he shouted, "*heil* to the Nazis!"

XIV

FROM: COMMANDER, SUB DIVS. 14, 15.
VIA: U.S.S. S-40, FLAGSHIP
TO: CINC, ATLANTIC SQUADRON
0010 OPERATION X331 CONTAINED IN
SEALED ENVELOPS B, C AND D
COMPLETED 0458 THIS DATE. ENEMY
DAMAGE BELIEVED SEVERE 0527
FROM: CINC (COMDR. IN CHIEF
ATLANTIC SQUAD
IRON PATROL FORCE)
VIA: U.S.S. WASHINGTON, FLAGSHIP

TO: COMMANDER SUB DIVS. 14, 15.

PRIORITY

0050 WELL DONE. ORDER ALL
SUBMARINE DIVISIONS IMMEDIATELY
WITHDRAW 0535

FROM: COMMANDER, SUB DIVS. 14, 15.

VIA: U.S.S. S-40, FLAGSHIP

TO: CINC, ATLANTIC SQUADRON

0010 CAN RAISE ONLY THREE SHIPS.
ORDERED THEM TO PROCEED OUT OF
AREA. AS FOR OURSELVES THE S40 IS
BEYOND REPAIR AND ON THE BOTTOM.
SHIP CAN SURVIVE THIS DEPTH ONLY
ANOTHER THIRTY MINUTES 0543

FROM: LIEUTENANT JOHN SYBIL, U.S.S.
S40

TO: VICE ADMIRAL JOHN SYRIL, CINC,
ATLANTIC

SQUADRON MSG. GOODBYE DAD. GIVE
MY REGARDS TO CORONADO.

FROM: VICE-ADMIRAL JOHN SYRIL, CINC,
ATLANTIC

SQUADRON

TO; LIEUTENANT JOHN SYBIL, U.S.S. S-40
MSG: GOODBYE SON.

FROM: COMMANDING OFFICER, U.S.S. S-
40

VIA.: DAMAGE CONTROL OFFICER

TO: CINC, ATLANTIC SQUADRON

MSG. THIS SHIP BADLY DAMAGED BY
DEPTH CHARGES. ON BOTTOM.
APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR LEFT. ENTIRE
GANG IN THIS PIGBOAT JOIN ME IN
FOLLOWING SENTIMENT: NO REGRETS
HERE

LT. SCOTT, COMMANDING

*“Calling U.S.S. Washington. . . calling flagship
Atlantic Squadron. . . come in, please. . .
Observation plane V.O., Squadron nine,
reporting. . . Observation, V.O. reporting. . . now
in the air over the scene of the submarine
engagement. There seem to be two pocket
battleships, and two cruisers missing out of the
figures approximated us by the Naval Intelligence
for the enemy main flotilla. . . The sea is littered
with debris and drowning men. . . Wait a
minute. . . there may be a third cruiser missing. . .
My observer is taking a new count. . . The enemy
fleet is at a complete halt. . . Enemy destroyers*

*are moving in and out. . . the scene is that of
complete confusion. . . American dive-bombers
are still operating viciously over this area. . . Just
below there is an S-boat submarine on the
surface. . . We’ll try and identify her. . . there are
four S-boats on the surface in all. . . The one
below us is the S-60. . . wait a minute. . . the S-60
has been rammed! The U.S.S. S-60 has been
rammed by a destroyer. . . The submarine is
sinking. . . Its crew is thrashing wildly in the
water. . . Just a minute. . . we’re flying in vicinity
enemy cruiser now. . . anti-aircraft guns are firing
past us. . . we’re cutting away but I think their
range finders have. . . (Static). . . and this is
(Static) being attacked by enemy fighter planes
(Static). . . this plane is in flames. . . we’re in
flames! Lieutenant Higgins, Observation, V.O.,
Squadron Nine, signing off. . .*

FROM: CINC, ATLANTIC SQUADRON TO
ALL SHIPS 0050 PROCEED ALL STEAM
AHEAD. ENGAGE THE ENEMY.

Jeff was cold and numb in the water. He was clinging to a rubber life-raft. The sea was littered with debris, and there were six others hanging precariously to the frail raft. It was possible that two or three of them were from disabled enemy craft which had been abandoned. But at this moment it did not matter whether they were friend or foe. They were men holding on dearly for their lives. And even now the tropic sun was scorching and rotting the very rubber to which they clung.

Jeff had no life-belt, and the water washed up over his face, and into his mouth and his ears. He swallowed and coughed. He did not know how long he had been here.

Wherever he looked there were ships. Destroyers cut past them at a desperate clip, rocking up waves that tossed the raft into a merciless gallop. Planes droned through the sky. American dive-bombers were plunging down at the enemy ships. The air was orange-red with bombs. Enemy aircraft was being catapulted off to meet the raid. They came roaring into the dense sky. But more than any other type of craft there were the trim, fleet destroyers that had all but annihilated the submarine divisions, and were even now tracking down new quarry. But what subs were left, like hunted animals, had dived to

the greatest depths their pigiron hulls would stand, and like four-legged crabs they were crawling slowly along the bottom, away from the boiling surface ocean.

Once when the raft was lifted on a swell, Jeff saw that there still remained afloat a large, dangerous fleet of battleships and cruisers. And yet, even so, he thought, there must have been damage inflicted among those dreadnaughts which stood so serenely there across the horizon. How much damage the United States might never know; but surely with such a mass of submarines participating in the action, hits had been made. The 60 alone had accounted for a pocket battleship. Jeff remembered this with a grim, weary satisfaction.

The raft receded into a canyon of water. Jeff's teeth chattered. He wondered what the enemy's plans were. The submarine action had come as a complete surprise and must have cost them dearly. If they decided to proceed into battle it would no longer be with the superior, over numbering forces they'd had when they started. The old S-type submarines had executed their mission with the grim efficiency that has become the tradition of the American navy. But for the subs, at least, it was over now. Phase "A," in the war's first naval engagement was herewith concluded. . .

A smile creased Jeff's parched lips, and he stopped thinking. It was hard to think, too hard just now. He did not remember how it was he had got here, or when he first came in contact with the raft. When the S-60 was rammed he'd been thrown clear—how many feet he did not know. He knew only that he had never seen the submarine again. And the destroyer which had hit them had limped off, as though it were dusting its hands. Jeff's shoes felt soggy, and by working his legs together he managed to push them off.

His lips were blue now, and his chattering had become worse. He looked at the other men. They were all hanging on like drenched rats. Now and then the raft tilted and Jeff went under. It happened every few minutes. Up and down his head bobbed. He didn't know how long he could remain conscious. Already he felt a swirling buzz through his brain. His fingers were bloodless with pressure on the raft. He felt wet all the way to his soul. In the glare of the sun his eyes had become red, and his vision was blurring.

The minutes passed endlessly. One of the men slipped from the raft, exhausted; the others tried to hold him up, but they were weak, and the unconscious man sank. They did not see him again. Jeff could hear sailors coughing and wheezing. He wanted to say: It's all right, we'll be fine; but he was unable to speak. The minutes kept passing. Numbness grew through Jeff. His eyelids were heavy. It was as though someone had hung pennies on them. His eyes were closing. He gasped for breath, like a fish.

He opened his eyes again. They couldn't close! He fought to keep them open. Wasn't it funny how he didn't feel anything in his fingers? He looked at them and they didn't look like fingers. They were bent over, swollen, and white, clinging to the raft. He stared at them. Probably they weren't fingers since he couldn't feel them. He couldn't feel anything. He was in the Roxy and the first part of the newsreel was coming on with planes roaring, and battleships going past. He would go to sleep and sleep through the newsreel.

His eyeballs ached, salt stung them; and he was laughing. He could not even hear his own laughter, but his mouth was moving, and he was sure he must be laughing. The others were staring at him. I will sleep and to hell with them. Now I lay me down to sleep. . . to sleep.

Why didn't the enemy pick them up? Was the enemy so busy they couldn't pick up survivors? Was there no compassion in the war, no end, no rest; was it only battle, always battle? This wasn't war, it was games. It was practice. Spring maneuvers. Men didn't die in maneuvers. These were very extensive maneuvers. Maybe in these maneuvers men would die. He was mixed up. He couldn't straighten his mind at all. The sea was green and white with froth. The sun was hot and hurt his eyes. His face was blistering.

The sea blinded him and he closed his eyes. It was better with his eyes closed. He could see everything much better this way by looking through his ears. The sounds that he heard made pictures it did not hurt his eyes to look at. His fingers seemed to be slipping. He could not feel them but he had the sensation that he was slipping down off a high wall. The wall was covered with wet, slippery moss, and he was slipping down off it. . .

Someone was slapping his face. He heard planes and ships, and somebody shouting. He heard consciousness roaring back into his mind. The shouting was in his ears: *Look! Look! Look!* Jeff's eyes burned, and the horizon was blurry. It was white and blurry. But gradually his vision seemed to clear. He was having delusions. They were crazy delusions. He thought he saw the familiar battle tops of the United States Fleet. He thought he heard 11" and 14" turret-guns screaming with flame and steel. He imagined he saw the enemy ships returning the fire, but drawing away. Destroyers seemed to be racing up and down laying a smoke screen. In Jeff's mind it was all a grotesque, confused picture of ships, and flaring guns, stacks puffing black smoke, the sunburnt sea, and the blue sky—like a huge, gaudy modern mural in the World's Fair—labeled in grim, precise letters: America at War. It seemed to be a running battle, the enemy withdrawing under a smoke screen, fighting furiously, the American ships steaming into the billows of smoke, guns belching red. Jeff, dazed, scarcely conscious, watched in horrible awe, and it seemed that, in the smoke-writhed sky, John Paul Jones stood, hands on his hips, looking down.

Then Jeff saw the destroyer bearing toward them. He watched as it became larger and larger. A seaman on deck was signaling the bridge, pointing toward the water. Still underway, a Jacob's ladder unfurled over the destroyer's side. A winch began to grind. A life-boat was being swung toward the side. The destroyer slowed up by throbbing into reverse on the engines. Painted on the side of the bow were huge white figures 125. From the ship's staff stars and stripes rippled in the breeze.

On the destroyer Jeff and the others sat huddled together, leaning against the bulkhead on the boat-deck companionway, a blanket thrown over them. The destroyer, her rescue work completed, had left the scene, and it was now listing thirty degrees to port, a sheet of spray streaming up beside the bow, tearing across the surface of the ocean, into the battle. It was a heavy destroyer, and already her deck guns, and anti-aircraft began to scream. An enemy plane swooped low over her. Jeff looked at the water under the plane. The rain that fell was machine-gun bullets. Now with a whine of her motors, the

plane pulled away. On the far horizon there was smoke, and ships, big ships, and the echoing thunder of guns. Destroyers of both sides hurled themselves at one another. Somewhere in the sky a bomber began its hideous tumble toward the sea.

It seemed to Jeff that whatever the enemy plan for attack had been, it was disrupted, and the United States was courting an engagement on its own terms. Even so, with enemy losses acknowledged, the Atlantic Squadron's tonnage did not match that of the present Axis Powers' force. But Jeff was too exhausted to give it further thought. It was up to the admirals of both sides now. Jeff felt the swaying motion of the destroyer. His skin was numb and prickled. It felt like the skin of a corpse.

A pharmacist's mate came along. Jeff and the other survivors were helped up. They were taken below decks, and forward to the crew's quarters. The space was empty of men, and the lights were on. All of the port-holes were covered with iron plates, and you could not see out. Two of the survivors were off an Italian cruiser. They spoke no English, but they grinned affably when it was explained to them in sign motion that they were to be prisoners of war. Their eyes glowed. There were no hard feelings. They were far too grateful at having been rescued to feel any emotion other than thankfulness. Jeff sat down on the edge of a bunk, shaking still from cold and exposure. The pharmacist's mate ordered him to lie down, and Jeff obeyed. The sailor had no idea from the tattered remains of Jeff's dungarees that he was an officer. Above deck, the bow gun of the destroyer opened up. Again there came the cracking staccato of anti-aircraft fire. The pharmacist's mate was very busy, and fluttered, like an old lady, trying to take care of every one. He came to Jeff.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Jeff said. He turned his eyes up. "I'd like a cigarette."

*FROM: COMMANDER OBSERVATION
PATROL TO: CINC, ATLANTIC SQUADRON*

*0010 ENEMY ENGAGED IN MANEUVER TO
DISINTEGRATE FORCES FROM PRESENT
FORMATION. THEY ARE SPLITTING UP INTO
A NUMBER OF SMALL UNITS. PURPOSE IS
TO SCATTER BATTLE OVER WIDE AREA*

THEREBY NECESSITATING US TO SEPARATE SHIPS OF OUR MAIN FORCE IF WE ARE TO CONTINUE PURSUIT. MOTIVE PRESUMED THAT CERTAIN ENEMY UNITS WILL FALL UPON SINGLIZED AMERICAN SHIPS IN OVERPOWERING FORCE ONCE THEY GET THEM AWAY FROM THE MAIN FLEET. ENEMY IS RETIRING IN DIRECTION OF OWN BASES THROUGH THIS ENTIRE ACTION 1014

FROM: CINC

TO: ALL SHIPS

VIA: SEMAPHORE CODE

OUR FORCES WILL REMAIN IN ONE BODY AND CONTINUE ACTION AGAINST LARGEST ENEMY CONTINGENT. STAND BY FOR ORDERS.

FLAGSHIP MEMO: We are now entering Phase "C" of today's battle. The decision to keep our force intact will beat the enemy at his own cat and mouse game. But the decision to do this was hard to come by, for the command forthwith enables those of the smaller enemy units (now scattering out) to escape unscathed.

Vice Admiral John Syril, CINC

FROM: DAMAGE CONTROL OFFICER, ATLANTIC SQUADRON. U.S.S. WASHINGTON
TO: CINC

VIA: INTER-SHIP COMMUNICATION

CONFIDENTIAL—SUBJECT: Preliminary Report, Estimate of damage and general effect gained by S-type submarine operation X331, as per sealed envelopes B, C, and D.

1. The purpose of this is to present a composite of all reports received this date from plane, submarine, and floating craft in our own forces. But all reports have not yet been received and the estimates herein contained are conditional, and subject to change.

2. ENEMY LOSSES: 2 pocket battleships by direct submarine torpedo hits at close range, have been sunk. 1 heavy cruiser, same. 2 light cruisers, same. 4 destroyers, same. 2 cruisers and 1 battleship believed hit, amount of damage unknown. No estimate on aircraft.

3. S-BOAT DAMAGE: 5 Submarines (S-60, S-40, S-15, S-1, S-65) known to be lost. 4 S-boats (S-14, S-29, S-3, S-2) missing and unreported. 4 S-boats damaged but made successful escape. 1 S-

boat, in navy yard for repairs, was not available for this action.

4. LOSS OF SUBMARINE PERSONNEL: Total un-known. Present figures at about 200 officers and men; but crews in ships unreported may swell this list.

Robt. Wake, Sr. Rear Admiral, United States Navy

FROM: CINC

TO: ALL SHIPS

VIA: SEMAPHORE RELAY

0050 CONTINUE ACTION AGAINST RETREATING MINOR FORCE 1530

That was at three-thirty. Now, at six, darkness came.

FROM: CINC

TO: ALL SHIPS

VIA: BLINKER LIGHT

0050 DISCONTINUE ACTION 1801

"Game called on account of darkness."

"Is that what it is?" Jeff said.

"Not exactly. All we had left to follow was a wraith and she outdistanced us. How do you feel?"

"Fine, Sir," Jeff said.

"I thought I'd come down to see you. Didn't know we rescued an officer this afternoon. Do you think you could make it to the wardroom for mess?"

"I'll try."

"Swell."

"Did we—win the battle?" Jeff asked.

"No, I don't think so. Unless you call throwing them back a victory. It was a big skirmish but the only really amazing result was that obtained by your scrappy little pigboats. The rest turned into a chase. The enemy split up and we couldn't get at them. They had some of their ships damaged and they weren't coming into a big fray if they could help it. Most naval battles turn out this way. There's not as much sinking of ships as people think."

"How do our losses stand?"

"Submarines, you mean?"

"No—other than that."

“Well, we lost two cruisers. Of course, that’s damn important. We need every ship we’ve got. This afternoon we chased down two pocket battleships and sank one. The other was the wraith that got away.”

“Did all of the remaining enemy get away?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid,” Jeff said, “if that’s the case we didn’t put much of a crimp in them—in spite of their losses.”

“No. They’ll gather their forces and come back in another offensive.”

“How soon?”

“Maybe tonight. They won’t wait long after what happened today. The Axis gives the people at home big victories to feed on instead of bread, you know.”

“Yes, but I doubt they’ll be back tonight,” Jeff said. “I *can* see it won’t be more than a day or two at the most—and there won’t be any iron net of S-boats for them to stumble into this time.”

“No, I guess not. Helluva battle, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. First battle of the war,” Jeff said.

“We lost a lot of men. If you’re all right they’ll probably need you as replacement officer on a cruiser or some other craft. I don’t think any of us’ll get much time off for repairs. Most of us’ll do what there is to do at sea.”

“I’d like to get on a cruiser,” Jeff said.

“Well, that’s probably where you’ll land. If the powder magazine gets hit the end will come much quicker than it does on a submarine.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” Jeff said.

XV

Now in the night, there was rain, and the crowd on the dock was huddled together, holding umbrellas, moving restlessly. Arc-lights shone bleakly, and in the distance the U.S.S. Relief, entirely white—except for the huge red crosses painted on her sides, and on the roof of the bridge—moved slowly toward the pier under the escort of tugs.

Kathie and Nick surged to the front line, against the ropes; they saw the waiting ambulances, and the white-clad pharmacist’s mates who stood by with stretchers. There was no noise, no cheering, no anguish even, from the

crowd: just the sound of chugging tugs vibrating through the rain, and the tearing and scraping of the huge rope fenders on the pier as the navy’s vessel of mercy edged in alongside. Lights shone brightly from all the port-holes, and sailors stood on deck against the chain life-lines.

Cots were strewn across the ship’s foc’sle. There was the strong smell of ether and medicines, and now on the ship you saw white-clad figures become suddenly very busy. The Relief was in from the scene of battle bringing the first casualty lists—printed on her own presses—and hundreds of wounded survivors from both sides. All day long the ship had followed in the wake of the destruction, her small boats picking up men, her crash ambulance boats rushing the critically wounded off damaged American ships of the line. But the Relief had not come through unscathed. Machine-gun and anti-aircraft shrapnel had splintered some of her top decks. She carried no guns of her own.

The gangway was over the side now. The crowd surged closer. Pretty young navy nurses, clad in blue capes, came off. Then, one by one, the wounded men were carried from the ship. The long line of stretcher-bearers seemed endless. Ambulance motors coughed. Each, as soon as it was loaded, drove off. It was still raining, a light, drizzly rain. The Relief listed creakingly, and the work proceeded.

At last several sailors came down the gangway with long casualty lists. They were given to the crowd. You took one and passed the others back. Eager hands tore at them. A woman screamed, and the scream choked off into sobbing. There was the murmur of voices. Kathie was staring at the list, trembling.

Aarans, A.B. Sic; Abrams, Q.Cox.; Albright, N., TMS/c; Ainsley, G.O. Lt. Cmdr.; Appasig, Wm. CMS/c—

“No,” Nick said, “the B’s.”

She was shaking terribly.

Bacon, Rbt. Ensign; Baker, G.E. S2/c; Bollinger, S. GM/c; Bamby, Pedro, Mattl/c; Barret, J. CY—

“Oh, Lord!”

“Kathie, that’s not Jeff! That Barret’s a chief yeoman. See the rating—CY?”

“Then he—*Jeff isn’t on the list!*”

“Not this list. There’ll be others coming in all night.”

“But he won’t be on any of them,” Kathie said suddenly, triumphantly.

“Of course, he won’t.”

They pushed through the crowd and found a horse and buggy cab. Kathie wept a little on the way back to Cristobal. Nick sat mute: I didn’t know she ever cried. He had a million things to do. But he couldn’t leave her for a while. He thought of *Herr Stohl*. Stohl would be looking for him. He thought of Craig—Craig wanted him at the military trials; then there were more arrests to make. But for an hour at least he would stay with Kathie. Until she got control of herself. He had never seen her go to pieces like this. She leaned on his shoulder, and he wanted to comfort her, but he didn’t know how. He was suddenly a little bitter. His heart hurt, and he was sick of being always and forever the noble friend.

“You’ve been so kind, Nick.”

“Sure, pappy Nick. Good old dog.”

“Don’t say that!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I do love you, Nick. Perhaps not in the way I love Jeff. But—it’s love all the same. I don’t think I could ever do without you!”

“We’re talking nonsense,” he said. He cleared his throat. “You want to file that article you wrote?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’d better go to the cable office.”

“Yes, I think we should.”

They rode in silence.

“The war’s really started,” he said. “The Axis Powers are making a bid for quick victory.”

“They won’t get it, will they?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said truthfully. “In a war sometimes it’s luck more than valiance; strategy more than courage. The Nazis have experience on their side.”

“And we have God on ours.”

“Put that in an article,” he said. “It’ll sound fine in print.”

The cable office was small and airless; heavy black drapes covered the windows, and inside the lights were very strong. Kathie went into one of the sending rooms and Nick walked anxiously up and down. He could hear the patter of rain on the roof, and now a glass-enclosed teletype began to

tick. An automatic writer typewrote words across a long roll of yellow paper. Nick stood and watched it, fascinated:

By UP.—Panama City, C.Z. The Panama Canal was tonight closed to all shipping, holding up vessels in both the Pacific and the Atlantic, and it was unofficially rumored here that two of the Canal locks have been badly damaged by sabotage. . .

By INS—Cristobal, C.Z. It has been reliably reported that the U.S. Atlantic Squadron routed an attacking enemy fleet in a day-long battle which commenced before dawn. [The machine ticked rapidly.] U.S. S-type submarines in an initial offensive took heavy toll on the surprised enemy ships, but it is estimated that no more than six out of the thirteen submarines in the engagement survived the encounter. . .

By AP—Colon, C.Z. The Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Atlantic Squadron has just announced that an enemy fleet has been successfully routed. . . Berlin, Germany, via Trans-Radio: it was announced here tonight that certain small Axis Powers naval forces had clashed with the main United States Fleet. The admitted losses of the German High Command through this action is listed at 3 destroyers, while 9 American submarines were said to have been destroyed in what was described as a suicide attack. In action later in the day two American cruisers were sunk, and one German Pocket battleship badly damaged. It was officially explained in Berlin that today’s offensive was merely a trial test of naval power, and not intended as decisive action. . .

“Oh my God!” Nick said.

Bulletin [the machine ticked]: Honolulu, Hawaii. . . Fragmentary reports have reached Honolulu that the U.S. Pacific Fleet met the main Japanese fleet early today somewhere in the vicinity of Guam. A fierce battle is said to be waging over a sea area of nearly thirty miles. . .

“It was arranged they’d both strike the same day,” Nick thought. “Only on this side the Axis war wagon hasn’t done so well yet. . .”

He was beginning to sense gradually the importance of today’s Axis thrust in the Atlantic.

They had been temporarily thrown back, but to keep face they would have to attack again almost momentarily.

INS. Tokyo, Japan. Tokyo underwent it's second air raid today. Planes flew high over the city bombing military objectives. . .

Tokyo, Japan. . . Manila has fallen into the hands of the Japanese. Japanese troops and marines marched into the city today ending a three-day siege. But raging fires have reduced more than half of the city to ruins and most of the native populace have fled into the jungle. In the battle for Manila the Japanese used both strafing planes and tanks. . .

Kathie came out of the other room. She and Nick left the cable office together.

The sign in green letters said: Cafe Madrid. It was a shabby little place but Nick liked it. He and Kathie sat at the bar, and he watched her in the soapy mirror. Her face was strained. She was worried about Jeff—and about the whole damn war, he imagined—and some of the old laughter had gone out of her eyes. Her nails were very red, and there was a cigarette between her fingers.

Behind them were the swinging doors, and the pattering rain. The room was blue with smoke, and people sat listlessly at tables. Portuguese and Brazilians; Panamanians and Americans. Some wore rain-coats thrown back over their shoulders. Glasses of port, claret, or burgundy sat in front of them—untouched. Now the bartender glanced at a clock, and switched on the radio. Someone asked him to turn it up loud, and a hush fell over the room.

The radio voice said: “—the famous commentator who will now analyze today's news of the war. . .”

A new voice came on, grave, tired. It was the hoarse, ominous voice of a man who has not slept for a very long time. . . .

The commentator sat in the glass-enclosed broadcasting room in the New York studio. His hair was rumpled, and he needed a shave. There was on the table in front of him a cup of lukewarm coffee, a half-burned cigarette, and his notes, prepared only at the last moment. He leaned toward the microphone. He was aware that what he said tonight would be heard throughout

the United States, Canada, Panama, Honolulu, and Alaska; it would be picked up by short wave and transmitted to Europe and Asia. For he was a man more respected for his opinion than any other.

He was at all times frank, no matter whom he hurt; and even though he made enemies in his own country, which accused him of defeatism. But he was an old man and he had long ago ceased to care what was said about him. His reputation, the key to all of his success, was based on a very simple tradition—truth. He stated facts, the summary of his opinion, and stoutly refused to dramatize. Because of that, tonight the whole world was listening for him—and he was very weary, his eyes burned. He put on glasses, and his hands fumbled with the papers. But in the end he did not use the papers. He just looked at the microphone.

“Hello everybody,” he said. “Three days ago we declared war. Today the war started. A blitzkrieg—more dynamic, more powerful than any that struck Europe—has been launched against America. No matter where you are, if you listen, you will hear the echo of its thunder. It is on now. It is begun. We are through with theory. The last speeches have been made. America is at war against the world.

“You have listened to the bulletins as they came in all day long, each worse than the last. Each more eloquent than anything I can possibly say. Eight of our submarines are sunk. Two of our light cruisers have been destroyed. Japanese troops, tanks, and planes are advancing from the North. Japan has also struck a crushing blow in the Pacific and Manila has fallen.

“This is an hour of crisis. The outcome of these battles—now in progress—may decide the fate of our country. Even if we should win these battles it would not mean that victory was at hand. Only that we had stood off the first attack. Victory is come by through offensive maneuvers. We are engaged in defense.

“In the Pacific our fleet has engaged a Japanese force twice its number. As yet there have been no announcements from either side. The battle may continue for days—for it is a fight until the finish. It must necessarily be so—for if the United States should lose in the Pacific, it might mean the annihilation of our fleet there.

“If this catastrophe should occur, the Hawaiian Islands would fall into Japanese hands; and the coast of California would be vulnerable to attack. The question would then rest with the home-guard forces on the Pacific Coast. But the inevitability of Japanese invasion would be established. San Francisco and Long Beach—with no navy to defend them—would be laid in ruins such as—or worse than—that which has taken place in Manila.

“But, I repeat, this can be a Japanese possibility only if our Pacific fleet suffers a terrible defeat. Military experts do not believe that such a defeat is possible—any more than they believed that France could be defeated. The real answer lies tonight out there in the Pacific in the fighting hearts of young Americans aboard battleships, cruisers, and submarines. I have painted a rather horrible picture because I want you to know how important that battle is. It is time that we all faced reality.

“In Seattle there have been new air raids, but the damage is small. However, Japanese land forces are reported moving down the coast from Alaska toward United States territory. Several divisions of Americans have been dispatched to intercept them. Whether or not Japan successfully invades the Northwest of the United States depends on these American troops . . . to whose number it has been reported tonight there have been added four battalions of seasoned, fighting marines.

“On the East Coast, New York City, Newark, and Philadelphia have experienced their first air raids. The Brooklyn Navy Yard was bombed. . . several East-side tenements; but the Brooklyn Bridge—which was one of the main objectives—was unscathed. Fires blazed along the row of fish markets on the New York waterfront.

“In the Canal Zone, on the Atlantic side, we have reports of a large-scale naval engagement which—mind you—despite the figures given in the report of losses, is heartening. A suicide fleet of small overage submarines has won for America her first victory. . .

“But a renewed Axis Powers naval offensive is expected within a day or two—and like the battle in the Pacific, this may be the crucial test of our defensive strength. For, let it be thoroughly understood before the enemy can move with a

destructive power against America it must first destroy its navies.

“For that one reason alone you have seen the various phases of action which commenced today. The history of not only the United States, but of the entire world, hinges on these first battles at sea.

“The ferocious Nazi lightning in the night has struck. . . and at this hour we can only wait for word of the outcome.”

When the broadcast was over the bartender turned off the radio, and Nick and Kathie sat very quiet. A Negro, who had been sweeping, wiped his face. The people at the tables sipped wine. Nick drank a whisky. He didn't trust himself to speak just yet. Gradually, people resumed conversation.

“We'd better go if you want to beat the curfew,” Nick said at last.

“All right.”

Under the canopy in front of her hotel he faced her. She was small, and she looked up at him, smiling. Just the touch of her arm made him tremble. The street was dark and blowsy with wind, and there were leaves blowing.

“Kath—”

“Yes?”

“Don't worry about Jeff. He'll be all right.”

“I hope so!”

“He'll be swell,” Nick said. “And Kath—”

She watched him, and rain pattered on the canopy.

“When the first break of the war comes,” he said, “if it ever does; when the pressure's off, and Craig doesn't need me any more—I'm going away.”

“Going—where?”

“I don't know—away. I'm sick of war. I'll do my part in Washington, D.C. or somewhere. I'm swell on codes—but I'm going to live. I'll have my own apartment—and books, and furniture—a white leather couch, I won't be leaving things behind—I'll even have a room where I can write—just like a real author—not a tramp hanging onto the fringes of war. And Kath—”

“Yes?”

“I'm never going to see you again.”

“What did you say, Nick?”

"I'm going to forget you ever lived. I'm going to have a dog, and smoke a pipe; and wear my pajamas all day if I want to. I'm going to have Venetian blinds; and I'll belong to literary circles. I'm going to do that if the war ever lets up."

She thought he was joking and her smile mocked him, "George, can I 'tend the rabbits?"

"Okay, Kath. You can laugh. I guess it's pretty funny, isn't it? . . . Good night."

"Nick!"

He moved off down the street, his slicker wet in the rain.

XVI

THE battleship was at anchor off a small island with other contingents of the Atlantic Patrol, and at four the next afternoon the ship's bell sounded eight times. But the busy crew paid no attention. Four o'clock was not knocking off time today. The sailors were at work on the shrapnel scarred deck, on the guns, and on stages, and floats over the side. In the cloudless blue sky a lone plane could have been seen on patrol; and aboard the other ships, anchored a safe distance apart, the same tireless repair work was being accomplished. But it was no comfort to realize that the enemy fleet, lying off somewhere miles from here, was engaged in the same enterprise. Both sides were licking their wounds.

On the battleship, early this morning, military funeral had been given the dead; and the crew had stood at quarters in dress blue uniforms, while the chaplain read services; and then a bugle, sounding fore and aft, softly played taps.

This afternoon, however, it was all work. Jeff had seen that when he came aboard. He had been transferred here, instead of to a cruiser, and he had arrived by motor-launch from the destroyer. He at once looked the big ship over critically. This was his new packet.

It was a modernized battle-wagon, perhaps twenty-two years old, in the Idaho class; her old cage masts had been replaced with a tripod, her armor plates thickened, and her whole gunnery system reinstalled to enable her to use pointer-fire. But the ship was still an old lady. The former speed had been twenty-one knots: under heavy steam she was now supposed to do twenty-nine.

In modern warfare that is not very fast, and the American admiralty was only too conscious of the fact.

The ship had not been so badly damaged as some of the others and the first lieutenant estimated that by nightfall, though not completely repaired, she would be in fair enough condition.

Jeff had learned these things when he checked in at the officers' gangway and signed his name in the log. He was given temporary papers, and the officer-of-the-deck, a long glass tucked under his arm, had been chatty. He asked Jeff all about the experiences of the S-60 and did not conceal the fact that he regarded Jeff as somewhat of a hero.

"We didn't get much in the thick of it yesterday," he explained modestly. "Though I suppose it was bad enough. But damn it all, I wish they'd give us a chance to show what we can do. This ship has the best-drilled gun crews in the Atlantic. Did you see the gunnery 'E' on the stack? It has a white hash mark under it. Efficiency? We've got it!"

The paymaster issued Jeff a chit and he went below decks, passed the radio rooms and the sail locker to the small stores, to get clothes. But there were no officers' uniforms in stock and he was glad to settle for several pair of dungarees, shoes, an enlisted man's pea-jacket, and a rain-coat. In the wardroom a lieutenant loaned him one of his hats, and this was Jeff's only visible badge of office.

He'd eaten a hearty mess in the vast room that was the junior officers' dining-hall, but he could not accustom himself to such space: the shiny red-waxed decks, the polished bright work; half a dozen white-clad Filipino mess attendants at your elbow with elegant silver cream and sugar sets, coffee-pots and trays. In comparison with the dirty, cramped quarters of the submarine—where in some places the overhead was so low you had to stoop when you passed—it was as though he had come from a squalid little shanty into a huge, ornate mansion. He could not help but feel that he didn't belong here, and he was vaguely discontented.

In the presence of the other officers who wore immaculate white tropic uniforms, his stiff new dungarees made him self-conscious. Dungarees are never right until they have been washed several times, and faded a little. He felt awkward,

gawky. He was out of place. He was a bum from the submarines, and for all their foul air, and the pounding of their Diesels, he wished he was back. He finished eating and dawdled over his coffee. He was all alone at the table. He missed his shipmates. Today he had not seen one familiar face.

A mess attendant approached. "The gunnery officer has desire to speak with you, Sir."

"Very well."

Jeff reported to the officer's room and was admitted. A large, gray-haired man swung around in his chair. He was a lieutenant-commander, and the door-plate had listed his name as Bell. He looked Jeff over, his manner a little unpleasant at first.

"They give you a room yet?"

"No, Sir."

"Those clothes don't fit very well, do they?"

"It was the best I could do. Commander. I lost my uniforms."

Bell wanned. "I know. Helluva sweet fight you men put up. It may turn out that you've done more damage than is now known—damage that will weigh heavily for us in action that's yet to come."

"I hope so."

"Here, cheer up, Barret! Thinking about your ship, aren't you?"

"The thought did cross my mind, Sir."

"She was a gallant little sub; you should be glad she struck such a telling blow. I think it was you and the S-15 that caught a German pocket battleship in cross torpedo fire and sank her, wasn't it?"

Jeff was silent. Where in the hell did the S-15 come in? But he didn't bother to ask.

Bell was looking at a paper on his desk. "They'll assign you a room presently. What I called you in here for was about a gun station. Frankly, we've been ordered to keep up steam in the boilers and we may move at any time. I'm making certain replacements in the firing batteries and I want to be able to report the ship ready for action." He paused. "Have you ever worked in a turret?"

"I served a year in them before I went to the submarines," Jeff said.

"Good. That's fine. I want you to go up into the pits of number three and familiarize yourself with the working order of mechanism there.

Lieutenant Anderson is the normal turret officer but last night after we'd secured the after turrets the damn fool came out on deck through the trap-door hatch and was wounded by anti-aircraft shrapnel. He'd supposed all action had been discontinued. He's up and around today—but with bandages on his head and one arm." Bell made a wry face. "Looks like he's been to the wars."

"I'm to take his place?"

"Not exactly. He's still on doc's binnacle list but he says he wants to report for duty if there's any action. I'm going to let him—but the man's sicker than he pretends and I think it's just as well if we have someone work with him. Then if anything should happen we'd have an on-the-spot replacement."

Jeff nodded.

"Mr. Anderson's in number three right now. If you want to take a run up there he'll show you around."

Jeff started for the door,

"One other thing."

"Yes, Sir?"

"Do you know anything about direct pointer fire?"

"I've had some experience," Jeff said.

"We may have to use that. Our pointer-control system was impaired yesterday. We've managed to get it fixed up—but I want to be prepared against another breakdown."

"It won't make much difference if we're at close range," Jeff said.

"No—but there's no telling what range we'll be."

At seven-thirty, the port-holes closed, the ship darkened, Jeff sat alone in the small cabin he had been assigned. In the submarine navy you do not know such isolation—this would be a whole wardroom—but he felt queerly desolate. For two hours he and Lieutenant Anderson had drilled the turret crew at pointer-fire; and at last Jeff had come below. He felt grimy, and dirty, and after supper he had come to his room. The anchored ship listed gently. He did not know what plans had been made—and to him it didn't really matter. He imagined the ship would stay here all night—wait until the enemy was seen steaming out for a new attack.

His life-boat, fire, and collision stations had been left up in the air; he had no division or deck

duty. His sole existence on this ship was for gunnery. He was a stranger in a new world. Over his head there was no longer the clanking of bits and davits, the hammers of the carpenters. The ship was serenely quiet. In peace time there would be movies on the quarterdeck at this hour, and sailors noisily ad libbing to Hedy LaMarr. Now there was only the pall of silence.

The state-room was bare and empty, and in the darkness he reached for something he had saved through all the mess—a fragment of gossamer as soft as moonbeams. Kathie’s handkerchief. She didn’t know that he’d stolen it from her. Maybe it’d been silly of him. He didn’t care. He rubbed it together in his hands. He touched it against his dry lips. Then—his cheeks stinging—he put it back in his pocket.

He could not remain here so still, so alone, in the darkness; in war it wasn’t right you should ever have time to think. Sometimes a soldier would rather die in battle than stagnate from inactivity! He rose and went to the door. He moved down the wide corridor in the officers’ wardroom compartments. Dim blue lights shone obliquely from white iron stanchions. Well-placed vents blew cool air into his face.

He left the wardroom country and entered the fireman’s deck, swinging past the empty laundry and steam-rooms, walking through the hot, square space that was the bull ring—small doors leading off it down into the engine rooms. In the corridor he passed the executive and communications offices—the sound of yeomen’s voices coming quietly through the open doors—and climbed the polished red steps of the ladder to the main deck.

He came up in the marine and band compartments, and walked past the post-office, and the scullery—huge tureens, pots and pans, shining through the darkness. At the scuttlebutt he stopped for a drink of water. Men’s voices buzzed everywhere and in the pale blue of the stanchion lights he saw shadowy figures peeling out of jumpers, kicking off shoes. Iron bunks were down, lockers were open, and hammocks swung here and there.

He went into the next compartment, past the canteen which was closed. A boatswain’s pipe sounded like a ghost voice through the loud-speaker system—but Jeff was climbing another

ladder to topside and did not hear whatever routine order it was that was being passed.

On the bleached white deck of the foc’s’le he stood against the life-lines. Behind him the fourteen-inch barrels of turrets one and two stood ominously silent. To his left, along the whole side of the ship, were the five-inch batteries. One deck above, on the boat deck, were the three- and five-inch anti-aircraft guns. Yet the ship was as quiet as a grave and the dark, glossy sea was without a ripple.

Jeff watched the water, and suddenly, once more, he knew a nostalgia for the submarine. It was just another wrecked pigboat now, on the bottom. But it’d been his ship. He’d lived with it, been part of it. Perhaps he belonged with Captain Knight and Mr. Morris:

“You have your job to do,” Captain Knight said, “and you cannot but execute it as well as you know how.”

“Answer to a sailor’s prayer!” Mr. Morris said. “I’ll match you to see who speaks to her.”

“This is the day they give babies away,” Captain Knight said.

Jeff shook his head. He stood very quietly.

In a few minutes he was conscious of voices on deck, but he did not turn. Then he heard the sudden rumbling of the wildcats. The huge spools were grinding, and the anchor chains began to clatter up over their metal runways. Sailors, wearing boots, stood forward and ran a hose through the hawsers. Jeff glanced up at the bridge. It was dark, of course; but he saw black smoke billowing from the stack. The boatswain’s pipe echoed faintly through the speaker system on the lower deck. The sea-watch was being posted.

Jeff glanced across the water. One battleship was already moving—a dark shadow, passing in the night. He quickly realized that part of the fleet at least was getting underway: very quietly.

Now the wildcats stopped grinding. Jeff glanced over the side. Water was gliding past the gray armor belt. It bubbled and flecked white. The water kept going faster, and faster. A breeze swept along the foc’s’le. They were underway!

Jeff’s spirit suddenly soared. There was some intangible thrill that he could not describe about the feel of a moving ship. Sailors were going past.

Jeff clattered down the ladders, went below to the wardroom. He ran into Lieutenant Anderson in the corridor.

"Where we going?"

"Part of the enemy fleet's been sighted," Anderson said. "Five of their cruisers—they must have been badly damaged. They've pulled into a natural harbor down the coast for repairs. We've spotted the men working over the side with acetylene torches."

"Where's the main force?"

"We don't know. Probably miles away getting ready for another attack."

"And we're going after the cruisers?"

"Yes—one division consisting of three modernized battleships. This ship and two others."

"We're going into the harbor after them?"

"Yes—catch them unprepared. If it works we may have them on the bottom before they can get up steam. They had an idea they were pretty well hidden and they mistook the plane that spotted them for one of their own on patrol—so they don't know we're coming!"

Jeff's blood raced.

"We'll be there before dawn," Mr. Anderson said. "The ship goes into battle condition two, at midnight."

XVII

THE room was walled with white 'dobe, dirty and stained, and cracked in three places. Because it was closer than the Mission Street headquarters, Craig used it during the long hours of military trials as a temporary office. The floor was cold, clay earth, and the desk at which Craig sat, scarred. The windows were grilled, in Spanish style, with carved wooden bars, and through these Nick could see the heavy white arc-lights shining down in the cobblestone courtyard.

The yard had formerly been part of a stable, and the smell of wet manure was sharp and pungent. Nick ran his toe across a cigarette, and sipped at a cup of coffee. Beyond the courtyard he could hear the clanking of cell doors, and the soft chant of the priest. There was the padding of footsteps, and the harsh click of locks. After that

there was only silence, and now in the few remaining minutes before midnight the voice of the priest was quite clear.

"This is really big," Craig was saying, "frankly—"

"What about those lights?" Nick interrupted. "I thought the town was blacked out?"

"We'll turn them off soon enough if there's a raid. But what's the difference—with thirty fires blazing like torches all over the city!"

Nick lit another cigarette and glanced toward the empty courtyard.

"I needn't remind you," Craig said, "that *Herr* Stohl intends to kill you the first chance he has. So you might pay some attention to me. It was Stohl's engineering that was directly responsible for sabotage committed on two of the locks in the Canal. And unless he's stopped there'll be more."

Nick nodded.

"Mind you; the Canal isn't damaged by bombs. Our planes fight them off. It puts the Intelligence in a damn ridiculous position, therefore, that there should be inside dirty work."

"Yes, naturally," Nick said.

"This *Herr* Stohl is *quite* an organizer," Craig went on. "We've broken down one of his agents—I won't mention what methods we used—and he talked plenty. I've got the information I need—and now what I'm going to do is prepare a trap for Stohl. It'll be set for a time when he has a meeting of his agents. It'll take waiting—and finesse. But I'm willing to wait, because it'll be the biggest coup of all. It'll ease the pressure here, and if it's successful—"

The soldiers marched into the courtyard now, and their hob-nailed shoes echoed loudly. Nick could see the faces of the soldiers, and they were all young men. They had been routed from their beds and they looked sleepy. They carried rifles on their shoulders, but the bayonets had been removed. A young lieutenant brought them to squad front—their backs to Nick—and commanded them to halt. They halted too quickly, and in getting the guns from their shoulders they were quite clumsy. A cool breeze had come up in the courtyard, and the soldiers stood at ease, waiting. They did not talk. One or two lifted their hands to their mouths as they yawned.

"—it may very well be that I can cut down on my Intelligence force here." Craig paused. "I've

enlisted every eligible man I could find, and I've a good many. But there's no point in having the government pay them salaries if there isn't enough work to go around."

"Of course not."

"For instance, I could afford to release you—and let you join the air force. They have a desperate need for good pilots, and—"

"Wait a minute," Nick said, "I'm not going to join the air force. Thanks, anyway."

"But why not?"

"I'm just not having any," Nick said. "I'm past draft age, and I'll be damned if I'm going to volunteer!"

"Well, I didn't know you felt—"

"You didn't know what?" Nick said. He was rattled. "I'll do whatever job you want—but I've been in wars for twenty years and I'm all of a sudden sick of blood and men dying and the stink of corpses. I'm getting senile, Craig. All of a sudden I want laughter and music. I want to sleep in the sun. Starvation, the smell of burning flesh, little children with their arms torn off—you can have it! I'll fight my next war in a parlor!"

"And you—you're the author of—"

"Blood of the Patriot—that's right; make something of it!"

"To hell with you," Craig said. "If you wanted to go into the air force I could get you a commission, and—I thought I was doing you a favor. But to hell with you!"

"You can keep your favors," Nick said.

"I will. I'll keep them for somebody who isn't yellow."

"You do that," Nick said. "You keep your favors for the brave ones."

"I'm sorry," Craig said. "I didn't mean that. You aren't yellow. Hell, I ought to know! You've shown more guts than me. I know how sick and fed up a man can get. I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"I said I was sorry!"

"All right, forget it!"

"You help me get *Herr Stohl*," Craig said, "and you'll be doing more than you could accomplish in six months of flying."

"Sure," Nick said.

They were bringing the prisoners out now. There were seven of them and they walked in single file formation under the glaring lights. The

belts had been removed from their trousers, and they were coatless, wearing open shirts. Their faces were white, and lined, and one of them was bald. One had gray hair which was tousled. The hair of all the others was dark, but not greasy. All of them needed a shave. Marine guards with side arms kept them in line, and the priest, in his swishing black robes, walked along with them reading sonorously from the Bible. The prisoners were lined up opposite the soldiers, and Nick could see their faces very clearly in the bright, hot arc-lights which shone directly on them. Behind the prisoners there was a high 'dobe wall with broken red pagoda tile on the top of it. Growing up the side of the wall there was shiny green ivy, and clusters of golden lichen.

"I could possibly find Stohl tonight," Craig said, "but that isn't the idea. By waiting forty-eight hours I can get him in a position to make a coup—which will result in not only his arrest, but a number of others."

The wrists of the prisoners were tied behind them, and there was some delay in the courtyard while black blindfolds were tied over their eyes. The bald-headed prisoner wanted a cigarette, and the man next to him asked for one, also. Cigarettes were put between their lips and lit, but it was difficult for them to smoke without using their hands. Standing there against the wall, the prisoners looked very harmless, and Nick recognized out of the seven two that he had helped arrest.

"Tomorrow the plans for the coup will be complete and we can go over them together. But everything—remember this—depends on waiting out the forty-eight hours. Between now and then there will be false, seeming leads. These will be traps. Stohl is aware that we're making preparations to close in on him and he's bound to counter with some desperate plan to get us first. Are you listening?"

"Yes—certainly."

"I said that Stohl is going to try and make a trap for us. But no matter what happens we're going to wait out the forty-eight hours. Do you know why?"

"Why?" said Nick.

"Because, you dolt, we don't want to play into *his* hands—it'd be almost certain death!"

The first row of soldiers kneeled, and those behind stood. They had the rifles against their shoulders. The prisoners stood very still. The young lieutenant said: "*Ready—*" One of the prisoners, a boy of twenty, collapsed, and he had to be propped up against the wall in a sitting position. The lieutenant again said: "*Ready—*" and now "*aim—*"

The gray-haired man began to say the Rosary in soft, fluent Italian, and the tall, lithe prisoner next to him, enraged, bared his teeth and shouted: "Heil Hi—"

"*Fire!*"

They fell in various ways and one, who was not dead, sat against the wall, his eyes half-lidded, his face like clay, vomiting blood. The lieutenant walked over and put an automatic against his temple and fired. When the man toppled over sideways, still choking up blood, the lieutenant, unnecessarily, fired again. The shot echoed dully from the 'dobe walls. A doctor came out from the row of cell blocks and began to examine the corpses. The arc-lights were still very bright and the boy who had fainted, and was propped up, had a big hole in his face. The priest made a sign of the Cross. It was three minutes past twelve.

"So if we wait, we'll have Stohl," Craig said, then: "I guess that's all."

"Yes, I guess so," said Nick.

Kathie Winters kept a big loose-leaf scrap-book. There were a series of them, really, one for each year, and in these she diligently pasted the clipped pages from her magazine articles. Since she was a staff writer on a national weekly the books were very fat. Fully clothed now, wearing the mustard skirt that Nick liked, she sat on the bed perusing one of the old scrap-books.

A few of her articles had been given a gala color lay-out, some were in black and white, and there were others, less fortunate, which had been shunted to the back pages of the magazine. In some issues her name had been put on the cover.

Now, for a moment, she studied the blue two-tone facade that had been lavished upon the article "Christmas in Madrid." The copy started in narrative form—with the human characterization of a ragged little urchin in a shell-torn city. It was Christmas Eve, and the child was standing before the candle-lighted altar of a bombed church.

But this was not the thing that Kathie remembered of that Christmas. It was the softly falling snow, and the red wine, and the distant thunder of guns; it was of a greasy little cafe where she'd stood under mistletoe and Nick had kissed her, the first and only time he had ever kissed her. She remembered the way his face had looked, frost-bitten, the furs she wore, and how he tilted her chin with his fist and said "I love you, baby!"

If that night he had said "Marry me, Kath," she would have married him. For she loved Nick then—wildly and desperately. But he had never said "Marry me, Kath," he didn't believe much in marriage, and she had run away—she'd fled in the night with her heart, just a scared sissy. He'd caught up with her in Barcelona, and she had put on a big face and laughed at him. She'd been cool when he found her in Paris; and in London she kept her distance. She ceased loving him then—or she imagined that she did—and in Warsaw and in China she was very sure of herself and her emotions. But she remembered one cold night in Helsinki, sitting in her room crying, because she had seen Nick's picture on the back jacket of one of his books that had been translated into Finnish.

He was a hard, callous sort; she knew that women made fools of themselves over him. Yet he was tender. It was simply the brutal, restless, vagabond life he lived that she could not stand.

She had steeled herself against him—and when Jeff Barret came along all of her pent-up emotion broke. She permitted herself to fall madly in love! It was time she married. The way she and Jeff had clicked, the infatuation they had both known, was enough.

And she loved Jeff still. That was the crazy, ironic part of it. She ached to feel his arms around her. And yet—wasn't Nick's companionship perhaps more important even than love? He understood her. The years had mellowed their friendship. And now, at last, Nick said he was going to settle down. If they were married she could learn to love him again. The thought that she would ever really, completely lose him made an awful void in her.

She was sick and confused. She knew that with Nick she would always be happy; while Jeff, whom she really loved, was her own age, and she would make him a fine wife. It would perhaps be

Jeff. That was the only right way. And yet a sudden terrible compassion for Nick—“*Good old dog!*”—frightened her. Selfishly, she wanted to cling to him. It seemed that there had always been Nick.

Wretched in her torment, one by one she turned the pages of the scrap-book. Old memories—all of them. A montage of yesterdays with Nick. But now, suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

She looked up. “Who is it?”

“It’s Tony, Ma’am, the bell-boy. I have a message for you.”

She went to the door and opened it. The uniformed boy stood in the hall, his face grave.

“Mr. Nick Waters is downstairs—at the back entrance of the hotel—wounded. He asked to see you.”

“Nick—wounded! Why didn’t he come up?”

“He can’t. It’s—very bad.”

“I’ll be right down,” Kathie said. She grabbed up her hat.

Herr Stohl sat in the back seat of the sedan parked in the alley behind the hotel. Two of his agents waited at the back door, ready to grab Kathrine Winters. *Herr Stohl* turned calmly to one of them in the car.

“Of course, she’ll come down! Then we’ll hold her as hostage—let Mr. Waters know she’s alive.”

“Even so, *Herr Stohl*, the plan is rather obvious. His chief will recognize it as a trap and refuse to let him come after her.”

“I know that!” *Stohl* replied irritably. “But I believe I know Americans better than you—they are damn fools about women, and Nick Waters will come after her whether he has orders to the contrary or not.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“I know I am! We’ll leave a trail big enough for him to follow.”

“And when he comes to the end of it?”

“Death,” *Herr Stohl* said eloquently.

Even as he spoke Kathie came out through the back door of the hotel.

XVIII

THE sky was storm-soiled with thick black clouds and the night was very intense. The three

American battleships crept across the black belly of the ocean. On the success of their mission might depend the defense of the Atlantic Coast. Three gray dreadnaughts moved across the sea, packages of death in their powder-rooms. There were no lights on any of the ships, only the tiny phosphorus twinkling on the bow staffs to guide the navigator—a firefly leading a monster. Jeff was restless, excited. He was conscious that his fingers kept working in and out. He came up to the quarterdeck and sat alone in the dark, waiting.

At ten o’clock, as though they had burst from the black tissue of a shroud, came the destroyers. For a moment Jeff’s heart fluttered, then he realized they were convoy. He could count four of them. The moon was splitting open the sky with a path of ivory, and the destroyers, zig-zagging, sounding for submarines, laid a screen, making new, artificial clouds to hide the big ships: narrowing their possible visibility to other craft down to only a few hundred yards.

To Jeff the slim, fast destroyers looked beautiful in the night, and he reflected the irony that, in a reverse situation, destroyers could be so ugly. There was something about them symbolic of war, for on a submarine they were your nemesis. They were the nightmare ships of the sea—your deadliest enemy. And yet now they seemed very like protecting angels. Theirs was the ability to fire deck guns, discharge depth bombs, lay mines, put down a smoke screen and shoot torpedoes.

Jeff sat on a bit, his feet in the scupper, elbows leaning on the life-lines, watching them, fascinated by their shadowy movements; a cool breeze blew through his dungarees, and he could forget for a while that in a few hours they were going into action.

Then at twelve o’clock the loud-speaker system throughout the ship came on, calling out the aviation division. Jeff went aft to where the three trim navy Voughts were secured, canvas fittings over them. Sailors came swiftly to topside. One of the Voughts was uncovered, wheeled on its cradle over to the long, iron tracks of the catapult, and hoisted aboard. The plane sat with dignity on the catapult, and the greased tracks were turned into the wind.

A mechanic climbed up into the cockpit and started the motor. It set up a roar. There were men

everywhere on deck now, and a chief boatswain's mate arranged the catapult gun. The mechanic climbed down out of the plane and a young officer, wearing a leather jacket and a scarf, a big Mickey Mouse painted on his back, climbed up into the ship. He signed the release book, and idled the motor for a moment. Jeff saw that there was only one ship going off.

The catapult was set and ready. The pilot braced himself, his motor picking r.p.m.'s. In the background a sailor stood clear of turret three, holding up a red flag; in his other hand he held a green flag which was down. He watched the bridge for the tiny, almost invisible signal that would be given when the wind was right.

Time stood still. All eyes were on the obscure seaman who held the flags. Suddenly his arms changed. The green flag came up. With a roar, the plane was catapulted across the iron track. In less than a second it had reached a momentum of seventy-five miles an hour. The Vought swerved off the end of the catapult, dipped once, then began to climb. It droned into the sky.

The aviation division was secured, and the men disappeared below deck.

Each battleship had sent up one Vought, V.O. They were observation planes. In time of action they spotted the salvos and radioed how far over or short of the mark they were falling; or, if they were hits, the direction, and estimated damage. But tonight their duty was patrol. Flying at a low ceiling they would circle around, hovering over the battleships, their smoke tanks laying a screen against enemy planes flying at a higher altitude. The destroyer screens were to cut off the visibility of surface craft.

If an enemy plane should swoop low over the ships, spotting them, the Voughts would go into immediate fighter action, to eliminate the enemy before he could radio the position of the Americans back to the Axis Powers' base.

The maneuver hinged upon the utmost secrecy—a surprise attack on the cruisers, and it was urgent that the battleships, like phantoms, sail in a cloak of invisibility until the destination was reached.

Jeff returned to the quarter, and climbed the long, steep ladder up to the boat deck. He passed sailors on look-out watch, and walking past the life-boat stations he came to the huge funnel of

the ship. Huddled in a circle around the base of it, sopping up warmth, were the men of the emergency life-boat watch. They wore clumsy life preservers, and they were half asleep.

Jeff climbed another ladder, past the conning tower—a blunt fortress of steel eighteen inches thick, eye-slits carved out of its gray facade, and moved up a short ladder to the signal deck. There were bags of pennant hoists here, and he saw the starboard range-finder, covered with canvas.

Jeff reached the bridge. It was very dark, and no one paid any attention to him. A sailor stood close by, wearing earphones. The captain was at the bridge window, his eyes following the dim outline of the ship only five hundred yards ahead in the formation. The officer-of-the-deck walked up and down; and a seaman stood fast on the short iron steering lever. There was another man posted at the enunciators, his hands on the polished brass gear. A quartermaster studied the compass. While Jeff stood there the navigator, a tall, thin commander, came in and spoke to the captain. He departed again silently. There was no sound, and yet the atmosphere was thin and tense. A haze of black smoke drifted down from the sky.

It was with reluctance that Jeff returned below to the wardroom. He was keyed up to too great a pitch to sleep, and yet he knew it was important to conserve his energy. He would lie on his bunk, in the darkness, waiting.

The shrill, banging gongs of General Quarters awakened him. Jeff sat up straight. It seemed incredible that he had slept at all. He did not remember closing his eyes. But now the gongs clattered throughout the ship. A bugle blasted officers' call through the loudspeaker system. The boatswain's pipe was trilling hoarsely. In the corridor there was the pounding of feet, the sound of voices.

Jeff leapt up, flung open the door, and moved through it. The speaker system was talking.

"Battle Condition One. Man your gun stations. Close all water-tight doors. . . "

Gong, gong. . . gong. . . gong!

Men everywhere on the double. Jeff hastened through the lower compartments of the ship. He rushed down a ladder past the brig, down another ladder, and into the lower handling room of number three turret. The men were pouring into it, and the powder magazine was open. It was the job

of the men down here to take the powder from the magazine and place it in the conveyers that would treadmill it to upper handling.

Jeff climbed the ladder upward from the handling room. He squeezed through the tiny compartment in upper handling, and at last into the pits. The powdermen, loaders, traymen, and rammer-men were coming in. Lieutenant Anderson was already here. He and Jeff were squeezed tightly against the bulkhead. The pits were low-roofed, dim-lighted. The shiny, oiled breeches of the three guns were opened. The intricate loading mechanism stood ready. Sailors, stripped to the waist, were taking their places. Many of them were still pushing cotton into their ears.

“We’re firing pointer-control,” Anderson said.

Then the afternoon drills might turn out to be a waste. In pointer-control the range was calculated in a plotting room deep in the bowels of the ship. The work of the turret crew would be automatic. Already drill shells were rolling onto the trays. Hydraulic rammers met them and pushed them into the dark canon of the breeches. Rotating bands swirled into the grooved barrel with plummeting force and a dull echo of metal.

Communication to the bridge was made through both hollow voice-tubes and direct telephone. The tubes were buzzing now. A tinny voice came through: “Coming on the range!” The powder conveyers were grinding, tread-milling upward.

Jeff moved to a sight and peered out on the horizon. To his profound amazement it was nearly dawn! The battleships had arrived on schedule—without being spotted! Gray fog was billowing across the sea. The ship was making a wide turn into the natural harbor. They were going full steam, the huge turbine engines throbbing.

The harbor was in the shape of a horseshoe and the anchored cruisers lay dead ahead. There was no smoke from their stacks. They had been caught short! They didn’t even have steam up. But certainly, by now, they had sighted their opponents. The gongs of battle-station quarters must have been screaming aboard all the cruisers.

Sure enough, Jeff saw the guns of the first one begin to train. They were going to fight from a stationary position! They were shooting fighter planes off from their catapults. Each would carry

a load of bombs and do what it could to harass the battleships. The five-inch anti-aircraft guns on the boat deck would get a chance at them.

“Coming on the range!”

Jeff rushed back to his position. Through the voice-tube he heard the brief calculations as to the roll and the pitch of the ship. Reports echoed through from the range finders. The show was to be at close range. That would give vicious, destructive power to the tons of steel salvos. The cruisers didn’t have a chance! But Jeff could see nothing outside now and his curiosity was piqued.

In the pits, rammers pulled back, loader trays swept clear. Powder bags were dumped into the giant breeches. The plugs closed rapidly. Ready lights went on. There was a roar. The fourteen-inch guns careened forward. They vomited ton shells. Immediately the gleaming breeches whipped back in recoil with shuddering force.

The first salvo was clear. The powder conveyers kept grinding—sending up silk bags of powder. Sweaty sailors worked smoothly, coolly. The voice-tube kept talking, chattering. Lieutenant Anderson, reporting by telephone, was alert. Jeff, squeezed against the hot bulkhead, was momentarily in excess here. The breeches slammed closed again. The whole turret shook. From the mouths of the guns, hell and steel screamed in a swirling mass across the water.

“The cruisers’ll return fire in a minute,” Anderson said.

“Yes, I imagine.”

Men moved back and forth in the dim overhead light. Rammers sped the drill shells into the scorched rifling. Powder bags were pushed into place; the breeches slammed closed. Guns captains on the three barrels switched on ready lights.

Swoosh!

The third salvo tumbled with dynamic force from the turret as the three heavy shells charged from the barrels. Below them, number four turret had fired; and forward of the bridge, turrets one and two had been lashing out in blind fury. Along the whole port side of the boat deck the five-inch batteries were screaming in broadside fire.

The gun recoiled, settled back into number three. Automatically, it kept moving, training on the target, as the battleship steamed swiftly across the range. Again Jeff peered from a sight. He saw

the first cruiser. It was hit. The armor had been penetrated in three different places. The ship was settling fast. It was wallowing. But even as the water crept up over her main deck her gun spoke for the first time—and for the last! The light cruiser was sinking!

In the heavy barrage it had been very nearly torn to shreds. Its light armor plates had been rent. It had had to reckon with even more than the fourteen-inch and five-inch shells: two of the battleship's torpedoes had ripped away the hull beneath the water line. But its only salvo was true. With terrific impact Jeff felt the shells hit the side of the battleship.

Those that crashed against the armor were not heavy enough to penetrate, and only dented the larger American ship's side; but the cruiser's forward battery had fired high, and its discharge landed on deck.

The battleship lurched slightly, wheeled over in a starboard list, and then was aright again. Through the tube echoed the voice of the damage-control officer making his report to the bridge. The mechanism in the pits of number three began to buzz again. In the phones the voice of Commander Bell sounded hollowly.

"Number three—"

"Number three, aye, aye," Anderson said.

"We're coming into extremely close range on a heavy cruiser. Change to pointer fire. This ship has a gunnery 'E.' I expect a hundred per cent accuracy!"

"You'll get it. Sir!"

Immediately, the pointers and setters took their places, training and elevating by hand wheel. They were tense on the sights. Range calculations began to come down rapid-fire through the tubes. . .

In the fire-control tower. Commander Bell watched everything at once, sending down his orders to the turrets, five-inch and anti-aircraft batteries; and reporting to, and taking orders from, the talker on the captain's circuit.

It was with grim satisfaction that he had seen the first light cruiser go to the bottom. This had been his first objective, and even while the cruiser's planes were diving at the ship over his head, bombing a crater hole in the foc's'le, running into the direct fire of the anti-aircraft

guns, he had operated his heavy batteries against the unmoving foe.

The early sun was coming up now, and the fog was clearing. The anti-aircraft guns had wiped the desperate enemy fighter planes from the sky. Near the shore Bell could see bubbles and oil on the water where the cruiser had gone down, and behind this only the chalky white cliffs of the shore.

Up ahead the battleship which had been first in the formation had attacked another of the five cruisers; they had gone into action in much the same manner as this ship. But it was some little satisfaction to Bell's proficiency as gunnery officer that only now, seven long minutes later, had the second attacked cruiser been crippled and finally silenced. It was an Italian vessel, settling slowly, the bridge in flames. Bell could see its crew scrambling over topside to abandon ship.

The two enemy ships had no need to feel shame in the defeat. A light cruiser was no match for a battleship. The division of American battleships had come to annihilate the whole nest of enemy cruisers and they were accomplishing the purpose as quickly as possible so that they might get out.

Two out of five of the cruisers were gone now, and the remaining American battleship had flung herself on another light cruiser. Her turrets were roaring at this very moment, and Bell could see flashes of red, while the thunder of the guns was a din in his ears.

Two cruisers remained. But these were both heavy armament. One had miraculously got up steam, and was underway, moving out of the harbor. The other's stacks were belching black smoke, but as yet she had not begun to move. Her anchor chains were crawling like snakes across the foc's'le. The battleship just ahead (finished with one job) trained her guns on the stationary cruiser, to nail her before she got the anchors up and started moving. The cruiser returned fire at once, savagely, bitterly; trapped, and baring her teeth in puffs of red flame. Her shells were heavier than those of her unfortunate and ill-fated sister ships.

But Commander Bell stared incredulously. He had blandly presumed that the ship ahead would give chase to the rapidly retreating cruiser, and his own batteries would engage the stationary vessel.

The talker on the captain's circuit had informed him this would be the case, and Bell had already relayed that to his guns: ordering them to stand by for close range. Instead, his target had been snatched away from him!

"*Check fire,*" he said bitterly.

For a moment Commander Bell could scarcely collect his wits. As the situation stood both of the other battleships were in action against the two cruisers, one heavy and one light. His own batteries fell momentarily silent; dumb. The captain's own voice sputtered through the circuit and into Bell's ears.

"What do you make of that, Bell? The stationary cruiser was *our* meat—and Peterson's attacked it!"

"Yes, Sir. He was closest and probably thought it was best to nail her before she could move."

The other heavy cruiser was clearing the harbor.

"Well," the captain said angrily, "the only thing left for us to do is give chase. We'll swing wide of Peterson's ship and go after that cruiser that thinks she's going to escape."

"She's putting on a lot of steam," Bell said dismally, "and those ships are geared for thirty-five knots." Both he and the captain were only too well aware that the battleship could do no more than twenty-nine.

"I know," the captain said, "she'll outdistance us. But we're compelled to give chase. As she gains we'll have to keep firing at increasingly longer range. I'll send up observation planes to spot the firing."

Ten minutes later they were clearing the harbor. The cruiser was far ahead of them, dead abeam for a bow shot. Bell swore. That meant he could use only turrets one and two. Three and four, on the after decks, were useless to him. He couldn't even get an angle for the five-inch batteries. If the ship were to veer on port or starboard rudder it would only enable the cruiser to put more distance between them. Moreover, the speeding cruiser was laying a smoke screen. Range could be calculated against the fleeing enemy only by the sheerest guess work. Every minute that passed was putting the heavy cruiser farther ahead.

Behind, in the harbor, the other two battleships were still engaged with their trapped quarry. Bell

gazed ahead at his disappearing target and cursed eloquently and bitterly. The battleship was straining, putting on every ounce of steam.

"Fire turrets one and two," the voice on the cap-tain's circuit said.

"Turrets one and two, commence firing," Commander Bell said on the fire-control telephone.

Both turrets fired at once. The ship shook, the guns recoiled, and the salvo was sailing across the water ahead of them. Now the guns roared again, and the second salvo sped after the shells of the first. In a few moments a third blast shook the ship's very bulkheads and fire flashed red from the mouths of the fourteen-inch guns.

The instructions for the firing had come from the plotting room, deep in the ship, where men worked with instruments calculating the range from every available source of information—the range finders, observation planes, and even the bridge itself. It was complicated mathematics, quickly worked out. The arithmetic of war!

Now the fourth salvo sped from the guns, and Commander Bell watched through powerful glasses. He saw small blobs of red—the cruiser was returning fire! In the same moment he learned that the battleship's salvos were falling short. The cruiser was almost enveloped in her screen now and only the flash of her after turret guns were visible.

Shells began to plop on the starboard side of the battleship. The cruiser's first salvo! A thousand yards behind came the second enemy salvo. With sudden numb horror Bell saw that they had corrected their range.

In the next moment eight-inch shells were tearing into the ship. The fire-control tower shuddered. A shell smashed squarely into the bridge. Flames leapt everywhere. The captain's circuit went dead.

Commander Bell stumbled blindly, he gripped a stanchion and stood up. His arm shielding his face, he fought his way out of the flaming tower. The ship was at hard right rudder, churning up water, already under control of the emergency watch in the fortified conning tower. The cruiser's third salvo saddled amidships, flying over the quarterdeck and splashing in the water on the other side.

Bell was on the outside ladder. He would go to the conning tower—navigate the ship and

command his guns from there. But as he reached the signal deck he saw a sailor pointing toward the horizon and shouting. Commander Bell stared, aghast. The battle tops of the entire enemy fleet, on their way at this moment to resume the attack they had yesterday abandoned, were steaming this way!

The big ships were moving rapidly, already having received the distress call from the cruiser. For a moment, the bridge in flames over his head, Bell just stared. The battleship was far too slow to get away. She was a turtle, and those ships moving across the horizon were hares. The other modernized American battleships, just now steaming out of the harbor, their work done, were in the same dire predicament.

Commander Bell set his lips grimly. There was no use trying to run. Let the bridge burn to hell. He rushed down and into the fire-proof conning tower. It was roasting hot inside, and he closed and bolted the door behind him. He stared out through the eye-slits. The captain had been killed on the bridge. Bell was in command. In command of a ship that now faced certain annihilation!

He turned swiftly to the emergency watch officer.

"Steam directly into the teeth of the enemy!" He picked up the emergency fire-control phone. "Stand by on all guns," he said.

Behind the conning tower, on the ship's stack, there was a gunnery "E" with a hash mark under it. E is for Efficiency.

XIX

NICK'S face was sweaty, his voice desperate. He stood before Craig's desk.

"But I tell you *Stohl's* got her!"

"I heard you the first time, and the answer's still the same. The thing's a trap. He thinks you're fool enough to walk into it—and if you do you'll be killed!"

"That's the chance I take."

"You'll take no chance!" Craig roared. "I'll lock you up if I have to. You're working for the government and you'll have to forget sentiment."

"Sentiment, I—"

"You'll have to wait! Tomorrow we'll be able to close in on *Herr Stohl* in a way where he can't

get out. I've spent valuable time and effort making the arrangements for this and I'll be damned if I'm going to have it spoiled!"

"But she might be killed!"

"What if she is? This is a war and she's only one person. People are dying like flies. I tell you, if we jump the gun on *Stohl* the whole thing'll fall through!"

"What the hell does that matter, when—"

"It matters to your country."

"Oh my God! She's alive, I tell you, I have—"

"One of *Stohl's* agents told you she was alive, didn't he? They've tried to kill you in other ways—and now they're holding her out as bait!"

Nick turned on his heel and walked to the end of the room.

"It's only until tomorrow," Craig went on. "Then there may even be a chance to save the girl."

Nick turned bitterly. "You know you're lying."

"Listen, Nick; stick with me. If we make this coup tomorrow you're free to go. But I can't make it without some of the information you have about *Stohl's* agents; and I need your testimony in the military trials. You're my key man in this round-up. Don't you suppose *Stohl* knows that? Why do you think it's so important that he get you out of the way?"

Nick's hands were white with pressure. He saw the key to the office which Craig had laid on the desk when he came in.

"What makes you so sure I'd be killed? Perhaps I could—"

"You could do nothing! If you went you'd be double-crossing me—and the government!"

Nick backed up. "Well, then, damn it, you're looking at a traitor!"

He took a knife from his pocket. While Craig stared, he slashed the phone wires. Then he slipped through the door. Craig shouted, and Nick locked the door from the outside with the key he had taken from the desk. He swung, long-legged, down the wooden corridor. Craig was crashing against the door. Nick walked through the reception-room, down the steps, and outside.

He caught a taxi.

Nick stood in front of the green Cafe Madrid sign, watching the windows of an apartment across the street. The apartment rooms were on the second floor, over a shabby, empty store. The

windows were shut, and the shades were drawn, the morning sun beat hot against them. Nick's gun was in the pocket of his coat.

He glanced at the roof over the shabby upstairs apartment, and he saw that it was thatched, with a fifteen degree slant; he noticed that it was isolated from all other roofs, and the sheer drop to the ground was not a thing to contemplate. He also discerned that there was a little square trap-door that must have led to the roof from one of the hallways. He supposed that in case of fire on the first floor a man could go up on the roof, come to the front of it, and jump down into a fireman's net. On the right side of the building there was a fire escape but it extended only as far as the windows so that you could not very well drop from the roof to the fire-escape without breaking your neck.

He studied the building very carefully, and then, at last, he turned and went into the Cafe Madrid. He walked with a quick stride to the back office and pushed open the door. The bartender sat there, a piece of rubber hose in his dirty aproned lap, watching Tony, the Italian bell-boy. Tony's face was black and blue and his uniform was tattered. Some of the brass buttons had torn off. The bartender looked up.

"All right?" Nick said.

"Sure, Mr. Nick."

"Did you have to hit him again?"

"Yes, he tried to get away and I hit him twice."

The bartender left.

The bell-boy stared at Nick with terror in his liquid brown eyes. He wiped blood from his swollen mouth with the back of his hand. Nick took the gun from his pocket and undid the safety latch. The boy screamed.

"What are you going to do?"

"*I'm going to kill you,*" Nick said.

"No, don't kill me!" He began to sob. "I had to tell the girl what I did because they made me."

Nick had previously only vaguely suspected that Tony might be in foreign pay. But when he learned about Kathie—knowing how careful she was—he at once realized she could only have been lured out of the hotel one way. He had seized the boy, taken him out in the alley, and in a very few minutes had him talking. He had chipped the skin from his knuckles hitting him.

"You're sure the girl's in that apartment across the street?"

"Yes, I went with them last night, and that's where they took her."

"You say it was about half past twelve?"

"Yes."

"They've got a phone there?"

"Yes. I was to hang around your room and if I could get any information that you might be coming after the girl I was to call and tell them."

Nick had not needed Tony to discover the address of the place where Kathie was held prisoner. Stohl had carefully arranged that he could obtain this address in half a dozen ways, all of them thinly disguised.

"You're going to phone now," Nick said.

"No!"

"You're going to phone and say I came into my room—and left again, and you followed me, and I'm now in a certain bar in Colon. The Liberty Bar. You're going to say I've been given orders not to go after the girl and as a result I'm getting very drunk in the Liberty Bar."

"No!"

Nick lashed out and hit Tony across the face.

After a while Tony phoned.

Nick and Tony watched from the window of the Cafe Madrid. Four men came down the steps of the apartment and climbed into a car. They drove off. None of them was Stohl. Tony—a gun prodded in his back—said that there were probably three men still in the apartment; it had occurred to Stohl that Nick might try to storm the place with force. For this reason *Herr* Stohl himself would not risk staying there. He didn't lack courage, but he shrewdly weighed his own value to his government and reasoned that there was no point of being in a possible exchange of gun-fire when others could do the work as well as himself.

The car was out of sight, headed for the Liberty Bar in Colon.

"All right," Nick said, "we're going across the street."

"No!"

"*No?*"

"I'll go! I'll go!"

The shades in the apartment on the right side of the building were still drawn and Nick and Tony moved across the street very swiftly. Before they

went upstairs Nick made Tony take off his shoes and carry them. Nick also removed his own shoes and they climbed the stairs in stocking feet.

In the hall on the second floor they stood quietly for a full minute, Nick's gun in the bell-boy's back. Then they moved silently forward. Nick looked up to the ceiling and saw the trap-door to the roof. He reached up a long arm and unlatched it. Now he motioned for Tony to put his shoes on.

When this was done Nick put his gun in his pocket and hoisted Tony up to the trap-door. The bell-boy—glad to escape—opened it and clattered noisily out onto the roof. Nick quickly hurried down the hall and rounded the corner, his gun in his hand again.

Immediately a door opened. Nick heard the voices of two men who spoke in clipped German. They said there was somebody on the roof. Undoubtedly Nick Waters. The trap-door was hanging open. There was the sound of one of the men climbing up through the space. The other followed. When Nick heard them on the roof he rounded the corner in the hall. He slammed shut the trap-door and shot the bolt in place.

The door of the apartment was open and he moved in through it. A man stood across the room, his head stuck out the window, watching the fire escape. Nick stepped up behind him and slugged him with the butt of his gun. The man slumped to the threadbare carpet on the floor.

Now Nick opened the door to an adjoining room. He caught his breath. Kathie sat in a chair near the window. She was tied up, and there was a gag in her mouth. Nick laid his gun on the bed and began working with the ropes. His heart was thumping against his side!

The bell-boy had been right. Stohl wasn't here. He just had time to get Kathie out and save his own skin for Craig—for military trials. He worked quickly and silently with Kathie's bonds. Once she said: "*Nick!*" Now she rose, and he turned. His gun was gone off the bed.

Herr Mark Stohl stood on the doorway, the weapon in his hand.

THE American battleship, her bridge in flames, turned in the water and steamed directly toward the huge double column of the enemy battle tops. Shells plopped on either side of her; and in the rear, the other two battleships, observing the movement, read Commander Bell's intention on the fluttering pennant hoist. From the signal decks, by semaphore wig-wag, came the immediate reply: "Joining your attack."

There were three heavy battleships then, in single file formation, rising and falling on the sea as they pounded toward the enemy fleet.

In the double column, three thousand yards apart in each case, the first enemy ships in line were giant battle cruisers. These two super-dreadnaughts towered over any battleship. They had been recently constructed, were scarcely five months in service, and they had been manufactured for the sole purpose of making a naval spearhead on the attack against America. They were the two largest ships in the world. Behind them came pocket battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, submarines, and destroyers. It was not intended that it should be a battle, but an onslaught. Their plans, each maneuver they would execute, had been carefully worked out in advance.

But to be attacked before reaching their objective by three old battleships was an event which could not have been taken into account. Even though they realized that the Americans, trapped, were making a desperate last stand, there was scarcely time for a board of strategy to cope with the situation. They prepared for immediate action to wipe out the bothersome contingent. There was really very little else they could do.

Commander Bell, in the conning tower, stripped off his coat; he was not conscious of the fact that his face and arms had been scorched getting down the ladder from the bridge. The conning tower was like an oven. Wisps of blue smoke seeped in through it, making the air acrid. The seaman on the steering lever, his waist bare, sweated in glistening sheets. His eyes smarted in the smoke and he kept rubbing them. The officer-of-the-deck watched through an eye-slit. Bell consulted his instruments, gauged his speed against the enemy, planned to the precise second

when his batteries would open up. His brain and all of his effort were on the operation of his ship, in this, its last action.

The navigator reported. "Mr. Bell—"

"Yes?"

"The four destroyers have joined our unit."

"Tell them—*damn it!*—tell them to go home. They're not in this predicament. They've got speed enough to get away. This attack isn't a stunt. It's the only sane thing left for us to do."

"Aye, aye, Sir."

The O.O.D. turned. "What are your orders, commodore?"

Bell mopped sweat from his face. "I don't think any of us'll get much past those two leader ships. Those big babies are hell on wheels. But if we do—we're going in between that column. Yes, I know! They'll eat us up that much quicker. But it'll enable us to inflict more damage—and that's the whole point. We're going to fire broadside—port and starboard runs simultaneously."

"Yes, Sir!"

"Inform all guns to change to pointer fire. It'll be closest range they ever fired—and I'm going to depend on the men rather than a mechanical robot. Robot firing is fine in practice but it has a tendency to go awry when a ship is hit. Tell the men that. Tell them—here, I'll take the phone—"

The navigator returned. "The four destroyers are racing ahead of us. They insist on joining the action, Sir."

"They're fools!" Bell stormed. But he smiled grimly. "Gallant fools," he said.

American planes which an hour ago had taken off from the flight decks of the U.S.S. Ranger and U.S.S. Lexington, roared overhead, and the ocean was suddenly dark with the bobbing shadow of their wings.

The flight commander looked down over the side of his plane and he saw the scene quite clearly. The three battleships below him, plowing toward the enemy, the four slim American destroyers racing ahead. Through his goggles the flight commander watched this, proud somehow. He grinned and with his gloved hand waved a salute to his shipmates below.

He did not know how long they could hold out, certainly not long enough, but he thought it appropriate to radio them a word of cheer, and

this message he dispatched at once: The movement of the main enemy fleet had been spotted hours ago by an observer, and the United States Atlantic Squadron was at this moment en route at full steam to engage them!

Somewhere over the horizon the United States ships were on their way. "Try to hold out," the flight commander urged. Then, his message sent, he signaled his squadron of fighters—with their racks of bombs—and ordered them in a full attack on the enemy.

First came the planes, roaring, whining, diving, bombing, machine-gunning; meeting enemy fighter planes, dog-fighting. Then the destroyers, two abreast, guns screaming, torpedoes loosed, mines dumped, laying down two heavy screens of smoke in between which the battleships would come. Six minutes later all four destroyers had been blasted to bits, ripped to shreds.

And then the battleships came, each roaring in double broadside.

In number three turret the pits were hot, the lights dim, the breeches gaped open. Men bare-waisted, in skivie shirts, worked desperately, stumbling through the turning, slewing turret. Powder conveyers ground dully. Breeches were stuffed. Plugs thumped into place. Now the third salvo. . . the third. . . Fire on the Buzzer!

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!"

The crashing, tumultuous weight of the turret careening forward, vomiting tons of steel, baring her flaming soul; then settling back, angrily, waiting like a fighter between rounds, waiting while men tinkered on her, while droning mechanism performed its task, while silk powder-bags were stuffed into her gullet. . .

But a man had screamed. A man had been crushed in the recoil.

"Get him out of the way. . . poor devil." It was the pointer on the first barrel. He was dazed. . . thrown in the path of the gun as it recoiled.

"Number three. . . Number three. . ." a harassed voice shouted through the tube, "What's the delay?"

"No delay. Sir. . . Mr. Barret—replace that pointer. I know you're an officer, Barret! But we haven't got anybody else. Take the gun sight yourself. . ."

"Right!"

Eagerly, Jeff leapt into the pointer's position. He threw off his officer's cap. His dungarees were wet with sweat. He began patting the gun, talking to it. "Come on, baby. We're going to town, baby!" His hands turned on the pointer's wheel. He looked out through the eye-piece. The breeches were slamming closed. The ship was moving very fast. Jeff saw a big battle cruiser cross-wired. They had her amidships. They got her in the guts.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!" Jeff shouted.

The shells screamed from the three barrels of the gun. The monster of steel came shuddering back into place. Jeff watched through the sight. The sea was red with puffs of smoke. The destroyer screen was dissolving—it became thinner with each passing second. The three battleships were naked now in the eyes of the enemy. Jeff glanced across at his setter, riding the little iron seat. He gave him the elevation figure.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!"

The gun roared again, venomously. All over the ship guns were blasting in a terrible din. Breeches swung open, smoky, powder scorched; hydraulic rammers pounded; drill shells rolled onto trays. The hungry, open maws of the guns were fed powder and steel. Commander Bell's voice kept echoing through the tube. Jeff kept his eyes on the sight. The big battle cruiser was listing badly. But her giant guns spoke in harsh defiance. Range for bow shot.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!" Jeff said.

He squeezed a button. The turret rolled out in a quivering frenzy and the salvo volcanoed from her. Sweat drenched Jeff's face and back. They were moving one way, the battle cruiser another; they were already out of her range, and a pocket battleship, her guns flashing red, crawled into the focus of the eye-piece, wavered on the cross-wires. "Got her!" Jeff said.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!"

He remembered saying that. And the gun fired on the buzzer—but he never knew how. For at that moment the whole ship shuddered from stem to stern from the impact of a heavy salvo. Perhaps the last salvo of shells from the battle cruiser. The

turret went black. Darkness. Pitch darkness. Men's voices. The powder conveyers still grinding. The turret recoiled, wobbling. Somebody over the voice-tube was saying "Direct hit number three. . . direct hit on the pocket battleship. . . the—" The voice stopped. Bells began to gong. They sounded faint. Maybe it's the thunder in my ears but they sound faint. Fire and collision parties were being summoned. The series in which the gongs rang told them automatically in what station they were needed. Shell hole through the bow. . . rush collision mats. . . All right! To hell with that. So there was a hole in the bow. It was only one compartment. The compartment was water-tight. . .

The pits were still dark. The fire-control phone began to talk. It squeaked: "Number four report! Number four—" It faded off. Turret four was silent. Turret four was a fresh grave-yard. Every man in its pits had been killed. The lower handling rooms crew was all right. They were always all right. They would have to sit on their hands and wait for the battle to end. End?

In number three the iron powder conveyers were still walking upstairs with their baskets of powder. The mechanism of the drillers buzzed and whispered. Men were trying to load in the dark. Now the emergency lights came on. Jeff saw three loaders on deck—heads mashed by the turret's recoil. They had to be got out of the way.

All of this had happened—the lights gone down and come on again, the men above in number four killed—in six seconds. Now, miraculously, on schedule, the guns finished loading. Breeches closed like the doors of time vaults. Jeff worked with the pointer's wheel. He cross-wired the speeding pocket battleship once more. He was firing at right angles, over the bow.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

"Mark!"

The turret leapt forward. It discharged its volley of death. It settled back. But it seemed to have lost some of its power. The metal screeched as the heavy barrels came to rest in the steel cradles. They were perhaps a thousandth of an inch out of line. The handwriting on the wall! Jeff thought. But they couldn't stop now. Anderson had noticed, but he was very cool. Everything was proceeding normally. There might be a misfire—possibly death for them all—but there was no

stopping. If an enemy shell hit the turret with enough force that flame inside would ignite the powder; it would roar down the conveyer treadmill in a step-ladder of violent explosions and set off the powder magazine—such an occurrence would immediately blow the entire ship to ribbons—that, too, would be death. Jeff thought about it.

Bzzzzzzzzzz

“Mark!”

The gun sprang once more, and wobbled back with its terrific ferocity. The voice-tube was talking. Triumphantly. *“The Nazi battle cruiser has been sunk! The battleship following us finished her off. . .!”* It was something better than a pep talk. The men began to work with renewed energy. Jeff was at the eye-piece. He was talking to the gun, cajoling it. “Be good, baby! Don’t peter out on papa. . .” He watched the boiling sea. The enemy parade seemed endless. A cruiser was sailing into his cross-wire of vision. Jeff trained the gun with a steady hand. He could hear the two other pointers talking to the turret as they trained. Jeff was training on the cruiser. Then, suddenly, because she was so close, the idea obsessed him to experiment with one shell. Instead of following the range along the ship’s side—where he couldn’t miss—he raised his sight to fire directly on the after fighting-turrets. The slightest movement of either this ship or the cruiser from the established course would send the shell to waste. He had no right doing this. He grew tense, training down to a point of fine precision. . .

Bzzzzzzzzzz

“Mark!”

He watched, feverishly. Then he shouted. A hundred to one shot! But the shell had penetrated the cruiser’s turret. In the next moment the powder magazine was ignited. In a horrible, blasting explosion of splintering red, the whole disintegrated ship was lifted a full forty feet out of the water. It showered down in a rainfall of burning debris. That was the end of the cruiser. It was vanished—gone from the face of the sea!

Jeff reserved his celebration to a grin at his setter. Already they were training for the next ship in line. But behind him he heard Lieutenant Anderson talking on the fire-control phone. He knew nothing of the cruiser’s demise, and his voice was irritable and distracted. “That was Jeff

Barret—the hero of the S-60,” he said bitterly. “He’s the only pointer I’ve got for this position. I saw him *deliberately* change the angle of his barrel. . .”

“Very bad,” Commander Bell’s voice roared down hollowly. “All he did was blow up a cruise. . .”

The battleship was wallowing badly now, however. It was bleeding in water by the ton. They hadn’t much longer. Already two of the turrets had been silenced. Now number three was on its last legs. Jeff was cross-wiring a new heavy cruiser. He heard the breeches close. The buzz was delayed, then it came.

“Mark!”

The gun started forward; and then, all at once, monster that it was, it jammed. There was a sudden twisting of steel; a discordant clash of delicate mechanism. The emergency lights crashed out. Men were screaming. A sheet of flame sucked back over the empty gun cradles. Jeff closed his teeth hard. The flame shot into his face. He clawed at it. For a moment he knew the sensation of burning alive.

Then he was conscious again, on the oily deck. The steel plates in the pits had buckled. Water was drenching down from the sprinkler fire-control system. It was the water that had revived him. There was only darkness. . . and the dripping water. Someone was moaning. . . whimpering. Silence. The clatter of the water as it came down. Fortunately the flame had never reached the powder to touch it off. Jeff sat very still in the darkness. He smelled burned flesh. The dead lay all around him. Setters, rammermen, loaders. The powder conveyers had stopped. The pits were a twisted mass. Darkness. The water kept sprinkling down. The metallic voice in the tube kept saying over and over, desperately: “Number three report. . . num-ber three report. . . number three. . .”

Admiral John Cyril, in the flagship of the Atlantic Squadron, watched the swelling green of the horizon through his binoculars. Gradually, the enemy fleet was becoming visible over the rim of the sea. Admiral Cyril’s ships were making all speed possible to join the engagement. In a few minutes they would be in it—firing at long range. But from his aircraft spotters and from the radios of the three battleships themselves he had

received reports that gave him a clear picture of the situation.

The four destroyers were gone. One of the battleships had been sunk, and the other two were sinking. At this very moment they were abandoning ship as best they could. But the damage they had inflicted was incalculable. One giant battle cruiser—pride of the Nazis—one pocket battleship, one heavy cruiser, and three fast light cruisers. Six of the enemy's capital ships! Added to that were the four cruisers (one had escaped from the original five) that the battleships had sunk early this morning. The Axis Powers paid a dear price for three American battleships!

The enemy still had ships, of course. But their main force had been reduced in number. They were rapidly being whittled down in tonnage to the size of their American opponents. They no longer had on their side crushing superiority. The battle into which Admiral Syril was sailing would be bitter—the war was still a war!—but he had the sweet satisfaction of knowing that the match would at least be equal. Neither his ships nor his men would face annihilation in the onslaught of a cruel, destructive enemy!

He put down the binoculars, and turned.

“Signal all ships: Take battle stations. *Stand by to attack!*”

XXI

HERR STOHL'S gray face was contrite, his eyes glittered a peculiar bluish color. He was a man who never wasted his time. The death of Nick Waters was only one small item on the crowded program he had laid out for himself. He was aware that the moment the Axis Powers' fleet secured its first crushing victory there was much he had to do in preparation for the German troops that would be landed in Colon to take over the Panama Canal. Already huge transports full of men lay off Newfoundland awaiting word to move. *Herr Stohl* was impatient to return to his affairs. He was angry that it had been necessary to spend so much time arranging the death of only one man; he could have had two hundred murdered with far less effort. He spoke softly, a speech to prelude death itself.

“You displayed considerable ingenuity in ridding this apartment of seven of my men.”

Nick bowed curtly. “Thank you,” he said. Kathie stood numbly at his side. Outside the sun burned hot against the drawn shades; the air was very close and specks of dust sifted like silver toward the ceiling. On the dresser a tin clock ticked loudly.

“I was in the room across the hall,” Stohl said. He spoke as though to point out his intelligence was superior to Nick's. “Even my agents were unaware of my presence here.”

“When one works for the Nazis he must be careful—even of his friends,” Nick said.

“You are very American,” *Herr Stohl* said. His lips were thin. “Intolerable, arrogant, and a fool!” He lifted the gun half an inch in his hand. His face was without expression.

With a sweep of his arm Nick knocked Kathie down and dived low at the German. The gun screamed, as he knew it would; but he had counted on the fraction of a second that it would take Stohl to shift his aim. The bullet ripped an inch over his back, quivered into the wall, and in the next instant Nick was grappling at Stohl's legs. In a Judo grip—lightning quick—he caught him on the flexible joints behind either knee.

Stohl went over backward, his head smashing against the door jamb. His hand came up, the gun wobbling in it, rage burning like acid on his face; but the bullet spun over Nick's shoulder. And now Nick, on the floor, pounded back Stohl's gun wrist. He banged Stohl's hand on the threadbare carpet, and the nerveless fingers splayed open. Nick scooped up the gun. Stohl was writhing savagely, his left hand at the holster of his own gun. The German Luger appeared at once—like a black snake. Nick wasted no time and took no chances. He shot *Herr Stohl* through the face.

The thunder of the dull, sickening shot died away. Stohl lay still, the gray of his face red gore. Silence settled through the room. There was the ticking of the clock.

Nick got up slowly. He felt no emotion, no thrill; the victory nauseated him. He turned to Kathie. Her face was deathly white. Nick made some small, mute gesture; afterward he did not remember what it was. The room was very hot. He motioned Kathie toward the door.

Then he heard voices, men were coming in. Nick's body tensed again. He swept through the door into the next room, the gun in his hand. He stood, necessarily, his legs astride Stohl's body, his feet on the floor. His finger sweat-kissed the gun trigger. Then—so horribly close that his heart wrenched—he turned the gun down, just in time, fired through the floor. He dropped the weapon and turned toward the window, turned his back to the men, biting his fist, choked suddenly and unreasonably with emotion.

Craig said: "You didn't think we were going to let you do this thing alone. . . The coup's finished. We had the phone tapped here and picked up four of the men in the Liberty Bar in Colon. . . You've got a bell-boy and two others on the roof. They can't get off. . . and once we get—Well, I'll be damned! It's Stohl! His face is kind of—It is Stohl, isn't it?"

"Yes," Nick said.

"That was a hell of a thing you did," Craig said. "If you were any good in this business you wouldn't have done it. But when you jumped the gun I figured it was whatever plan you made against my own. . . and I played it that way. . . Nick, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Nick said, "I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"But I am, though," Nick said. He turned. "Listen, Craig, I almost killed you, I—"

"Why, you damn fool," Craig said, "your cheeks are wet!"

Late afternoon sun, red in the coco-palms; long scarlet shadows of sunset. Traffic in Cristobal. . . Panamanian cops under beach umbrellas in the intersections. . . Americans in white linen; the peddlers with their gaudy shawls, the red and green squawking parakeets; women in wide-brimmed hats; sailors in tropic whites beginning to come ashore, and soldiers off duty. . . anti-aircraft gun crews sitting on roof-tops, smoking cigarettes, chatting.

Kathie and Nick, at the bar in the Cafe Madrid. People at tables, the tables crowded, the waiters moving in and out. Now the bartender turned on the radio. The old crowd, the regular crowd, quieted, grew expectant. A hush fell over the room. The announcer's voice burst from the loudspeaker with pitiful excitement:

"News of the world. . . Honolulu, Hawaii. The battle in the Pacific is finished. First contingents of the Pacific fleet tonight sailed triumphantly into Honolulu Harbor and reports have been made of the worst and most terrible naval defeat in the history of the world! The Japanese fleet has been totally annihilated!"

A hoarse cheer went up through the room. For a moment the radio voice was drowned out, then you could hear it again:

"Admiral Wilson, former Commander of the Asiatic Squadron who was C. in C. of the Pacific Fleet, announced tonight that the victory—unparalleled in memory of man—was the result of a theory he had seen proved in Asiatic waters time and again: the Japanese are not marksmen. They have for years been waging an unsuccessful war against the Chinese whose marksmanship is equally bad. The Nipponese have operated air raids over cities in China where there were no fighter planes to hamper them and no anti-aircraft guns—and yet they repeatedly failed to hit a single military objective.

"By keeping the engagement at long range and making his ships a difficult target Admiral Wilson states that the Japanese had lost before they began. The majority of Japanese ships have not been installed with latest range-finding and fire-adjusting mechanisms. They were fired by Japanese pointers who could scarcely see their opponent, let alone take aim. The American ships, on the other hand, as has long been their tradition, fired accurately, sinking one Japanese ship after another.

"In this instance it was pointed out by Admiral Wilson that Japan's first-line fleet was much over-rated and actually was little more than a floating junk heap. Her two finest battleships were twenty years old. Two others were twenty-four years old, a third two, twenty-six years old—and there were several ancient coal burners twenty-eight and thirty years old! It took no more than a shell or two to sink them. What commenced in all seriousness to be a battle turned into a turret picnic for American sailors. The Japanese were massacred.

"In the destructive action the American navy lost only two cruisers. . . the crews of which have been rescued. When the Japanese had been

defeated, and ships were sinking on every side of them. Admiral Wilson ordered a flotilla of cruisers to seek out hidden Japanese aircraft carriers. This maneuver is now being carried out and one has been discovered and sunk.

“In the vicinity of Wake Island two American submarines came upon seven large Japanese troopships. Their convoy had left them to join the main engagement of the distressed Japanese fleet. The submarines sank all seven of the transports one by one.

“Shanghai, China: Under the escort of the United States Asiatic Squadron—which until now has seen little action—a million Chinese troops are embarking aboard every available craft for an immediate invasion of Japan. General Chiang Kai-Shek announced that he would personally lead his troops to quote ‘the heart of Tokyo’ unquote. . .

“Manila, P.I.: Units of the Asiatic Squadron, with the aid of aircraft from the base at Singapore. . . have trapped seventy-five thousand Japanese troops attempting a wholesale evacuation of Manila.

“Tokyo, Japan: The Japanese government has officially, according to signed agreements, called upon her European partners for immediate military aid in the Far East.

“Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo is undergoing the worst air raid in her history. The city has been turned into a blazing inferno.

“Shanghai, China: Persons in official circles were of the opinion here tonight that the Empire of the Rising Sun is coming to her final inglorious end. They state that the time has passed for Japan to sue for peace. That it is too late, and that Japanese dominance will be wiped from the face of the earth. . .”

The radio voice was growing husky.

“Here’s a dispatch from a military base somewhere on the Alaskan Coast. . . Japanese equipment has been junked. Their troops are reported in full flight from wave after wave of American forces led by the United States Marines. . .”

The patrons in the Cafe Madrid were laughing. Tears ran down their faces, and they were

slapping one another on the back. Two of them—very old men—stood up and were dancing a jig.

“Quiet,” the bartender yelled, “quiet!”

“Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Brazil has declared war on Germany and Italy. . . In making this announcement to the press it was revealed that declarations of war against the Axis Powers were expected within the hour from Uruguay, Peru, and other South American republics. . . now that it has been seen which way the tide is turning.

“Berlin, Germany: The German Admiralty tonight admitted they had received reports of a surprising naval set-back in action today in the Atlantic and indicated that the advertised invasion of America might be temporarily postponed. But the German Government warned that this was not to be taken as a sign of weakness—and that the war against America would be prosecuted to the hilt. As if to back up this statement air-raid sirens were heard tonight in New York, Brooklyn, Boston, Philadelphia, Newark, Norfolk, and even in Washington, D.C. Planes droned over these half a dozen cities in what were described as revenge raids. . . with Messerschmitts diving low and machine-gunning the streets. . .”

“The war’s still on,” Nick said. He ordered a drink. “We’ve won the first round—staved them off for a while, but it’s only the beginning. As the commentator said, war is not won by defense alone.”

“What about Japan?”

“It’s not so surprising,” Nick said. “Military men have always expected a fold-up like that. First, the Japs deliberately oversold themselves for purposes of bluff. Even their miserable excursions into China didn’t discourage them—and when they joined the Axis they got very cocky. They began to believe they were really a power.” Nick stuck a cigarette in his mouth. “It was like a scrub high-school team playing the University of Southern California. Anyway, it’ll give the Chinese a chance to settle up a lot of old scores.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“But our war over here goes on. It may never be as bad again—ships from the Pacific will reinforce the Atlantic Squadron—and a rather enraged and aroused America will continue to

fight for the land it loves. The Totalitarians have found out that we're a new, fresh people. We're not rotten and decayed like the spoils they claimed in Europe. *We're Americans*, Kathie, be glad."

"I am," she said, "oh, I am!" and there were tears in her eyes. She looked up. "What do you intend doing, Nick?"

"I'm getting out. I've finished what little I could do, and now, for *me* at least, it's over. Craig wanted me to join the air force. But it's no soap. Kathie, I—I'm tired."

"Oh, Nick!"

"I'm going to have a nice white-leather chair—and my own private bar in the apartment—and a new typewriter, and music. I'm going to sit down for once in my life."

"Nick—"

"Yes?"

She bit her lip. "Can I go with you?"

"Can you—"

"Will you marry me, Nick! Oh, darling, we've been through so much together, and—"

"Kathie, don't fool me, my heart, it—"

"I want to marry you, Nick! *Honest*, I want to!"

"Kathie, all my life—ever since Madrid—"

He pulled her off the stool and took her in his arms. He ran his hand through her hair, and kissed her. He held her close to him. "Kathie. . . Kathie. . . Kathie!" he said.

It was three days later. They had waited in Cristobal only so that they might tell Jeff. Yesterday they had received a radio that he had been picked up from a life-boat—he was on his way in. Nick's bags were packed and downstairs in the hotel lobby. He sat in Kathie's room now, his long legs thrown over a chair, nursing a drink. Kathie was packing. With loving care she put lingerie into battered aviation luggage that had hotel and steamer posters stuck all over it—a gaudy array with names like Moscow, Biarritz, Queen Mary, Shanghai, Normandie, Paris. . . Berlin. For her, too, it was over. Last night she had typed the concluding sentence on the last article she would ever write. It was late afternoon, and the radio, turned low, was playing dance music.

"We'll walk in the snow on Madison Avenue," Nick said. "And when there's an opening night in

one of the playhouses we'll be there in evening dress. We'll be literary lions in all the cheesy little department stores, Kathie—and you can write your memoirs."

She shook out a skirt, and began folding it. "The Life and Times of Kathrine Winters," she said.

"And there won't be any more Madrid. . ."

There'll be smoky midnights in Harlem, and a silver Christmas in Westchester. Well have red bells in the window, Kathie, and lovely gold candles on the mantel. Well—"

The phone rang. Kathie picked it up. "Yes," she said. "Yes, send him up." She put the instrument down. She was trembling now.

"Jeff?"

"Yes—he's on his way up."

Nick put aside his glass and rose. He walked the room nervously. Suddenly he took Kathie in his arms and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

"Remember—we'll tell him right out! Tell him how it is. No sentiment. No tears. I'm so tired of tears!"

"I am, too, darling! I'll tell him—no matter what—I promise you, Nick—I'm yours! Jeff'll understand!"

"Okay. Straighten up now. Put on a big smile. The guy's been to the wars, you know."

There was a knock at the door. Nick stiffened. Kathie squeezed his hand, and then she went to the door and opened it.

Jeff stood there. He wore his white tropic uniform and it was immaculate, with gold lieutenant-commander bars on the shoulder pads. He had been promoted two ranks. His face was still sunburnt, blistered, and he wore colored glasses. The hair at his temples had turned white.

"Jeff—"

"Kathie!" he said, and his voice broke. He took her in his arms, choking. She stood numbly, and he held her for a very long time. Then she asked him to come in, and she crossed the room in front of him.

Jeff came slowly behind her, and Nick watched him. Jeff's hands were groping out eagerly. Once he almost stumbled. He was blind! He was groping toward Kathie, a smile on his face.

"We won a battle," he said.

She turned and stared at him. Nick got up very slowly and softly. "I guess you two would rather—"

"Nick," Jeff said, "I didn't know you were here!"

"I'll see you later, kid," Nick said.

At the door Nick paused and Kathie came to him. She looked up, searching his face, and he saw it in her eyes. He had but to say the word and she would come with him. She'd tell Jeff. For the first time in his life Nick could have her for the asking. He tilted her chin with his fist.

"Goodbye, baby," he said.

XXII

THE night he finished the manuscript the sky outside was noisy, and the light over the desk was very poor so that Nick had to squint as he scratched the words on paper. He was nearly at the end, and now, reflecting, he realized that there was very much that he had not told. He had not dwelt on the suffering, nor even the horror; and he had striven to avoid that which was sensational: and yet he saw with bitter dismay that he had told only part of the story. He knew that to chronicle even a portion of the things he had left out would take volumes. And what was more, in treating a theme of such profound importance it had perhaps been imprudent of him to describe in such detail the wedding of a blind naval officer to a beautiful girl. But they were the ones who were really happy. For them peace had come; they would know the bliss of starlit nights, and long, warm days without gunfire. They were the lucky ones, and this was the point he had tried to make. No, he was not sorry he had given so much space to a simple wedding scene; and as for his notes on the war itself, he saw again that this was only the beginning. He could not predict the future; and it was very likely that history itself would pygmy these few skirmishes he had reported with so much zeal. But he did not care! He had finished his job and there was in this moment a small sense of fulfillment. He rose and carefully put the bulky manuscript into his locker.

When he went outside the dark sky was quite clear and starry. It was nearly dawn and pilots were streaming from the barracks, still half asleep.

On the tarmac mechanics were warming up the fighter planes. Nick fitted his helmet over his head and pulled on his gloves. A major approached.

"Good morning, captain. You're squadron leader here, aren't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

The other nodded. "We've received information that enemy aircraft is approaching in great numbers." He paused. "You're to intercept them."

Nick nodded.

"It'll be a tough battle, I'm afraid. It's very likely that you'll be outnumbered."

"I understand," Nick said.

In the sky, leading the squadron, he glanced down on the burning ruins of Cristobal. Then he looked over the horizon. The sun was coming up and he saw a cloud of black specks that he knew to be enemy aircraft. His creased face hardened, and he kept watching the planes. Once he glanced at the insignia painted on the wing of his own ship. It was red, white and blue.

Respectfully dedicated to:

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF;

And to my shipmates in the United States Navy