

THE CURTAIN DOES NOTHING TO ISOLATE ME FROM THE ambivalence of life aboard a U-boat. Whatever prize a patrol delivers, uncertainty follows. A misstep away from catastrophe, an equal step from glory.

I breathe and a tangle of breaths are meters away. Except for the four men on the bridge, a pair in the engine room, another in the control room, the crew is fitfully dormant.

Even so they are raw with conviction, fixed to a life as few ever are. In the fog of my half-sleep, half-faith, there is a lull. I know it in the cadence within my chest, slowed to something resembling stoicism. Life goes on.

Then, at its most restful, sudden uproar from the control room. 'Commander to the bridge! Black smoke!'

I am on my feet in an instant, grabbing the binoculars. Into the control room, a scramble to the conning tower and the bridge.

'Show me.' I turn to the quadrant where Exec's binoculars are trained.

'Forty degrees,' Hagemann pronounces.

A trail of soot visible to the naked eye. The view through the binoculars verifies its source. A shadow of a steamer belching black against the murkiness of a moon-faint sky. I fix to it. A freight and passenger steamer? Behind it a second shadow. An escort without doubt.

'What do you make of it, Captain?'

Make of it?

A steamer in total blackout. There is only one thing to make of such a vessel. The ferry crossing the Strait. On its route to Newfoundland.

Make of it?

A target, there can be no doubt. Military aboard, as we know from intelligence.

Civilians as well. The other steadfast conclusion. The briefest pause, an intake of air.

That is the price. The dealings of war. Ask the dead of Cologne, of Hamburg. Ask Wimmer about the dead of Bremen.

'Maneuver ahead.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Tube five.'

Exec is surprised. My decision is to fire from the single stern torpedo tube, not any of the four tubes in the bow. 'One eel, sir?'

'I trust your aim, Hagemann.'

He looks at me with a quick, unflinching smile.

'Action stations!' My words flash through the ship.

The U-boat comes alive.

Men drop from their bunks in fractured unison, like the bullet release of bodies at a road race. A scramble to dress, to stow away the remnants of night. An instant queue to the latrine.

A vehement mutter. 'Quick, you laggards! There's a war on, or don't you know it!'

Hagemann calls from the bridge 'Tube five!' The words repeated, doubling over themselves, an echo stretching to both

ends of the boat. 'Tube five! Tube five!' The return version as loud as the first.

Their call to arms. In the aft-most compartment, the torpedo men take charge, clearing access to the tube where the eel has been lying in wait, ready for the firing line between the twin rudders. Here also are the electric motors, dormant until the U-boat dives. For now the engineers are in the adjacent compartment, attending the diesels.

There is no slowing the urgency. It is not in their training, even though it will take time to get the U-boat in position, a while of creeping in increments through the black of night.

In due time, up from the bowels of the ship, 'Tube five, ready!'

On the bridge Exec is consumed by the precision needed to plant U-69 in the best position. He orders the *Überwasserzielloptik* fixed to its pedestal. He plants his eyes against its binoculars, adjusting steadily, steadily, until the prize lies through the cross-hairs of the UZO.

'Range?'

'1800 meters.'

We need to be closer, at least by half. But I say nothing to Hagemann. He's in his glory.

I'm locked onto my own binoculars. I would have thought the escort would be circling the ferry. Instead, it trails obediently aft. With each passing minute I grow more and more confident that neither ship has any suspicion we are so close. Both claiming a steady, unencumbered passage home. Landfall near enough to taste.

'Target speed and course?' Hagemann calls to the navigator in the control room.

'Enemy speed 10.5 knots. Course forty degrees,' reports Janssen.

Exec and the navigator must work like twins if we are to make the kill. Janssen is a year older than I am, another three older than

Hagemann. He has the brains and patience of any man aboard. Hagemann appreciates the fact.

I give Exec all the time he needs. By 0800, U-69 is on the verge of its crucial position.

'Range?'

'Six-five-zero.'

'Target bow right, bearing nine-zero, target speed one-two knots.'

'Open tube door!'

A few seconds later, the comeback, "Tube five flooded!"

'Stand by!' yells Hagemann. He awaits the final order from me.

My gloved hands are like iron clenching the binoculars. My heart pumps madly. A hungry missile to unleash, frantic to send the enemy into chaos.

It is neither right nor wrong. It is what I am here to do, a U-boat commander, every particle drilled to within that fraction of a second.

In wait, nerves pitched to the edge of the verdict. In desperate need of relief.

'Permission to fire!'

Hagemann, bent into the eyepieces, right hand on the firing lever, must take it to its absolute end.

'Connect tube five!' he barks. It echoes through the ship.

Another echo returns. "Tube five ready to fire!"

'Tube five...!' At that second Hagemann jerks the lever. 'Fire!'

A hulking, willful jolt.

The torpedo lunges from the ship, severing black water, locked on the enemy that trails black, indecent smoke.