

DRAGONFLY

Charles A. Cornell

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Chapter One

The train shuddered, braking hard, bumpers thudding together with a loud bang, iron wheels screeching in pain. The little boy, barely five-years-old, was thrown forward into my lap. A heavy suitcase fell off the rack and crashed on the schoolgirl sitting beside me. Blood spurted down her white blouse.

There was a roar of propellers outside. I looked through the train window at the Cornish coastline, its jagged cliffs falling down to white-capped waves. The sun, a dull orb darting in and out of stormy clouds, disappeared behind a discus-shaped silhouette.

“What’s that horrible sound?” the vicar asked.

The whine of the siren grew louder. I glanced out again and saw the aircraft’s unmistakable circular profile, the multiple gun turrets under its nose. “A Platzi,” I muttered. “What’s it doing this far from London?” The sound of the bomber’s dive-siren turned towards the train. Its fuselage tilted downwards. The doors on its undercarriage opened. “Oh my God!” I gasped. “Not us! Why...*us*?”

The carriages lurched backwards, yanking me like a puppet on a string. The little boy tipped out of my arms onto the floor. With desperate puffs of steam, chugging faster and faster, the train rumbled back in its bid to outrace the bomber and reach the safety of the tunnel we’d left only minutes before.

A conductor ran through the corridor banging on the compartment doors. “Get down! Get down!” he screamed.

“Quickly!” I yelled at the vicar, pointing to the luggage rack. “Help me take this down. All of it!”

The portly vicar and I wrestled two trunks and my duffel bag to the floor as the train shook violently. “Like this!” I said, pushing the heaviest trunk against the window. “Hurry! Pile it up!”

We made a wall of luggage then dragged the schoolgirl’s suitcase across the gap between the seats. The elderly man, who was traveling in the company of the young boy, fussed as I tucked him under the roof of our makeshift air raid shelter, his wide eyes searching from face to face for answers there was no time to give if we had any hope of staying alive. The bomber’s wailing dive-siren grew closer and closer to our carriage, its seats now empty, their plush green fabric littered with discarded books and newspapers. The schoolgirl was shivering beside me, holding her head, looking like a bundle of bloody laundry that had grown arms and legs. I grabbed the little boy and held him tightly to my chest as the vicar prayed in a rapid, hushed voice, inviting protection from our Lord. I started to pray with him.

“Miss Somerset,” the little boy sobbed, clinging to my uniform as I stroked his head. “I’m scared.”

There was an evil ripping sound as bullets sliced through the roof of the compartment and raced across the tops of the luggage. Scraps of leather and bits of clothing flew into the air. The schoolgirl screamed. The volley of bullets was followed by another, inches from our faces, shredding a path across the seats, tearing the newspapers into strips. Seconds later, explosions shattered our windows, filling the carriage with smoke and dirt, hurling my duffel bag against the compartment door. There were screams up and down the corridor. Then a hush.

Wounded, the train slowed, rocking in an awkward stagger from side to side. I wafted the dirty air away with my hands. “We’re still moving. The bombs missed us. Thank God! Is everyone all right?”

The rumbling echo of the train’s wheels entered through the broken windows. The greyness of the Cornish sky peered down through a large hole in the carriage’s roof. Cold air rushed in from all sides. The schoolgirl, cut on the head by the falling luggage and in a state of shock, was otherwise unharmed. But the vicar clutched his black shirt with his hands, his face ashen, his portly chest heaving in desperate strokes of panic. His breathing was short and labored.

The eyes of the spritely five-year-old beamed as the sound of more propellers filled the sky. He squirmed out of my lap as I tended to the vicar, climbed onto the seat and pointed his finger through the shattered window into the cold air. “Look! Spitfires!”

“Blasted Jerries!” his great-grandfather said from underneath the luggage, shaking his fist.

“No, Great Dad. They’re ours!”

“Get back under here!” I ordered, yanking the child away from the razor-like edges of broken glass.

The sirens on the Nazi dive-bomber were no longer wailing. I heard the straining drone of engines, the sounds of different types of aircraft going into a steep climb.

As I leaned forward I felt a tug on my uniform. “But miss, why can *you* look and not *me*?”

“Because I need to check if we’re going to be safe, Jowan.”

“I want to see! I want to see!”

“All right. But stay in my arms. This glass will cut you to ribbons. We don’t want that to happen, do we?”

The German dive-bomber had veered away from the train and was heading south over the grassy headlands towards the blustery sea, and France. Several Spitfires were right on its tail. They were so close I was sure the enemy tail-gunner could see into our boys’ faces as they opened up with their guns. The Spitfires battled the larger bomber like angry blackbirds chasing a hawk away from their nest, weaving a desperate pattern in the sky. Fiery smoke was spewing from the Platzi’s wings.

Jowan was delighted. “Look, miss! Look! That’s what I want to do when I grow up!”

The Spitfires twirled in the air, giving the Luftwaffe bomber a right spanking as they pushed it away from the English coast. We lost sight of the planes when the train entered the darkness of the tunnel. Its engine chugged to a crawl with a hiss of steam, and stopped. A great cheer thundered up and down the carriages.

“What do we do now, miss?”

“Stay here with Great Dad, Jowan. He needs you. See how frightened he is?”

The vicar’s eyes were staring into the sky through the hole in the roof.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m getting help for the vicar.”

“Is he dead? I saw a dead person once.”

“Just promise me, Jowan, you won’t touch him until I get back. Okay? That’s a good boy.”

The damaged train limped slowly towards the station at Penzance, the long trip from London down to Cornwall nearing its tiresome end. The engine stopped with a jolt about fifty feet short of the platforms. Smoke was rising from deep craters on either side of the tracks. The glass and steel roof of the station had collapsed in a mangled heap. There were piles of charred bricks marking the spot where some of the station's walls used to be.

Weary passengers began to disembark onto the bare tracks, searching for the loved ones who were supposed to meet them there. I helped Jowan and his great-grandfather down from the train. They had little in the way of luggage, just a cloth satchel for their clothes and a small basket for the sandwiches and apples they'd brought with them on the journey. We stumbled through the crowd, walking past one bomb crater and then another. In the random crush of bodies racing this way and that, I was separated from the little boy and the old man, and they disappeared from view.

I had no idea what I was going to do. Somewhere in the ruins of Penzance there was supposed to be a bus station, the next leg of my journey, but most of the buildings in the center of town were ablaze, fire crews overwhelmed by the extensive destruction. People were weeping in the streets, kneeling over bodies covered with sheets.

I stood amid the growing chaos, duffel bag over my shoulder, wondering where I might find a billet for the night. Some young men in Air Force blue were helping to load an ambulance. I was about to approach them to see if a fellow pilot could hitch a ride to the RAF base when I felt a tug on my jacket. It was Jowan. He looked up at me with his curious smile, tugging on my sleeve to pull me away from the station's ruined entrance. "Great Dad says you can come with us if you like, miss."

The little boy led me to a green flatbed lorry that was belching black smoke as it sat idling in the loading yard next to the station. It had a cracked windshield but was otherwise intact. 'Culldean's Farm' was written in yellow letters on its dusty side.

"I'm Arthur, Jowan's father," said a man with a clay pipe, tweed jacket, flat cap and wellies. "You're going to Treporth, aren't you? I'm sure we can squeeze you in the cab."

"I'll ride in the back," I said, knowing how smelly Great Dad was. "I could use the fresh air."

"As you like."

The bed of the lorry was nearly full and had an odd assortment of wares. There were empty cider barrels, a crate of dishes, a newly purchased butter churn, and yards of fabric rolled tightly over cardboard tubes. I piled some empty potato sacks over the

fabric and made myself somewhere to sit.

Arthur Culldean knew his way around the back streets of Penzance and was able to avoid the heaviest of the bombed-out sections of town. The Luftwaffe's attack had concentrated on the town's commercial and industrial centers, its rail yards and the port. A merchant ship was burning in the harbour but fortunately it looked like the Royal Navy was out at sea at the time.

As we made progress beyond the rubble-strewn streets, we arrived on the outskirts of Penzance and passed by a Platzi that had been downed in a field. The plane had crashed within feet of a country pub. A curious crowd had gathered around as the Territorial Army picked through the remains for anything of military importance. The Dornier Rundflügel, or as the Luftwaffe called it 'die Hollenfeuer, the Hellfire', was the newest addition to the Nazis' deadly arsenal. There wasn't much left of the Platzi or its pilots, just a smoldering expanse of junk. The top of its fuselage was protruding from the ground; the large swastika on its back forming a grisly burial cross. Some boys were throwing rocks at the wreckage, squealing with delight every time they hit the swastika with a clang.

The lorry was soon ambling its way through the English countryside where the air no longer smelt of smoke but the earthy aroma of cattle and pigs. As we travelled south, bumping along the hedgerow-trimmed country roads hugging the Cornish coastline, the rhythmic swaying of the lorry lulled me to sleep.

The next thing I knew it was raining and I was being poked awake by the not-so-gentle fingers of a five-year-old boy. "We're here," Jowan announced as he pushed on my stiff shoulders.

I rubbed my eyes to discover the lorry had stopped at the top of a cliff. Below us was a tiny village, a quaint slice of Cornish solitude which consisted of no more than a single street lined with white-washed thatched cottages. A river ran between houses on one side and small allotments on the other.

Across the sea, nearly a mile offshore, was a castle on an island, surrounded by the angry waters of the English Channel. I assumed from the description given to me, this was Royal Naval Station Enysfarne. The castle's tall medieval spires were silhouetted against the red twilight of the setting sun. The castle looked like a brooding dragon standing watch over England's shores: the path up to its keep, the dragon's spiny tail; the parapets, the folds of its angled wings; the turrets, the crown of its ever-vigilant brow.

"You'll have to take these steps down to Treporth, miss," Arthur Culldean said, as he grabbed my duffel bag and helped me down. "It's another four miles along these bluffs before we get to the road that runs back into the village. It's a slow slog and it's getting late. You'll get there quicker this way."

"Thank you. You've been very kind."

He noticed my faraway look. "Strange place, Enysfarne. Always has been. That's where you're heading, aren't you? Someone meeting you in the village?"

I pulled a folded scrap of paper from my jacket.

"A Mr. Darwyn Gascoyne. But that's all it says. How do I find him?"

Arthur Culldean chuckled. "How can you *not*?" he replied. "He's the harbourmaster of Treporth, amongst his many other endeavours. If he's not propping up the bar in the Portcullis Inn, then he's in the gutter outside it. You'll have no trouble finding him. Treporth isn't a very big place."

I felt a tug on my jacket. "Are you leaving, miss?"

I reached down and picked Jowan up. He poggled at the badge on my shoulder. "They're pilot's wings," I said.

"You're a pirate?"

"No, silly. A *pilot*."

"Do you fly planes?"

"That's what a pilot does."

"But you're a girl."

I pulled the rest of my lemon drops from my pocket and put the bag in Jowan's little hand.

"Cor, thank you, miss!" He gave me such a big hug. "Why can't she come back to the farm, Dad?" he asked with woeful eyes. "There's lots of people staying at our farm, miss. I'm sure there's room."

"I have to go to Enysfarne, Jowan. I have a new job there."

"Let me take him from you," Arthur said. "Come on, Jowan. The miss has to go." The little boy fussed as he was put on the ground, wriggling out of his father's arms to clutch my trouser leg.

"Leave her be, Jowan. She'll be wanting to get down to the village to have a bite to eat I expect."

"My Dad says, miss, there's not a finer meal anywhere than what you'll find in the Portcullis."

"I'm sure there isn't."

'Great Dad' Daveth Culldean was fast asleep in the lorry. I gave Jowan another hug. "Give your Great Dad my regards," I said as I started down the steps.

"Bye, miss."

"God speed, young lady," Arthur Culldean added.

I watched the Bedford trundle away, its diesel smoke chugging in the damp evening air, the rattle of its load of empty barrels breaking the silence.

The drizzle had strengthened and the creaky wooden steps down to the village of Treporth had become quite slippery. With each step I took, the rain fell like sadness on my shoulders. It was as if a dark cloud of regret had followed me from Suffolk and was trying to wash my pilot's wings into the sea. I'm not

accustomed to wallowing in self-pity and I wasn't about to start. "Suck in your gut, girl; keep a stiff upper lip and carry on," my Dad always said.

As I entered the village proper, I expected the arrival of a stranger to create a bit of a stir. This had to be the most remote military outpost in southwestern England, perhaps all of England. But each villager I came across went about their business without giving me a second glance.

I saw a rather rotund woman carrying a large cloth-covered basket marching towards the biggest building in the village which by its size and the muffled noise coming from within, must be the famous Portcullis Inn. As I caught up with her, the most inviting smell of warm bread wafted from the basket.

"Excuse me?"

The woman turned and looked me up and down. "He's in there. You're late."

"But I've not introduced myself. My name is—"

"I know who you are. Should have been here hours ago. He's in no condition to take the dory out to Enysfarne. You'll have to use the causeway. And you'll have to look sharp. No dawdling. The tide'll be coming in soon. Just put the reins in Darwyn's hands. The donkey knows the way."

She pulled on the heavy pub door then said, "Wait here."

There was a donkey tied to a post outside the pub, harnessed to what was a rather rickety looking cart. It was rattling its bridle, snorting and braying in the cold sea air. I was just about to walk through the door to find some warmth when a body was flung out into the street and stumbled to my feet. The man was no taller than I was, five-foot-five or six, but quite portly, had a bald head with bushy sideburns, and stank of liquor.

"Darwyn Gascoyne, at your service," he said, then proceeded to throw up in the street. "Sorry. Must have been something I ate."

A cobblestone causeway crossed St. Stephen's Bay to connect RNS Enysfarne to the mainland. I'm not sure how Mr. Gascoyne did it but the donkey was eventually pointed in the right direction and we started another bumpy ride, hopefully the last one.

"If they call last orders," Mr. Gascoyne said with a burp. "Not to worry. You can always stop by my kiddlywink. It's the shack behind the harbourmaster's office. I have a little business, you see. Just to put some extra coppers in my pocket, mind you. And more coal on the fire, you understand. It's the finest rum this side of Barbados. It has my personal guarantee. Get it from one of the darkies in the Territorials. Nice chap. A bit odd, mind. Where he gets it from I don't know and don't care. The sailors at the station love it and that's all that matters."

"Damned war," he continued. "But what's a little rum going to

do to spoil it, eh? And if it looks like you're entering a bakery when you come in, that's all well and good. Because it is. My wife's apple-cakes are considered a delicacy for miles around. Don't leave without some. Have you met my wife?"

"Briefly."

"Bit of a bat. But a helluva cook."

We were twenty yards from Enysfarne's main gate when the cart came to an abrupt stop. "Civilians are not allowed to venture any closer to the Naval Station," Mr. Gascoyne said as he dropped me off. "Anyone not in uniform will be considered a spy and shot without question. Unless on official deliveries, of course. But it's a bit dark to take chances. So best to be safe."

I thanked him and watched the donkey cart turn around and wobble its way back to the village. I approached the sentry and presented him with my papers. The soldier looked me up and down as if inspecting a child sent to the countryside to escape the Blitz. He reserved his most astonished look when he reached the line that said 'Pilot Officer'.

"Everything in order, *corporal*?"

The sentry coughed, took another look at my papers and nodded. He saluted and let me pass.

Beyond the sentry post was an archway flanked by two half-round towers. Passing through, I came upon a cobblestone road that led to a small harbour sitting at the rocky footings of the castle. As far as I could see in the dimming light, the harbour consisted of a cluster of small stone buildings that watched over

a pair of man-made piers jutting out from the island like a giant crab's claw. The Atlantic Ocean, with its marauding wolf packs of German U-boats, lay just beyond the waves lapping against the harbour's concrete seawalls.

The castle, its harbour and the distant shadows of the hamlet of Treporth were now in total darkness. Not even a candle was burning. As my eyes strained in the waning light, I spotted a familiar shape - a Sunderland flying boat bobbing within the shelter of the harbour's walls. The Sunderland was an ungainly, lumbering beast with a bulbous hull and four noisy engines. In Coastal Command, we used to say it was like flying a grumpy hippo. Alongside the Sunderland, a stout-nosed fishing trawler was keeping company with several Cornish dories.

I climbed the wet, weathered steps towards the castle keep, my tired body dwarfed by the sheer size of Enysfarne's impenetrable medieval battlements. Part fortress, part monastery, ancient Enysfarne was the thing of Arthurian legends. But there were no archers in sight; no bows to strike fear upon those who were besieging its walls. Instead, the ramparts bristled with ack-ack guns and searchlights, radio towers and machine-gun nests.

The castle of Enysfarne was a dark and towering force that hovered over what was left of my innocence. It contained my

destiny, of that I had no doubt whatsoever; a fate that threatened to wipe the blush off my face and turn me into the man my father always wanted me to be.

Chapter Two

I was escorted to the station commander's office by Ensign Dougie Bishop, a husky bull of a man. He sported arms bathed in tattoos of naked ladies and had a beard that made him look the spitting image of the sailor on the front of a pack of Player's Navy Cut cigarettes.

“Bad luck t’have woman board ship,” he grunted in his broad Yorkshire accent as we marched down the lonely corridor.

“We're not exactly on a ship, Mr. Bishop.”

“Can thee cook?” he asked.

“Not really. Unless you count making tea and toast as cooking?”

“Guess that'll have to do then, miss. Here we are.”

He knocked firmly on the door of the commander's office and then barged in without waiting for a reply from inside. “Pilot Officer Somerset has arrived, sir.”

The office of the station commander, Commodore KC Lowndes, looked to have once been a dining hall in medieval times. Its floors were bare, honey-coloured flagstone. Its ceiling was high and curved upwards into a barrel arch. A large rectangular oak table, strewn with maps and nautical charts, was standing in isolation in the middle of the room. Ample space had been left around it for a stand-up briefing for perhaps fifteen or twenty people. On the wall behind the table was a large display board with a map of the North Atlantic stretching from the Norwegian coastline and the North Sea to the British Isles and Ireland, and onwards across open ocean to Iceland, Greenland and the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Multi-coloured pins littered the map.

Sitting at his desk at the far end of the room, Commodore Lowndes was applying his signature to a swath of papers with the efficiency of a teller at Lloyd's Bank. Papers were filling a tray until it was nearly overflowing.

Without looking up, the commodore said, “Show him in, Ensign.”

“*She is in*, sir,” Bishop replied.

With those words, the commodore's attack on his paperwork

was stopped dead in its tracks. I felt several nudges in the small of my back as Ensign Bishop prodded me across the room. Despite my tomboy physique, standing next to the brutish Ensign Bishop was such an unfortunate way to make a first impression. I must have looked like a dwarf.

Commodore Lowndes took off his round, tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, stiffened his back and gawked, "I'm expecting a Pilot Officer *Ronnie* Somerset. There must be some kind of mistake, Miss-?"

"No mistake, sir. Pilot Officer *Veronica* Somerset." I snapped to attention and delivered the crispest salute I had ever mustered; a salute that lingered long on my cap. "But everyone calls me 'Ronnie', sir."

"That will be all, Ensign."

As Bishop left, the cavernous office turned as quiet as a library. A manila folder had been sitting in a prized position on the commodore's desk, carefully isolated from the flotsam that was the rest of his papers. On its front was the crest of the Royal Air Force. Commodore Lowndes opened the folder and shuffled through the pages inside, his nose sniffing like he was hunting for a lost truffle. Finally, in the snarky tone I was used to hearing from my commanding officers, he said, "So they've given me a teddy bear, have they?"

"Beg pardon, sir. A teddy bear?"

"The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force fight over the ownership of Sunderlands like two children fighting over a favourite teddy bear," he explained, looking up at last. "The Navy thinks of a Sunderland as a boat that flies. The RAF says it's a bomber with floats. Both of my Navy Sunderland pilots were called up for RAF fighter training. Smashing lads. Jolly unfair to hold them back. I have Flight Lieutenant Trevor Mowbray seconded to me from the RAF. He can do a spot of Sunderland duty in a pinch until the other chaps arrive but he has more important things on his plate than fly a Sunderland. The Air Ministry promised to send me some cracking pilots in return for mine, and in particular, a chap named Ronnie Somerset. But clearly," the commodore sighed, "they've sent me a teddy bear instead."

"I've flown plenty of times in Sunderlands, sir."

"Of course you have, Somerset," he said, resuming his examination of my file. "Of course you have. Delivering them from the Short Brothers factory in Northern Ireland to bases in Scotland. And then on the postal route from Scotland to Iceland. The *postal route*? Damn it, Somerset, did you happen to drop any bombs on submarines while you were delivering the mail?"

"Er, no sir. But—"

"But you expect to fly *my* Sunderland, do you? So you can write home and tell your parents how you hunted pesky little U-

boats before tea and saved the Royal Navy?"

"My mother is dead, sir. Died of Spanish flu when I was just a baby. But if those are your orders, sir, then yes. I'll hunt Nazi subs. But not the writing home part. It's not allowed. Loose lips sink ships, they say." I hoped a little nautical terminology might impress him.

"Quite right. At ease, Somerset."

I waited several minutes, hardly breathing, as Commodore Lowndes buried his head again, absorbing the minutest details of my RAF service record as if he was a large sponge mopping up a spill.

Finally, he asked, "What were your duties at RAF Martlesham Heath, Somerset?"

"My duties, sir?"

"Yes, Somerset, your duties. You are a pilot, aren't you? But what did you fly? It seems there's hardly any mention of flying at Martlesham in the file."

"There isn't? But there should be. Well, I mean..."

"Spit it out, Somerset."

"They had me doing desk duty. Something about waiting my turn. So I worked in the operations room, the radar room, the telegram desk and then I did some courier duty, delivering dispatches from Martlesham to the US Army Air Force base at Thorpe Abbots. B-17 Flying Fortresses. I didn't fly in those. But I was shortlisted."

"Shortlisted? For bombers?"

"No, no, I mean fighters, sir. I was shortlisted for Spitfire training. That's what I was supposed to be waiting to do. That's why I was sent from Scotland to Martlesham Heath. But I did fly bombers. I was in Transport Command when I joined up. Flew Lancasters. From their factory in Canada to Glasgow. Three missions of that. Bloody cold, that Atlantic, sir. But being a Navy man, I suppose you know that. Well, um... yes, at Martlesham, I did get the chance to fly in the base's Hudson several times. But only as the navigator. I'm not sure why all that's not in the file."

"So, once again, Somerset, you've had no real *combat* experience then?"

"As I said, I was wait-listed for fighter training, until, um, well..."

"Do you know a Group Captain Corscombe? Because he seems to know you."

"He was going to be my commanding officer at the Flight School at Martlesham Heath until he and I, well, you see, we, um..."

"Group Captain Corscombe seems to have given you a glowing reference, which is in stark contrast to the rest of *this*," the commodore said, holding up a document dripping in the

fussiness of British military bureaucracy. "It's from the Office of the Air Vice-Marshal for Fighter Command, Group Southeast. I don't suppose you've read it?"

"No sir. Not from the air vice-marshal's office."

"It's signed by Sir Reginald Melbury himself."

There was a moment of awkward silence as I shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the next. This was the document that had followed me down those slippery steps. I could hear the stark *clomp-clomp* of heavy boots marching down the corridor outside the commodore's office. I imagined it might be the British version of a Gestapo squad, ready to take me away without trial, to be jailed for crimes I hadn't committed.

"He says in here," the commodore huffed, as he thumped his finger on the file, "that you were found *unsuitable* for fighter training. That you had *issues*. Issues with handling yourself off the base."

"Beg pardon, sir, but that's an outright lie! None of that had anything to do with my flying skills. I know how it looks, but —"

"How it *looks*, Somerset? With this dossier, I'm jolly well damned if I know why on earth the Royal Air Force expects *me* to let *you* fly my Sunderland! It appears the Air Ministry has decided His Majesty's Air Force has little use for you. But someone in Whitehall presumes the Navy does. There may be a desperate shortage of pilots but if it were up to me, I wouldn't let you fly a *kite* for the Royal Navy!"

"May I speak frankly, sir?"

The commodore jerked upright, his face red. If steam could have come out of his ears, it would have, with a whistle. He paused, huffed again to let the steam out, and then said, "I suppose I won't be able to stop you. Go on. If you must."

"Well sir, women pilots serving in the RAF have been treated like nothing more than aerial cabbies, servicing mail routes in Sunderlands or flying stripped down Lancasters across the Atlantic. I'm twenty-two-years old. I earned my wings when I was nineteen. Men younger than I are being called into fighter cockpits, often their first aircraft, and with less training. These men are being judged not by their age or by their gender, but by their skill and their bravery."

"Jolly right too."

"I have fifteen missions in Sunderlands, sir. We could have been fired upon at any time by German fighters on any one of those missions, postal routes or not. And I was well trained and ready to do whatever it took to fend Jerry off. Fly the plane. Man the machine-guns. And yes, drop bombs on a Nazi sub if it came our way. The fact I didn't have to do it, and have never done it, doesn't mean I *can't* do it, if called upon. I'm an RAF pilot. And I guess now I'm a Royal Navy pilot. I'm confident I

can acquit myself in combat, if given half the chance. So all I'm asking is that you give me that chance, to prove myself."

The commodore was stunned.

"To prove myself, sir."

"Yes, yes, I heard you, Somerset. Thank you for that. I think. But not another *word* until I've gone through this file, in its entirety. Not a single word until you're spoken to again, is that clear, Somerset?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good."

Commodore Lowndes fumbled through the rest of the dossier. As he turned each page, the silence in the room was punctuated with a series of even odder sounding grunts. I felt my cheeks glowing red hot despite the frigid temperature inside the sparsely furnished office.

He bolted upright with a start. "Princess Victoria?" he said, shocked. "You *know* the Princess Royal?"

"We've been friends since childhood, sir."

"You're *friends* with the princess? How is that possible, Somerset? Your file makes no mention of having a title. Do you?"

Oh, how I wish I could lie about that. But as much as I would like to, and as much as it would have helped me so much at times, I just couldn't. "Well sir," I said. "My father has been a butler for the Royal Household at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace for many years, since I could ever remember. Vickie... um, I mean Her Royal Highness and I, and my best friend, Busbee Collins... she's also a pilot... I know it sounds strange, we're not royals ourselves, but we were all very close as children, and um..."

"Yes, yes, that's quite enough, Somerset," he said, holding up a note on Royal letterhead. "There's a commendation here from Princess Victoria that seems to override the negative report from Fighter Command. And it's jolly well it does. Because, and I use the Princess's own words," he said, reading from the letter, "it would be to the great pleasure of King George VI and Victoria, his daughter and heir to the throne, that Pilot Officer Veronica Somerset, while seconded to His Majesty's Navy, be accorded by her commanding officer the full privileges of her rank in respect of her exemplary performance in the service of His Majesty's Air Forces."

"Vickie's always had a special fondness for the RAF, sir. And she's a very skilled pilot herself. I watched her win the King's Cup Air Race in 1936. And—"

"That's quite enough nonsense for one night, Somerset!" Commodore Lowndes snorted, shutting the file and pushing it to the edge of his desk. "Well, I'll be damned! Damned and horse-whipped. *'To the great pleasure of the King's daughter'*, indeed!

How the devil did you-?"

The commodore's remarks were interrupted with the wail of an air raid siren. Dougie Bishop stormed into the office, a helmet for Commodore Lowndes in one hand and a strange looking radio pack in the other.

"Wasps, Ensign?"

"Nay. Jerry's got something worse in the air tonight, commodore. Platzis again. And they're giving the radar station at Treporth a right pounding!"

The two men left me standing there. As I stepped into the corridor to see what was going on, I was nearly bowled over by sailors scrambling to put on clothes and air raid helmets in the frantic rush to their battle-stations.

I heard the most deafening scream as a passing aircraft rattled what few windows the castle keep had. It shrieked by within feet of the battlements and at a speed that was truly frightening. It left behind a whirling vortex of sound that boomed along the corridor like the beating of a kettle drum. That was no Platzi. I heard the station's ack-ack guns engaging it, adding their thump-thump to the cacophony.

I had no idea where I was running to. I had barely been able to absorb the layout of the keep on my way in. It was a truly intricate maze of medieval halls and ante-chambers, staircases and buttresses.

My only thought was, *Up, Ronnie. Go up.*

So I did.

I picked a stairway that was quiet and empty, where sailors weren't still streaming down in a great sweaty rush. The stairs had apparently been abandoned. They were dripping in cobwebs and spiders but as I could see the flashing light of explosions coming from underneath the door at the top, I knew the door must lead into a room overlooking the action.

The door was old and weathered. A draft of cold night air pursed through its splintered surface. At first I thought it was locked, but realizing that it was simply age that had melded it shut, I put my shoulder into the wood and burst through.

I fell flat on my face into a clump of wet moss. It was then that I realized how tragic this endeavor could have been - the door led to nothing more than a few crumbling flagstones that once was the floor of a room that had, many eons past, fallen into the sea below. I now found myself outside the walls of the keep on a ledge a full one hundred feet above the rocks of Enysfarne Island.

The gasp of fright lasted only long enough for my senses to refocus on the attack at Treporth. High above the village on the bluffs that overlooked the sea was a radar station. Radar towers like this were part of the Chain Home system that protected coastal England from attack, giving our defenses early warning

of approaching German aircraft.

From a distance, I could see searchlights sweeping the sky, lighting up the underside of the clouds. Several Platzis were dive-bombing our defensive positions, the vicious explosions from their bombs announcing their success. The bombers dove again, strafing our troops on the ground. I could see our boys scurrying away from their damaged ack-ack guns. Some lay prone and lifeless on the grassy bluff. A radar tower was destroyed in the first strike. The three dive-bombers circled back for another run.

My heart was lifted when I heard a familiar sound overhead. The squadron of Spitfires from Penzance had arrived to give chase. "Give'em hell!" I screamed.

The Spitfires roared overhead like angry bees, sending the Platzis out to sea. Suddenly, I heard that howling shriek again. Four German fighters punched through the high cloud and descended on our boys. These fighters were oddly designed, with a barrel-shaped rear housing containing a massive single propeller as well as a jet engine. This twin propulsion system gave them a deadly combination of speed and efficiency, and was the origin of that frightening howl when they flew past. I had never seen anything like them in any briefing at Martlesham Heath.

I watched in absolute horror as one of these devil-fighters got a Spitfire in its sights, unleashed its front guns, and in what can only be described as a hailstorm of bullets, tore our plane into flaming shards with a single burst.

Soon, over twenty aircraft were in a terrifying dogfight. Each time a Spitfire approached a Platzis from behind, two of these devil-fighters got on its tail. The Luftwaffe pilots had a vicious system and like two Jack Russells that grabbed your leg, wouldn't let go until blood was running. One by one, all of our Spitfires were vanquished without a single enemy loss. The burning fuselages, containing the valiant souls of our pilots, crashed into the sea in front of my eyes.

My heart sank into my stomach.

I felt like throwing up.

Flying alone in the sky and satisfied with their grisly accomplishments at Treporth, the three Platzis and their four devil-fighter escorts returned to formation, looped across the sea in a wide arc, and headed back towards the English mainland to find more targets.

The fires around the castle and in Treporth took away the darkness. With no more planes in sight, the sounds of people yelling as they fought to extinguish the blazes replaced the sounds of gunfire and aircraft engines. I looked across at the machine-gun nest that was fifty feet below me, to my left. Medics were attending to some of the gunners who had been

wounded. I saw a plume of black smoke rising from the station's harbour. I couldn't make out what had been hit but hoped it was the trawler and not the Sunderland.

My attention wandered to the top of the keep's main tower, directly above the gunners and in view from my ledge. A figure was peering through the oddest set of brass binoculars, mounted on a rather large brass tripod. The instrument had unusual antenna-like appendages extending from its sides. The brass on the instrument shimmered with a flickering beat as the tripod's legs absorbed the red glow cast from the many fires in the distance.

The figure behind the tripod was that of a young man who appeared to be about my age, twenty-one or twenty-two, clean shaven, with tussled short hair in a schoolboy cut. He was wearing a brown leather trench-coat. He alternated between peering into the binoculars' lenses and writing notes into a logbook. He turned the optics to follow a line towards Penzance, and then made an adjustment as if calibrating something. He peered into the binoculars again and continued his note-taking, seemingly unperturbed by the chaos of the air raid.

He stopped his deliberations and looked in my direction. I could feel the wind picking up on the back of my neck. The gust came up rapidly, tossing my hair in front of my eyes. He leaned over the battlement. "Watch out! Behind you!" he shouted.

The ledge I was standing on, and a good twenty feet of castle wall on either side, was lit up by the brightest, most intense light I had ever seen. The wind was fierce and the roar of a gale rushed in to deafen any other sounds around me. As I turned, I was completely blinded by the light shining in my face. The wind pulled my hair horizontally; the mossy debris and crusty rubble of the ledge swirling up into my eyes.

I froze in place, a swelling surge of panic running up from my stomach, catching my throat so I could hardly breathe. As my eyes strained to see, I could only make out a black shape, a massive flying object behind the light. The aircraft was moving slowly from side-to-side. I could see the outline of a cockpit and the silhouette of a pilot. Above his canopy, two enormous horizontal propellers lifted the aircraft in a hover.

"Wasp! Wasp!" someone yelled from below. The machine-gun nest opened fire but our bullets bounced off the aircraft's black armoured skin with a tinny *ping, ping*, as if children were throwing stones at an oil barrel.

The craft leaned sideways, and then moved quickly upwards. The searchlight illuminated the castle walls until the aircraft's height cleared the top of the keep. As the craft turned away from the ledge, I saw a large globular fuselage, with a broad red band enclosing a black swastika.

Just then I felt a firm grip on the back of my collar. I was

lifted, dragged by the scruff of my neck, and pulled back inside the castle.

“Now's not the time to be messing with one of those, Miss Somerset, if you know what's good for you!” said Dougie Bishop.

He took me in his arms like a baby and carried me down the stairs. I was shaking and wet; my hair a tangled, knotted mess. He put me back on my feet and brushed the moss off my shoulders.

The sirens had stopped. A morbid calm had returned to Enysfarne as sailors trudged back into the castle from their stations, some more bloodied than others, but few without the scars of a terrifying night on their faces.

“Is it over, Ensign Bishop?” I asked.

“They'll not be coming back here tonight, miss. The bombers have done their dirty work and will be low on fuel. There's nothing we can do for Penzance, what's left of it, those poor sods. And I'm afraid to say, the Sunderland's in bad shape, miss.”

My heart sank.

“Aye, miss. I knew bad luck followed you. You should get cleaned up and go to bed. We'll sort you out in the morning.”

“That hovering thing? I've never seen anything like it.”

“A Wasp. Jerry's latest toy. Don't know why it didn't fire at you when it had the chance. These pests do the spotting for the dive-bombers. Jerry's been probing our coastal defenses for a fortnight now. Doing whatever damage he can before we chase him away. But not tonight. He got the better of us, he did.”

“Those jet fighters, Ensign. What the blazes were those evil things?”

“Aye, miss. Not good. Not good at all. Never seen the likes of them before. This was a new kind of Jerry attack. And a good 'un at that. Nigel will tell us all about it in the morning. Once he's sent the radar images to Bletchley Park. Fighter Command will identify them, miss. Our spies in France have been seeing all sorts of weird machines. It's a right nightmare, miss. And it ain't getting better.”

A lump formed in my throat. “The Nazis are getting ready to invade us, aren't they Ensign Bishop?”

Bishop's thickset chin dropped towards his chest. “Aye, miss. That's what the lads have been saying. I know the commodore's worried. He may not look like much to you, miss. His papers and all. But he's a brave man. And seen lots of action in the last war. And survived it. He's not saying much, one way or t'other.”

Dougie Bishop led me down a corridor not far from the commodore's office to a small windowless room that contained a single bed, a lamp, a dresser and a worn Persian carpet that added a smidgeon of colour to what was no more than an

oversized pantry.

“The commodore had this set up when his wife visited. We haven't seen her for quite some time now. Rumors are she was killed in the Blitz. The commodore says nowt about it. But this room'll do I think, miss. There's a water closet with washbasin 'cross from the commodore's office. Just knock first, in case he's doing his ablutions.”

Ensign Dougie Bishop left me to it. My duffel bag had already been delivered to the room, presumably while I was getting my dressing down in the commodore's office. I took off my jacket and shoes and lay my head down on the soft pillow. It felt like heaven. I pulled the blanket over me, resigned to leaving a proper washing-up until the morning. I quickly went to sleep.

Chapter Three

Goodness knows what time it was. At first, the strange rapping sound was easy to ignore. I was just dog tired. Twice I thought I heard it. A slow, solid knocking. But each time, in my deep dreamlike state, I wasn't sure if what I was hearing was real or I was imagining it, in the blur between waking and sleeping.

Not this time. It was just too loud.

“Who is it?” I asked.

The knocking continued. I removed the blankets that had cocooned me during the night and, as I was fully dressed, put on my shoes and approached the door. I leaned against it and listened.

“Who is it?”

I turned the knob slowly, my heart thumping. I saw the flicker of a candle in the crack of the door as it opened. I entered the corridor just in time to see the passing of a robed shape as it turned the corner at the end of the hall, taking the candlelight with him.

Enysfarne's hallways were sparsely lit, just a single light bulb outside the commodore's office, in the opposite direction to where the figure could be seen. The far end of the hallway was slowly slipping into darkness as the candle moved away from me. I followed the receding light and picked up my pace, the candlelight guiding me around one corner and then another. As I followed the light down several flights of stairs, the dampness of the walls increased until there were signs of dripping water.

As I turned the next corner, I came upon the most incredible sight. An elderly man stood before me holding the candle. His robes were like a monk's habit, tied at the waist with a simple braided rope. He was a large man, broad shouldered and stout.

He had a voluminous blue-gray beard and a balding head, his face creased with age, with a shock of wispy eyebrows curled at their ends. In one hand he held a candlestick; in the other he held a bird, a pure white dove. It was lying still in his palm. I caught a glimpse of a ring on his finger. It had a large stone with many facets that reflected the candlelight in the most peculiar way.

He said nothing, just stared at me. His body glowed with a luminous blue aura. Behind him was an arched door with heavy wrought iron hinges. I heard the ruffling of wings behind me, a sound I was so familiar with - the frightened and hurried flight of a bird rising from the bushes - a sound I'd heard from the earliest days of my childhood, wandering the woods around Windsor Castle where pheasants were commonplace.

I turned around to look for the bird whose wings beat so loudly, but there was nothing there. When I turned back again to face the old man who held the dove in his hand, I found myself alarmingly alone, save for the candlestick in its holder that was now on the floor.

I placed my hand on my chest. I felt faint. I stumbled sideways, reaching out to steady myself on the cold and wet stone wall.

I heard sounds coming from behind the arched door. I recognized one of the voices. It belonged to the young man who had yelled a warning to me from his perch on the castle keep, the young man in the leather trench-coat peering through odd brass binoculars. I couldn't quite make out what he was saying but he had an argumentative tone as he exchanged words with two other voices in the room beyond the door.

I stepped around the candlestick, unwilling to pick it up, and turned the door's thick iron knob. To my surprise, the door opened without making a sound. As I walked through, I found I was stepping onto a balcony overlooking an expanse of open space below, with a ceiling above me another two stories high. As my eyes wandered up and down, I realized I was looking at the inside of a cave; a cave like none I had ever seen before in my travels.

The candle behind me suddenly extinguished. I was now hidden in the shadows of the entranceway, my presence undetected by the three men below.

The cave was lit by a series of bare bulbs strewn on wires and hung on crude brackets attached to the cave's walls. A man in black trousers and a white shirt, wearing a Jewish yarmulke, was sitting at a table. He said, "But vee must leave soon, don't you see, Nigel? There's not much time left."

"You can't leave," the young man replied. "You mustn't leave. You *have* to keep working. Of course there's not much time left. That's why it's so vitally important we finish our work here. To have even a *chance*. The British Government will assure your

safe passage.”

“British Government? And what if your British government has a svastika on its flag? What then?”

“I'll take up your concerns with the commodore. In the meantime, here's a list of the crystals I need.”

The man at the table was about forty-five-years old and was full-bearded. As I searched the cave, I saw a fresh-faced young boy about fourteen, also dressed in black trousers and white shirt. He had curly ringlets of dark hair dangling down his cheeks. The boy was working at the rock face with a small pick. The similarity in their faces suggested they were father and son. Both of them wore a jeweler's monocular on one eye, attached by a strap to their heads.

The older gentlemen had a black velvet cloth in front of him covered in rock crystals. To one side was a weigh scale and a wooden tray divided into compartments. The man picked up a crystal, examined it, and then placed it on the scale. He applied the smallest weights I'd ever seen, so small he had to pick them up with tweezers. Having weighed the crystal, he then placed it in one of the compartments. As he picked up another, I could see the crystal giving off a multi-coloured spray of light as it reflected the harshness of the naked bulbs.

The old gentleman picked up the list again. “Two days. It will take two days to fill your list, Nigel. And we need some sleep. This is not easy work and my eyes are not getting any younger.”

Nigel sighed. “I'll send a telegram to Berlin, Zachariah. And tell Hitler to wait.”

The old man continued his work, hunched over the pile of crystals on the velvet cloth, picking through them with tweezers. “Oy vay, Moshe,” he said. “Please tell me you will not be so impatient when you grow up. It will be the death of your father, if the Nazis don't get me first.”

“Then please have patience yourself, Zachariah,” Nigel replied. “And I will make you a solemn promise that you and your son will be saved. Somehow. You have a gentleman's word on that.”

Zachariah stopped his work and lifted his head. “A gentleman once made that same promise to my brother and his family, in exchange for a bag of gold coins. My brother, his wife and two daughters were delivered to a farmhouse outside Antwerp where an SS truck waited for them. I never saw them again.”

“My word is better than gold, Zachariah. Of that, I am sure.”

I was listening so intently that I hadn't noticed the spider descend from the damp ceiling above me, the one now crawling through the knotted locks of my hair. It decided that the shortest distance between two points was right across my face, and as its tiny legs scurried onto my cheek, I let out a scream that echoed and echoed, and echoed again, high into the cave's summit.

Moshe, the schoolboy, dropped his pick; the old man Zachariah rose from his table; and the three of them stared up at the balcony, speechless and in shock.

Nigel recognized my uniform and said, "Miss Somerset? How kind of you to join us. Did you bring tea?"

Chapter Four

Dr. Nigel Pennbridge foraged through an array of dynamos, radio transmitters and oscillators in various states of disassembly like a nervous squirrel on the forest floor looking for a nut, an effort of delicate concentration and agility given the unholy mess he'd created.

"Ah! There it is!" he exclaimed, as he produced a toaster. "Do you like marmalade or strawberry jam?"

"You have marmalade? That's so hard to get."

"Marmalade, it is then."

The kettle was boiling away, its whistle nearly lost in the clankety-clank din of the experiments in process in Nigel's laboratory, an abandoned medieval cellar at the lowest level of the castle keep, joined to the crystal cave by a passageway cut through solid rock.

Nigel was an odd boffin, only slightly taller than I, with swept-to-one-side unkempt brown hair that looked like he'd cut it himself. Unlike the sailors at Enysfarne - who all seemed to be bred on a farm specializing in monster men with arms as thick as tree limbs - Nigel's physique was wiry and muscular in a kind of hungry-marathon-runner-way.

Very quickly, I had determined three things about Nigel Pennbridge: he was a packrat for bits and pieces of anything mechanical; he had a special fondness for glass, stainless steel and bakelite; and lastly, he was extremely uncomfortable in the presence of a member of the opposite gender. However, with a

bit of prodding, I was able to convince him to call me Ronnie instead of Veronica - or even, heaven forbid, 'Miss Somerset' - and I considered that a small victory.

As I sat with my cup of tea looking around the lonely medieval chamber, I could imagine how its alcoves once housed barrels of ale and wine, sacks of root vegetables, bushels of barley and wheat, and a host of other essentials necessary to feed the lord of the manor, his knights, and their entourage. But Enysfarne's cellars had now been commandeered by His

Majesty's Navy and the War Office's Department of Experimental War Technology, to become a veritable wonderland of glass bottles and beakers; brass piping and funnels; and Nigel's collection of fantastic electro-mechanical apparatus dressed in chrome.

Standing on its tripod next to the table of spare parts was the odd-looking brass binoculars. A lot of work had gone into the design and construction of something that resembled ordinary binoculars from a distance but up close had the oddest set of aerials and electrical connectors sticking out from either side of the lenses. I cupped my eyes into the brass hood that jutted out of the eyepieces but the image was only a blur.

Hanging from a string stretching from one bookcase to another was an unusual series of negatives. The subjects, coloured a very ghostly pale yellow, looked like aircraft flying above a town. The buildings were just outlines and bright flashes of yellow light sprayed upwards from them.

"Radar-enhanced optical photography. I'm still trying to perfect it," Nigel said.

"Photographs? From radar?"

"The only way to take pictures in the dark."

"Is that what you were doing during the attack, taking photographs? Where is this?"

"Penzance of course."

"Penzance? But that's thirty miles from here, Nigel. How?"

"Jolly good, aren't they? My radar-amplified binocular camera has a range of fifty to sixty miles. But with just a bit of improvement, I think I can get its resolution out as far as a hundred miles."

"These pictures are a bit peculiar. The colour, that is."

"They're just raw images like photographic negatives. They still have to be processed. Do you want to see some finished ones?" Nigel opened a desk drawer. It was stuffed full of glossy photos.

I picked up a few, amazed by their detail considering the distance they were taken from. In the first photo of Penzance, the train station was undamaged and there was a spire of a church in the background I don't remember seeing when I arrived. There were ships in the harbour, people in the streets.

I shuffled through the photos and then gasped.

"It took them two days," Nigel said. "The first day was a practice run, more reconnaissance than anything else. I took these just as the first wave of bombers arrived. And then these afterwards..."

The next photos showed the Penzance that was waiting for me when I stepped off the train. The station destroyed. The church spire gone. The ships ablaze. All of it captured by Nigel's device, with frightening clarity, from thirty miles away.

“And then these, last night...”

He held up a photo of a discus-shaped aircraft plunging headlong towards the center of Penzance.

“Those damn Platzis!” I said. “The horror those people must have gone through.”

“I'm sure Goering isn't too pleased with the name we've given it.”

“We could change it to 'Fatzi' in his honor.”

“Well, it's proving to be deadlier than the Stuka, if that's even possible. Our spies with the French Resistance saw a squadron of twenty Hellfires arriving at an airfield near Dieppe. We think that's where these have come from. Air Force intelligence at Bletchley Park thinks the raids on Penzance are just a prelude. The bastards are preparing for a new Blitzkrieg.”

“On us?”

Nigel's smile disappeared. He didn't answer.

As I perused the photographs, I came across the aircraft I'd heard screaming past the castle's towers, the plane with the odd barrel-shaped back-end that contained both a large propeller and a jet engine. “This one makes such a horrible sound. Beastly thing, isn't it?”

“The Messerschmidt factory's newest fighter-interceptor, the MX-66 'BlitzKugel' or 'Thunderball'. It looks like a flying beer barrel, doesn't it? Our boys are calling it the 'Keg'. They destroyed our Spitfires like swatting at flies. Two days ago, six of these monsters tore through an entire formation of heavily armed American B-17 bombers. The Yank tail gunners couldn't keep up. Hardly any of the Fortresses survived.”

“B-17s?” I gasped. “Oh, no! What squadron was that?”

Nigel thought for a moment. “U.S. Eighth Army Air Corps. Flying out of Thorpe Abbots in Norfolk, I believe.”

“Oh, my God!” My eyes began to water. “Oh, my God!” I felt sick. I sat down on a stool, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye.

“What's wrong?”

“I was at Thorpe Abbots last week. I knew a lot of those boys. They were so young. So full of life. Oh, Nigel, how horrible it must have been. How dreadful.”

“It's getting hard to predict how much more horrible this war will get, I'm afraid. That's why my work here is so important. And why it's so damned frustrating. I'm sure you've faced the bureaucracy of the War Office before.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Pure scientific research often takes a backseat to military expediency I'm afraid, Ronnie. And then there's the Royal Navy to deal with. Their head is in the right place; otherwise I wouldn't have a home for all this. But their heart is somewhere else entirely.”

“In wartime, I've found that everyone's heart is somewhere else.”

“Oh my goodness, the time!” Nigel said, looking at his watch. “There's bakelite curing in an oven. Burnt toast is one thing, but remaking those transmitter housings would set me back two weeks. I'll be right back.”

Nigel scurried off. It was no wonder he was so scrawny. His laboratory was like a shop full of clocks all needing to be wound at different times to keep them running.

At one end of the lab was a contraption that had caught my eye as soon as we'd come in. The curious assemblage of glass was sitting on a large table next to a blackboard full of chalky scribbles of equations and formulae. I wandered over to take a closer look. A scaffold of brass clamps and tripods held up the glassware. At one end was a small electrical pump. In the center of the apparatus was a thick horizontal glass tube about four feet long containing rock crystals from the cave, placed inside the glass so they touched each other one-by-one in a single file line like a series of lead soldiers on a march. The crystals were held in place by tiny claws like the ones jewelers use to mount gemstones into rings.

I was intrigued by the angular shapes of the crystals and drawn to the peacock-feather iridescence of their facets - a sheen that rippled across their surfaces, broadcasting every colour of the spectrum; colours that danced the moment you turned your angle of view, even just a tiny bit.

Beside the apparatus was a brass stand about two feet tall supporting a small glass plate covered by a glass dome, like a cake stand just big enough to hold a single raspberry tart. Under the glass was one of the crystals, a large one about the size of a walnut. I slowly circled the crystal in its glass-domed home, my eyes transfixed by its beautiful, radiant qualities.

Nigel was pre-occupied with removing housings from an oven. I lifted the dome and took the crystal from its stand. I was instantly shocked by its lightness. As I rolled it from one palm to the other I thought I saw it float, if just for a brief moment. I tossed it up gently. It rose about a foot and fell back so slowly I could see it spinning in front of my eyes as if time had slowed to a crawl.

“It has the lowest density of any solid substance I've ever measured,” Nigel said as he plucked the crystal out of the air before it landed in my palm. “I think feathers are denser. That particular crystal has the weight of an ant, at one hundred times the ant's size.”

“What's it made of?”

“I don't know.”

“With all this equipment,” I replied. “You don't know?”

“It defies any attempts at spectroscopic analysis. It's a

tenacious little imp. It won't allow me to determine its elemental composition.”

“What do you mean, it won't 'allow' you to analyze it? That's impossible. Isn't it?”

“Well, let me show you what else it does that I don't fully understand. It's a discovery that changes everything we know about chemistry and physics.”

Nigel took a beaker of cold water and poured it into a funnel at the entrance to his apparatus. The water trickled into a bulbous glass reservoir with a stopcock on the bottom.

“Turn it, Ronnie.”

As I did, the water flowed from the reservoir into the horizontal glass tube. But nothing happened. The water was blocked. The first crystal it contacted acted like a cork, preventing it from traveling down the rest of the tube filled with crystals.

“Now watch, as I apply pressure to the water in the reactor tube with this pump. In fact, stand over there, at the end.”

“Where this windsock is?”

“Yes. Tell me when you're ready.”

I did as he said and then nodded.

Nigel turned the pump on, injecting a stream of air into the glassware. The air bubbled into the reservoir of water, pressurizing the long glass chamber of crystals.

What I saw next made me step back so suddenly I nearly knocked over the tall pile of papers on the desk behind me. The reaction was incredible. Initially it was very slow, the pressure causing a small quantity of water to be absorbed into the first crystal. But as the water passed from one crystal to the next, its speed of absorption increased. The further down the tube the water percolated, the faster it traveled. As it reached the end of the chain of crystals, the water acquired the most incredible velocity, accelerating faster than the eye could focus. When the speeding water reached the very last crystal, there was a bright flash of pale blue light. At the same time, there was a popping sound, a rapid expulsion of gas, and the windsock was filled until it nearly burst.

“My word, Nigel! What the devil was that?”

At the front end of the apparatus, the glass reservoir was still nearly full. The reaction had hardly consumed any water at all. And all the crystals were still in place.

“What you've just witnessed, Ronnie, is a process I've called hydro-reactive distillation.”

“Say again?”

Nigel removed the windsock from its circular mount and twisted its open end until it looked like a tube for piping icing onto cakes. “Hydro-reactive distillation. The separation of hydrogen and oxygen gases from water, simply by forcing the

water under pressure through this chain of crystals. And what's even more remarkable is that the crystals are not consumed in the reaction. The water simply passes through them and transforms. The crystals can be re-used over and over again.”

There was enough gas left inside the windsock to turn the conical sock into a balloon. Nigel let it go and the sock rose quickly in the air. It briefly fluttered about the lab, then as the sock's twisted end unraveled; it gently floated down, landing in a tangle of electrical wires at the far end of the cellar. Nigel recovered the windsock and re-attached it to his apparatus.

“The gas inside the sock is an entirely new discovery, quadra-hydrogen. Lighter than air, but unlike regular hydrogen it's not flammable. If it was, I would have blown this lab up a long time ago.”

“*Quadra*-hydrogen?”

“Each quadra-hydrogen molecule contains four atoms rather than the usual two. And this,” Nigel said, pointing to a small Petri dish sitting below the end of the glass tube, “is the most curious part of the process.” A few drops of what seemed to be clear tree sap had dribbled into it. He picked the dish up. “Stick your finger in it, Ronnie.”

I hesitated.

“Go on.”

As I poked the droplet with the tip of my finger, it had the most unusual feel to it. It was like a silky jelly. As I pulled back, it stuck to my finger like honey and slid back into the dish in a thin thread.

“Now taste it,” Nigel said.

“Taste it? This? You've got to be joking!”

“Go on,” he chuckled. “Don't you trust me? I'll do it, if you don't want to.”

I dipped my finger in again and put a sticky drop on the tip of my tongue. It dissolved like icing sugar and gave me a tingling sensation as I swallowed. Then I felt my throat expand and my lungs surge with air. I burped. “Oh my goodness! That was strange!”

“Oxygel. It's oxygen, but with ten atoms in each molecule instead of just two. It's a little more stable than the quadra-hydrogen. Eventually this blob of oxygel will evaporate into the air. The warmth of your body was enough to convert it into normal oxygen. That's what you felt expanding inside you, and what made you burp. It was oxygel turning into oxygen gas. So there it is...hydro-reactive distillation, the explosive separation of water into quadra-hydrogen and oxygel.”

“And you're the inventor of this process, Nigel?”

“Not exactly. If there wasn't a war on, I would present my findings to the Royal Academy. But since the Department of Experimental War Technology has classified this process as a

military secret, I can't. It's a pity. It's a whole new method of matter conversion. But it's the military's technology now."

"But if you didn't invent it, who did? Don't tell me we stole this from the Germans!"

"Oh, heavens no! And we must prevent the Nazis from discovering this secret at all costs, Ronnie." Nigel took out a large ring of keys from inside a drawer. "Follow me."

At the back of the lab was a staircase leading to what, I assume, had been the storekeeper's office in the Middle Ages. Nigel opened its heavy oak door. At some point in the last two hundred years, the room had been converted into a library. As we stepped in, the air smelt of history and old paper. The walls were trimmed with floor-to-ceiling oak shelving of the richest patina; the shelves laden with leather-bound books, maps tied with satin ribbons, and scrolls on wooden rollers. In the center of the room was a large refectory-style table. On it was a book nearly three feet square. Its binding was of the earliest kind of crafted leather. It had a gilt-embossed title on the front, 'Substantia Vita'.

"It's Latin for 'The Substance of Life'," Nigel explained, turning the book's delicate vellum pages; pages elaborately decorated with the most magnificent calligraphy. "The oldest parts of this book date to 886 AD. But the book was rebound in the fifteenth century and has been added to many times."

The book contained geometrical drawings showing the same rock crystals that had come from Enysfarne's cave. Around these original monastic illustrations were notes and sketches that had been made at a later date by a quill pen.

"What's odd about these pen-and-ink notations is that they appear to have been done by the same hand but the notes have dates from 1228 to 1936. I don't understand how and why the succession of owners of this book took so much trouble to duplicate the same handwriting to the smallest and most exacting detail. It's a mystery."

Nigel turned the page again. "The book calls the crystals 'paramagnum vitae'. That name doesn't have an exact Latin translation that I can find. Paramagnum means 'prepare greatly' or even 'prepare violently'. And vitae means life. Well, the violent part makes some sense when you consider how much energy is released in the hydro-reactive process."

The next page had a set of diagrams showing strings of paramagnum vitae crystals assembled like spiral strands of beads. They snaked in graceful arches across the yellowed pages. Under each crystal were letters and Roman numerals, a cataloguing system of some sort.

"What you see in front of you, Ronnie, is an intricate set of instructions. Like an electrical circuit diagram. Zachariah and Moshe Van Dunste's special talents have been vital in unlocking

the secret of the transformative power of these crystals.”

“But they're jewelers, Nigel, not electricians. I don't understand.”

“The medieval scholars that produced this document were not schooled in the modern science of crystallography,” Nigel explained. “But later, in the handwriting added in the margins, we find they had a profound understanding that predates the work of modern day scientists by centuries. Whoever it was, stumbled upon the key to unlocking the incredible power hidden inside paramagnum vitae.”

Nigel turned to an illustration from medieval times. The artist had drawn a volcanic eruption around a castle, inscribed with a passage from the Book of Genesis:

'And God said, let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'

“This drawing symbolizes Enysfarne,” he continued. “It was a very important castle, not just for the defense of the coastal population but as protection for the mining of the paramagnum vitae crystals that lay under it. It rests on an ancient volcanic foundation, created millions of years ago. When the crystals solidified from the volcanic magma, they grew in the shape of pyramids until they reached a size of roughly four carats. But after that size was reached, paramagnum vitae crystals do something incredible. They alter their geometric shape.”

“Hold up, Nigel. I'm a bit confused about all this. As a pilot, I have to understand a lot of tricky things to get an aircraft weighing several tons into the air and keep it there. I'm pretty good with aerodynamics. Then there's mechanics and meteorology. Navigation of course. And things like, well, just knowing when you're running low on fuel. But with this crystal stuff, I can't quite connect the dots. You're wandering down a rabbit hole into Boffinland.”

“Sorry, Ronnie. It's just been my entire life for the past two years. Remember how the crystals touched each other inside the tube in my lab? And how they varied in size, some larger crystals next to smaller ones? This isn't random. Can you see it? The sequence is right here. Right on this medieval page.”

He pointed to the ancient diagram and its sequence of shapes, and to the Roman numerals underneath them.

“Zachariah and Moshe are categorizing each crystal by their carat size according to this ancient system - those over four carats, those under. Then, if we assemble the crystals in exactly the order prescribed in this medieval manual, the passage of water under pressure will produce the violent expulsion of quadra-hydrogen. Paramagnum vitae... prepare, violently, life.”

“It's magic,” I said.

“Not magic, Ronnie. Science.”

“Excuse me, professor. But if someone with doctorates in

physics and aeronautical engineering can't explain why it does what it does, then it must be magic.”

“Someday I will understand why, Ronnie. Someday, I know that I will. And *then*, it will be science.”

“And until that time, Nigel?”

“Right now? It's the only hope we have to stop the Nazis.”