

CHAPTER 4

Malcolm stared at the open sky. The bridge was gone! The bridge crew was gone. Malcolm struggled to organize his thoughts. Think. The command crew is likely gone. No Captain, no Bromley. Who's next in command?

Oh, shite, he thought, it's me. I'm in charge. Bloody hell, what do I do? Malcolm forced himself to focus. Alright, we have a problem. With no bridge, we've lost weight; that's why the nose is pointing up. We need to gain control of the flaps so that we can readjust to the correct altitude. And flight control... is somewhere over the Baltic. No auxiliary control room. Is there a place to tap in to the controls? No... wait...

Malcolm suddenly remembered. One of his first assignments on the Daedalus was to replace the typical levers used to control pitch and direction with a ship's wheel. Captain Collins insisted he was not captaining a ship without a wheel, so Malcolm fabricated controls to allow the wheel to replicate both the direction and pitch controls. And he had connected them right...there. He looked down the hall ten feet and found the section of decking.

If he could get to the engine room he could probably grab enough hardware, including the original levers that he held onto for some reason.

Crewmen started to appear in the hall on all fours to stop from sliding back in order to find out what was going and get orders from the bridge. Malcolm yelled to a crewman, "You, there, go to the engine room. Get Mr. Frye and tell him to bring a standard repair kit, a welding torch, and the spare control levers. He'll know what I mean. Move it, on the double."

The startled crewman, not used to taking orders from the engineer, hesitated for just a second and then hurried down the hall, aided by the downward slope of the hall.

Alright, he thought. That's settled until Frye gets back. What's next? Communication. Communication usually comes from the bridge and is relayed to the radio room where it's distributed to the ship. The radio room was amidships. Malcolm shut the door to the bridge and started to careen down the sloping hallway when he met Lieutenant Saxon climbing towards the bridge.

"What's going on?" asked Saxon. "I've been trying to reach the bridge ever since that explosion. I can't reach anyone."

"That's because the explosion was the bridge. It's gone, the whole thing is gone."

"Well, that's terribly inconvenient. We have another problem."

"Besides the fact that we have no control and no bridge crew?"

"Yes, immediately after the explosion, two zeppelins dropped out of cloud cover some five miles out in flanking position. When I couldn't reach the bridge, I decided to come here and report to the captain personally."

"That appears to be me at this point. I'm assuming that Bromley was on the bridge when you reported to the captain that you had relayed his message?"

"Yes."

"That leaves me as acting captain. Congratulations, you're now second in command."

"But..."

"No buts now, Saxon. I need you to go to the radio room. Ask the operator for a spare handset and some wiring tools. I'm going to wire up the bridge line right there," he said, pointing to space on the wall near the point he connected the wheel to the control lines.

"What good will that do?" asked Saxon.

"I'm going to throw together makeshift flight controls there. It's going to be our bridge. And we need to restore communications to the rest of the ship. Let the men know what's going on."

"But..."

"Saxon, we don't have time. Go to the radio room. I have an engineering crew coming in minutes. And we have to know what those zeppelins are doing. It seems awfully coincidental that they should appear minutes after we're in distress. Now get going.... Now!"

The authority in Malcolm's voice startled Saxon. "Yes, sir," he said and headed down toward the radio room. Malcolm followed, stopping at the junction point where he had connected the wheel to the flight controls. He struggled and with great effort was able to pull the decking up to access the lines. All control, electrical, and radio lines ran along a two-foot-wide trough that lay below the decking of the main hallway. The decking came up in five-foot sections so cables could be accessed for maintenance.

Malcolm located the gearbox he had fabricated to allow the turning of the wheel to direct the rudder and the forward and backward motion of the wheel as the lift control. Malcolm reached down, happy that he still had his tool belt strapped on after his work on the engines, and pulled out a screwdriver to open the gearbox.

Shortly, Frey came with a small cadre of engineering crew and the equipment.

"What's happened, sir?" Frye asked.

"You've been promoted to chief engineer, Mr. Frye."

"You're having a joke on me, Mr. Robertson. You're the chief engineer."

"Not anymore. We've lost the bridge and the bridge crew. I'm acting captain now."

"Shite," said Frye in amazement.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mr. Frye," Malcolm joked.

"No, it's not that; it's just... shite."

"I know. Shite about covers it all. But now, I need you to focus. Remember how we disconnected the control levers and repurposed the gearbox for the wheel? We've got to reverse that process right here," he said, pointing to the open gearbox. "Can you do that?"

"I think so. Why aren't you doing it?"

"I've got to restore communications and try to get some order back to this ship. Ah, and here's what I need." Saxon arrived with a spare headset with wires hanging out of the end.

"Here it is. And while I was there, a message came over on the telegraph."

"Who from?" Robertson replied quizzically.

"The Germans. The message reads: 'British Airship. We will aid your stricken ship. We will board and escort you to Germany for repairs. Prepare to be boarded. Please respond.'"

"Have the Germans taken any action?" Malcolm asked as he took the handset from Saxon. Malcolm again opened the door to what had been the bridge, noted what was left of the cable and followed it back to the hallway. He shut the door and started to pull the cable from the hole where Frye and his men were working.

"No, they're waiting for the captain's response," Saxon added, slightly amused.

"How did the captain respond?" Malcolm asked as he was stripping the communication wires with his teeth and twisting them together with the corresponding wires on the handset.

"Bloody hell," Malcolm gritted through his teeth. Someone was calling the bridge and voltage, needed to ring the bridge phone, was now coursing through his mouth and it hurt.

"You haven't responded yet," Saxon prompted.

"What? Oh, shite. That's me isn't it? Alright, no response right now. Let's see if we can get control of this ship first."

"Do you intend to let them board and help us?" Saxon asked.

"I find it a wee bit suspect that these two guardian angels show up to help us in our hour of darkest need. And remember our orders from the Admiralty; we were to avoid the German mainland at all cost. Whatever it is we're doing, it appears that the Admiralty doesn't want the Germans to know."

"What should I do?" Saxon asked.

"For now, I want you to have your crews prepare all guns. I'm hoping it doesn't come to blows, but better safe than sorry."

"How will I know your orders?" Saxon asked.

"If I remembered my radiophony courses, you should hear right about now." After a quick wail of distortion, Malcolm's voice echoed through the ship.

"Attention crew of the HMS Daedalus. This is Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Robertson. There has been an explosion that has destroyed the bridge and its crew. As ranking officer, I hereby take command of the HMS Daedalus. We are currently working to restore flight control. In addition, two possibly hostile zeppelins are approaching us. All hands to battle stations and await my orders. Thank you, that is all."

Malcolm went to hang up the handset, and realized there was no place to hang it and no way to disconnect the circuit. That would tie up communications across the whole ship. Malcolm ordered one of the crewman down the hall to the radio room and instructed him to tell the radio operator that he would have to manually close and open the circuit to the makeshift bridge for the time being. Malcolm stationed additional crewmen down the hall who could relay signals to the radio operator if Malcolm needed to reach a particular station or if someone needed to contact him.

"Mr. Frye, how are the flight controls coming?"

"I think we're set, sir," Frye replied. "Do you want to try them?"

"Yes, level us out.... no, belay that order," Malcolm said. An idea was germinating in his mind. "Are you sure the controls are set?"

"I think so."

"Damn it man, yes or no. The fate of our ship depends on it!!" Malcolm bellowed.

"Um, yes," Frye stammered. And then, gathering his confidence, "Yes, I'm sure."

"Good. I want you to go back to the engine room. I need you to foul the mixture to the engines enough so that they give off smoke, but I'll need full power on a moment's notice. Also, at the same time I ask for full engines, I want you to drop the emergency ballast."

"Drop the ballast? Are you mad? With the bridge gone, we'll shoot up faster than a firework!"

"That's exactly what I'm counting on! Mr. Frye, you have your orders, hop to it."

"Yes, sir!" Frye said as he turned to leave.

"Mr. Frye," Malcolm said, more gently. "A chief engineer has to be absolutely confident in his work. You're getting that lesson much more quickly than I did. Good work on the controls."

"Thank you, sir. That means a great deal, coming from you." Frye turned and worked his way back to the engine room.

Malcolm signaled to the relay team that he wished to speak to the gunnery officer. The message went down the line to the radio and moments later the message came back that Lt. Saxon was on the line.

"Lt. Saxon, what are the positions of our angels of mercy?"

"Coming up fast on either side of us."

"This is what I want you to do. When they pull up beside us, sight a target 10 feet over the top of the airships and prepare to fire."

"You want us to fire over their ships?" Saxon questioned somewhat incredulously.

"Aye, I don't want to start a war, I just want to scare them."

"They'll likely return fire, you realize."

"I'm counting on it," said Malcolm a little mischievously.

"Are you going to let me in on this little plan of yours?" asked Saxon.

"Absolutely, not. That way if the whole thing goes to hell in a hand basket, you're not implicated and can command whatever is left of the ship."

"That's terribly comforting," Saxon said sarcastically.

"I'm going to have the operator close the line. When the ships pull up beside us, contact me. We'll have to time this just right."

"Will do."

Malcolm signaled to the crewman to disconnect the line. Again, the message travelled up and back from the radio room. Malcolm ordered a crewman to get some paper and a pencil. Malcolm scribbled a message on the paper with orders to relay the message to the German ships on his order and immediately after transmission, open the radio for ship-wide communication.

Now, all Malcolm could do was wait for the Germans to move into position. He hoped that this daft idea of his would get them out of trouble. He hated the thought of gambling everyone's live on this one desperate plan, but his only other alternative was to admit defeat and allow the Germans to take them in disgrace to Germany.

Minutes went by as Malcolm tortured himself with the myriad ways his plan could go awry. Then, he received the signal to pick up the handset. "The Germans are in position. They have us in their sights on either side of us."

"Good, I'm going to go to ship-wide now so we can coordinate this." Malcolm signaled to his relay crew. The message went down the line and thirty seconds later, the message came back that the following message was sent to the two German airships:

"German Airships. We would sooner die than to accept help from boffing cack like you."

Malcolm doubted that the German commanders would completely understand the very Scottish curse, but he was pretty sure that they'd get the intent.

Malcolm waited. After what seemed like an eternity, the radio operator cut in. "Captain, I'm receiving a reply. Prepare to be boarded."

Malcolm smiled "Very good. Patch me through to the whole ship."

Malcolm went to the flight controls, hoping that Mr. Frye was indeed correct in his assessment. Malcolm took a deep breath. "All hands, this is the captain. Prepare for immediate ballast release on my command. Lt. Saxon, fire all guns. Mr. Frye, release emergency ballast and go to full engines now."

Everyone hang on!!!!" Malcolm pulled the altitude level straight back and pulled the rudder hard to starboard.

First were the muffled explosions of the many guns of the HMA Daedalus firing in perfect unison. Suddenly, the nose pulled up sharply and then veered to the right. The ship shuddered as it nearly turned upside down. Crewmen slid down the hall as the violence of the maneuver knocked their feet out from under them and then they started to tumble down the port wall of the hall that was now the floor.

Malcolm struggled to keep his balance and stay at the flight controls. The door to the bridge suddenly flew open and Malcolm saw that the top of one of German zeppelins was only 10 feet below the Daedalus. And then he heard it. A massive set of explosions coming from everywhere. The Daedalus continued to climb and turn. As it did, Malcolm began to gradually bring the rudder back from full starboard. Within twenty seconds, the floor was once again the floor. Malcolm picked up the phone. "Commander Saxon, you'll have to be my eyes. Report."

"Bloody hell, Robertson, what did you do? I have men and guns everywhere!" yelled Saxon.

"Report. What's going on with the Germans?"

"I... I don't believe it. I'm seeing extensive gunfire damage to the carriages of both zeppelins. One looks like its losing buoyancy. I don't understand. We missed them. On purpose."

"Aye. My point was to provoke them and fire at them, but not hit them. That might make the angered captains fire back, at which point, thanks to the clever work of Mr. Frye, we were no longer in their sights so they fired at each other."

"That was bloody brilliant Robertson! Dangerous, but bloody brilliant," said Lt. Saxon.

"Thank you. Lt. Saxon. When you have your men squared away, meet me in the captain's office. We'll use that as a temporary bridge to converse. Appoint someone to be gunnery officer in your stead. I'll ask the crew chiefs to join us so we can figure out our next steps."

"Very good, sir."

"And Saxon, one more thing."

"Yes sir?"

"See if you can find a navigator. I have no idea of where we are or which way we're going other than away from the zeppelins."

Saxon unsuccessfully tried to stifle a laugh. "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 5

Malcolm thought the hardest part of taking command was over once he got them out of the immediate trouble of the zeppelins. He was wrong. Malcolm stayed at the makeshift helm until a navigator reported. Unfortunately, most of the detailed maps were on the bridge and were likely ashes floating on the Baltic. The young navigator struggled to ascertain their position without a compass. Finally, one of the older crewman said he could find their position if he had a sextant. Malcolm remembered that the captain had one on display in his office. Within minutes, the crewman determined their approximate position on a much less detailed map found in the captain's office. Malcolm offered to make the crewman a navigator on the spot, but the crewman quickly turned down the offer and left the room.

Soon the chiefs of the crew were assembled in the captain's office: Mr. Frye represented Engineering; the young Sub-lieutenant Hensley who was the sole navigator now; Mr. Fletcher, Chief Signal Boatswain in charge of the radio room and shipboard communications; Dr. Jenkins, Surgeon; and Lieutenant Saxon, second in command.

Malcolm heard their reports in due order. First, Mr. Frye made an account of the damage to the Daedalus. Until they could land, they would not be able to do much about the bridge area. Mr. Frye's damage control team had routed what wires were left out of the remains of the bridge and replaced the door with a wooden wall and a window so that the navigator could see where he was going without freezing from the outside air. With the aid of Mr. Fletcher, Frye was able to wire a more practical handset that would allow Malcolm to address individual stations or ship-wide without having to work through the radio room.

"And, I have an idea that might allow us to use the contaminated fuel," Frye added at the end of his report.

"Contaminated fuel?" asked Saxon.

"Yes, sorry. In all of the excitement, it seemed like the least of our problems." Malcolm relayed what had happened in engineering prior the explosion. "If it hadn't been for the fact that I was busy bringing the engines on line, I might have been on the bridge." The thought sent a shiver up his spine. "Mr. Frye, what's your idea for the contaminated fuel?"

"Between losing the bridge and our emergency ballast, we're running exceptionally light. I think we can repurpose the fractional distillers that produce the helium to filter out the sugar."

"Excellent idea, Mr. Frye. Make it so," Malcolm said, feeling a little disappointed that he hadn't thought of it himself. Of course, he had other issues to contend with, so he might forgive himself this time.

The chief signal bosun reported that the Admiralty received the coded message Malcolm had sent apprising them of their situation and asking for additional orders. The reply instructed them to continue at best speed to St. Petersburg. The Daedalus would be repaired there before the Admiralty sent further orders. All of the men frowned, not knowing the nature of their real mission and knowing that the Germans seemed to be intent on preventing that selfsame mission.

Sub-lieutenant Hensley, now promoted to full lieutenant, was the only navigator left on the ship. He presented Malcolm with a list of the midshipmen who had shown the most aptitude for navigation, recommending Midshipmen Bennet for night navigator.

"Very good. Thank you, Mr. Hensley. Please inform Sub-lieutenant Bennet of his promotion."

Dr. Jenkins's reported only minor injuries from Malcolm's aeronautic maneuvers, but warned the captain that for the crew's sake, he ought to warn them before he tried something like that again.

"And I will be visiting each of the newly-promoted officers," he added, looking at Hensley, Frye, Saxon, and Malcolm in turn, "for your physicals."

"But we all had physicals before we left Kingsnorth," Malcolm replied.

"Aye, that would be for your old positions. I have no records that the current captain, commander, chief engineer, and lieutenant in charge of navigation have had their physicals. Regulations, you know."

"And where would we be without regulations," bemused Saxon. Everyone laughed and for a moment, the tension from what had been unsaid eased from the room.

Malcolm swallowed, "And now for the casualty report. We lost Captain Archibald Collins, Commander Arthur Bromley, Lieutenants Andrew Clairborne and Hugh Beauchamps, Midshipmen Michael Morrissey, Paul Castleton, and Leslie Hopkins, Signal Boatswain Arnold Tibbets, and Airman Guiles Shephard. Let us pause for a moment in remembrance of our lost companions."

All bowed their heads and were silent for several seconds. Malcolm looked up and broke the silence. "Thank you. We all have a great deal of work to do so let's get to it."

As the chiefs filed out of the office, Dr. Jenkins hung back for a moment. "When do you plan to hold the service, Captain?"

"Service? What? Oh." Malcolm hadn't thought of that. "I suppose when we get to St. Petersburg, once its official."

"Captain, permission to speak candidly, sir."

"Granted," Malcolm said, not liking the direction of this conversation.

"The men are hurting sir. They're happy to be alive and everyone is counting his blessing he hadn't been on the bridge, but at the same time, they think it could have been them. They need the time to say goodbye and know that the sacrifice that was made will be honored."

"You're right, I hadn't thought of that. But I don't have the foggiest idea of how to do it."

"I believe there's a standard ceremony in one of the captain's books. Do you mind if I look?" he asked, indicating the shelf of books behind Malcolm.

"Please, be my guest," Malcolm said, moving out from behind the desk.

Dr. Jenkins rummaged through the bookshelf, finally finding one well-worn book. "Ah, yes, the captain's ceremonies.... Let's see, marriages... no we don't need that... ah, here it is, funerals." Dr. Jenkins pointed to the section and handed the book to Malcolm.

"Ach, I'm a horrible speaker," Malcolm said, shaking his head as he looked at the service. "All of the officers will be scoffing at my accent and snickering at me behind me back."

"I really doubt that, Captain. I think every man on this ship knows if it hadn't been for you and your quick thinking, we'd likely be in a German prison."

"I don't know what to say; I never met half of these people. Being in the engine room limits your view."

"Aye, and on a ship this big, most captains don't know all of their crew. But good captains do. Go and talk to the men. Don't always eat at the officer's mess. Every once in a while, go to the enlisted mess. Get to know the men. Heaven knows I tried to get Archie, Captain Collins, to do it, but he was stuck in his old ways of thinking. That officers were officers and enlisted were enlisted. But you know, we're all just men trying to accomplish something. Lord knows, rank isn't always a measure of talent... present company excepted."

"Do you think it will help?"

"It certainly can't hurt. I think the best thing for a new captain is to know his crew."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'll take it under advisement."

"Please do. And Captain?"

"Yes?"

"I know you'll be fine," Dr. Jenkins said as he left the office.

CHAPTER 6

Malcolm scheduled the service for four bells, the next day. Since there were no bodies and no need of caskets, nine flags bearing the Union Jack were found and sewn to make a packet that was filled with weights. Malcolm asked anyone in the crew who knew the deceased to add something personal of the deceased to the flag. At four bells, the crew assembled in the bomb bay in the bowels of the ship. All were decked out in full dress uniforms. The nine flags were laid out over the bomb bay doors.

"I am the resurrection and the life..." began Malcolm. He led the crew through the expected prayers and responses. Malcolm departed from the prescribed text, stopping to let the crew share remembrances of each of the deceased. Some were funny and some not, but all were heartfelt. Commander Saxon came forward with a remembrance of Commander Bromley so that Malcolm was spared having to say something nice about him, and Dr. Jenkins gave a touching narrative of the captain, showing a side that the men had not known.

When all were finished, Malcolm continued, "In the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our shipmates Captain Archibald Collins, Commander Arthur Bromley, Lieutenants Andrew Clairborne and Hugh Beauchamps, Midshipmen Michael Morrissey, Paul Castleton, and Leslie Hopkins, Signal Boatswain Arnold Tibbets, and Airman Guiles Shephard and we commit their spirits to the air. While their bodies have returned to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, may their spirits continue to soar the airs and find their way to your heavenly kingdom."

Malcolm nodded, and the bomb bay doors were opened. The flags fell and immediately were pulled away by the wind and flew into the air. When the bomb bay doors were shut, the ships guns fired twenty one times in salute. Finally, one of the young midshipmen played a very shaky version of Taps. After a moment of silence, Malcolm dismissed the assembly.

Malcolm returned to his quarters to change from his dress uniform. He was glad that that was over. He still had the unenviable job of writing letters to the next of kin. Fortunately, records of next of kin were kept with the purser who was not on the bridge. Malcolm was astonished to find that Boatswain Tibbets and Airman Shephard had no next of kin to notify. The thought mortified him. As horrible as he felt about the prospect of his parents receiving such a letter, he thought about what it would be like for no one in the world to care about your passing. Once his parent's passed on, would that be his fate? Who would his next of kin be in that case?

Malcolm opened a drawer of his dresser and pulled out a very old and dented metal flask. It was the very same flask from which he had his first taste of whisky. He looked at the flask, remembering his final time with his grandfather and took a careful swig. He had long since learned how to drink

his whisky properly. As he stoppered the flask, he thought about when his father had given him the flask. Malcolm had been home on leave after just completing engineering college. He had a week before he had to report to Greenwich for naval college. The night before he left, his father took him aside.

"Son, I don't have much to give you, but I wanted to give ya something to tell ya how proud we are of ya."

"Da, you don't need to give me anything."

"Yes, I do. Now if you'd let me finish. The night your granda died, I heard every word. I was outside waiting and I heard you choking on your first whisky. It was all I could do to stop from laughing. But I heard how proud he was of you that night. And how proud he was of me, although he never said it to me face. But your mum and I want ya to have this—something to remember your family and who you are."

George Robertson handed his son a package wrapped in brown paper. Malcolm quickly unwrapped it to find his grandfather's flask. "Your mother wanted me to fill it with some sort of fancy brandy, but I knew you'd want whisky."

"I'm touched, Da. Thank you."

Malcolm raised the flask in a toast. "To family," he said, and drank another swallow.

The next days were chaotic. Without the bridge, the aerodynamic characteristics of the Daedalus changed so that the crew had a hard time maneuvering the great airship. It was nearly impossible to make best speed. And although Malcolm had passed flight school, he was not the best pilot. Sure, he could quote all of the aerodynamic principles at work and probably even calculate some of the equations in his head, but controlling the ship was a different matter.

And there were the myriad of day-to-day tasks in running a ship. Reports to review, orders to sign, inspections to conduct. It seemed the line to the captain's office had no end. It became so much that Malcolm excused himself, saying he had to check on something in the engine room and put Commander Saxon in charge.

Malcolm was only too glad to go to the engine room. The metal, the smell of grease, and sweat were a balm to his shattered nerves.

"Captain, what can I do for you?" asked Mr. Frye.

"Nothing in particular. Just wanted to see how things are going here," Malcolm asked.

"Fine, sir. While Damage Control was building our temporary bridge, I had the lads here strip the engines down to clean up the mess from the contaminated fuel. If we had to, I could run the engines at peak speed, just give the word."

"Excellent, Mr. Frye, although I think if I gave that order now, the ship itself might protest too much."

"I'm not so sure. I went out with the riggers this morning, checking the cabin section for any stress damage."

"You went out there?" Malcolm asked. It was a professional hazard as chief engineer, but Malcolm had never gone out willingly and was often sick upon return.

"Aye, I went for a dangle, as the riggers like to say. The cabin is secured to the ship and there seems to be no other structural damage. Also, sir, we've made the modifications to the fractional distillation system and have started to run the contaminated fuel through it. In another few days, the fuel should be good enough to use."

"Well, Mr. Frye," Malcolm said hesitantly, "it seems you have the situation well in hand."

"Aye sir, I learned from the best," Mr. Frye said.

Malcolm begrudgingly turned to leave. "Keep up the good work, Commander," he said, and left.

Malcolm was more dejected than he had been before coming to the engine room. He felt like he was in limbo—that there was no place for him on the ship. He didn't belong in the captain's office and it was clear that he didn't belong in the engine room. He wandered around the ship, watching the men at work, each having a specific task and executing it dutifully. Every man on the ship knew his task and what was expected of him, save Malcolm. He had no idea what to do.

Malcolm had always been a problem solver. It had held him in good stead at school and as chief engineer. Malcolm could quickly size up any given situation, figure out the possible scenarios, settle on the most likely choice and execute it quickly. When Malcolm solved a problem, his focus was intense and he acted decisively.

Once the immediate problems of what to do with a ship with no controls and two hostile airships surrounding them had been solved, Malcolm now had no idea how to solve the problem of being captain. Every decision he made, he second-guessed. He would rely on Saxon or one of the other officers to validate the decision or even make it for him. Aimlessly, Malcolm drifted to the mess hall and got a mug of tea. He sat in the mess, watching the men and letting the tea turn cold before he even drank a sip.

Doctor Jenkins observed him in the mess hall and frowned. Tonight would have to be the captain's physical. Without a doubt, Jenkins thought.

Malcolm took his meal and retired to his cabin. In the uproar of the last few days, he hadn't had a chance to move into the captain's cabin. Saxon had wasted no time in moving into Bromley's cabin, but to Malcolm it just felt wrong. He supposed that maybe if he stayed in his cabin, things would go back to the way they had been.

Malcolm sat at the small desk of his cabin, reading more reports that had been brought for him. Malcolm picked at his meal, as he dutifully read each report. He had no idea what he should do with the information, but read them because that was what a captain did; at least that's what he thought a captain ought to do.

There was a knock at the door. Malcolm looked up, wondering who would want him in at this time of the evening or if some new calamity had occurred. Encouraged that there might be a problem he could solve, he sat up and said, "Come in."

Malcolm did not expect Dr. Jenkins to arrive with his black doctor's bag, a stethoscope hanging around his neck. "Sorry to bother you, sir, but I'm here for your physical."

Malcolm sagged, "Is this really necessary?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. Regulations, you know. I have to establish that you're fit for duty."

"Bloody hell, man, you already did that at Kingsnorth," grumbled Malcolm.

"As I said earlier, that was when you were chief engineer. I have to establish that you're fit for duty as the captain."

"Very well, let's get this over with," Malcolm grumbled. "What will it be first?"

"Take off your shirt," Dr. Jenkins said as he put the stethoscope into his ears.

As the doctor placed the apparently ice cold stethoscope on Malcolm's back, he flinched and quipped, "You couldn't warm that thing up first?"

"No, I couldn't. Now, keep quiet and let me do my job. Take several deep breaths. I'll tell you when to stop." Malcolm took four deep breaths and the doctor said, "I've heard enough, you can get dressed."

Malcolm start to put his shirt back on when the doctor said, "I'm afraid I'll have to mark you unfit for duty. It's your heart."

Malcolm froze for a second. "What? My heart? What's the problem?"

Dr. Jenkins said, "It's not in your work. A ship can't have a captain whose heart isn't in his job."

"What the bloody hell is this about? Are you having fun at my expense?"

"I'm afraid not, Captain. I've been watching you today; you're a balloon lost in the wind, blowing wherever the wind takes you. And you need to be a captain, setting a course and holding to it. Fortunately, I think there's hope for you. The prescription is first, a stern lecture. The second is this," he said as he pulled first a bottle out of the bag followed by two honest to goodness glasses. Jenkins handed the bottle to Malcolm.

"Auchentoshan single malt whisky? How did you get this?" Malcolm asked in astonishment. Auchentoshan was the closest distillery to his home and, not incidentally, his favorite whisky. "Did you know that I came from a village not far from where this was made?"

"Really?" the doctor replied in amazement. "I didn't know. I actually won this off an officer back at Kingsnorth, going on two years now. I never had the right opportunity to open it. But in this case," he said, appraising Malcolm, "I think it's a medical necessity. Go ahead, pour. But you should know, I'm going to deliver some harsh medicine with this. Think of this as honey to smooth its going down."

"I'd listen to a sermon from the Devil himself if it meant I could have some of this," Malcolm said as he poured two fingers for each of them.

"Cheers," Malcolm said, raising his glass.

"To absent friends," Dr. Jenkins replied.

"Aye, absent friends," Malcolm replied less enthusiastically.

They each took a swallow, Malcolm savoring the flavor and the warmth of the whisky. After a few moments, Dr. Jenkins said, "Permission to speak candidly sir."

"I don't suppose I have a choice in the matter, do I?"

"No sir, you don't."

"I didn't think so. Permission granted," Malcolm said, taking another drink and enjoying the warmth of the whisky.

"I was serious when I said that your heart isn't in this job. I watched you today. You were aimless, and if you'll forgive the analogy, rudderless. The captain of the ship sets the tone for the ship. If he is aimless and drifting, the crew will be drifting and aimless."

"That's all well and good, but I have no bloody idea what the hell I'm supposed to be doing! I'm an engineer; it's what I know. I don't know the first thing about being a captain."

"I wouldn't say that. You knew enough to get this crew out of a very sticky situation. I think I can speak for the crew when I say I'm very happy to not be spending time in Germany right now."

"That was different; there was a problem to solve. That's what I do, solve problems."

"What do you think a captain does? The orders he receives are solving a problem for the Admiralty. When officers come to him with reports, they are either telling the captain that they've solved a problem or looking for additional resources to solve a problem—resources they can't acquire on their own," Jenkins offered.

"But engineering problems, I know how to solve. I know the equations and principles involved. This..." Malcolm said, indicating the whole ship, "is more than I know."

"Then, learn, Captain. You have to learn what principles govern people, what motivates them. It's the same as engineering, just a little more... imprecise."

"That's easy for you. You deal with people all the time."

"True. But I had to learn that. Do you know how I started in medicine?" asked Jenkins.

Malcolm shook his head. "I started out as a veterinarian in the Army, tending to the horses. I was in Crimea and saw the bloody aftermath from that fool Cardigan. It became clear that the horses were lost, so I helped out with the men. I mean, I was a doctor and men are just another type of animal. After that tour, I left for medical school and became a doctor. I enlisted this time in the Navy, thinking that the duties on ship would be better. That's when I met Archie, I mean Captain Collins."

"You and he were good friends," Malcolm acknowledged softly.

"Yes, we were. We were together for several adventures," he stopped to chuckle. "Some of them actually happened in battle. But in that time, we both learned about men, what drives them and what motivates them. As a captain, you need to know when to push the men and when to step back and get out of their way. For all his faults and quirks, the one thing Archie was good at was letting competent men do their jobs. Did he ever tell you how to carry out his orders?"

"No, not once," replied Malcolm.

"That's because he knew there was nothing he could tell you that you didn't already know. But, I'm sure you saw how he told Lieutenant Clairborne exactly what to do and how to do it. That's because he knew that Clairborne needed more experience and frankly, discipline. A captain is like an engineer—he has to have a toolbox with a tool for every occasion. What's that expression, when all you have is a hammer..."

"Every problem is a nail," Malcolm said. He thought about this. Jenkins may be on to something.

"But the only way to do that is to get to know people, the same way you have gotten to know the ship. I'm told that you can tell if there's something wrong with the ship just by listening."

"Yes, but, it's not hard. The signs are there, you just have to look."

"That's what it's like with people too," Jenkins added. "Because I've been doing this for years, I can tell when a man comes to sick bay if he's really sick, hung over, or looking to get out of work. It's about watching and listening, knowing what to look for."

"How do I do it?" Malcolm asked.

"By watching and listening. It's an imperfect science, but keep it up long enough, you'll have plenty of empirical evidence to support your theories. I'd say start with Saxon. What do you know about your second in command?"

"Hardly anything."

"Invite him to dine with you, then," the doctor said. "Break bread with him, drink with him, and take his measure. It's important for the two of you to trust one another." The doctor looked down at his drink. "Listen to me, wise old fool giving advice to a much younger man."

"No, really, I do appreciate it," Malcolm said in earnest.

"Thank you, you're too kind. I should go before I have too much of this," he said, indicating his glass. He drained what little was left and packed the glass back in his bag. Malcolm handed him his empty glass and started to hand the bottle over when the doctor pushed the bottle back at Malcolm and said, "No, you keep it. I know you'll appreciate it far more than I ever could."

"Thank you, doctor," Malcolm said, meaning both the whisky and the advice.

"I think you have the makings of a great captain in you, Malcolm. I told Archie as much before he died. Prove me right son." He put a hand on

Malcolm's shoulder for a brief moment, picked up his black bag, and left the cabin.

CHAPTER 7

The next day, Malcolm followed the doctor's prescription. As he listened to the morning reports, he tried to figure out what problem needed to be solved or was being solved by the report. It worked. It was much easier for Malcolm to grasp the contents and know what to do with them, even if it was to file the information for future reference.

He toured the ship, this time not in an aimless daze, but with purpose. He again returned to the enlisted mess where he grabbed a mug of tea and sat down with a small group of off duty crewmen. The crewmen were nervous; the captain coming to sit with them could not be a good thing. After a minute of extremely polite conversations, the crewmen suddenly remembered duties or errands that they had to perform and scurried away.

Perhaps the direct approach wasn't the best, Malcolm mused. Instead, he opted to watch the crew's interaction and try to judge each man's mood. He wasn't sure if he was right or not, but the exercise helped.

When the doctor had told him last night that he had thought Malcolm was unfit for duty, Malcolm was hurt. That instant made him realize that he really did want to be captain, and a good captain at that. Malcolm returned to his office and asked a crewman to have his personal affects moved to the captain's cabin. He went to the engine room and personally told Mr. Frye that he should move to the chief engineer's cabin and his effects had been moved out.

Malcolm returned to the makeshift bridge. Commander Saxon had the watch and was making sure that they were on course and moving at best speed.

"Good afternoon, sir. We should be seeing the Russian coast by daybreak and arrive in St. Petersburg by early morning," reported Saxon.

"Excellent. Commander Saxon, would you care to join me for dinner tonight in the officer's mess? Nothing formal, I just want to go over a number of things with you."

"Very good, sir. I look forward to it. What time?" asked Saxon.

"Four bells," replied Malcolm.

"Very good, sir."

Malcolm said his farewells, confident all was well on their sorry excuse for a bridge, and went to the chef to make preparations for dinner. Malcolm returned to the captain's office—his office, he had to keep reminding himself.

As he sat in the chair, he surveyed the room in detail for the first time and saw the souvenirs of a man's life. On the desk were pictures of Captain Collins—first as a young man with his equally young bride, moving forward several years to a man with his wife and four children, moving forward several years to a picture taken somewhat recently, a grandfatherly captain sat with his now matronly wife surrounded by their adult children and several grandchildren. Grandchildren who will never get to know their grandfather, Malcolm thought.

But the markers of Captain Collins' life were not just the pictures on the desk. On the bookshelf were several ship models, probably ships on which Captain Collins served. The oriental carpet on the floor was probably found on a trip to India. There was a native mask from somewhere in Africa, and even a small flag of the Confederate States of America, a prize that must have been gathered as a blockade-runner during the Civil War in the Colonies. On the wall, he saw the empty spot where the sextant had been. Malcolm walked to the large globe next to the desk; as he turned the globe, he saw x's over several of the cities. As he stopped to examine them, he realized that they must represent a city that the captain had visited. He noticed with interest that St. Petersburg was unmarked. And now would stay so forever.

Malcolm returned his attention to the reports on his desk and began writing the letters to the next of kin. He had put this task off; how could he tell them that their loved one died in a freak accident? Or was it an accident? Malcolm had not taken the time until now to examine the string of events. First, the contaminated fuel. It's very likely that had Malcolm not heard something off with the engines, they might have failed not long after the bridge explosion. The bridge explosion had completely disabled the ability to steer the airship. And with the command crew killed, there would be no one to step up and take command of the ship. Whoever took over would likely have no choice but to take the German aid. The loss of the bridge, while taking some of the technology of the Daedalus, would not significantly hamper someone who wanted to take the Daedalus apart for its secrets.

There was a saboteur and collaborator on board, Malcolm realized with a start. And with the frayed relations between German and the Empire, something like this could touch off a powder keg that might consume all of Europe. Malcolm hoped that his actions over the Baltic had no repercussions. He was counting on the fact that it wouldn't look good for the Germans that a disabled British airship had effectively stopped two German zeppelins without laying a shot on the Germans. There had been no word from the Admiralty, so he assumed there were no further repercussions. The thought of a collaborator on board disturbed Malcolm greatly.

Malcolm filed this thought away for further reference and realized that it was nearly time for his dinner with Commander Saxon. He retired to the captain's quarters—his quarters. He was immediately struck by how few personal affects he owned. Malcolm refreshed himself, took the bottle of Auchtoshan with him and went to the officer's mess.

At exactly four bells, Commander Charles Saxon strode into the officer's mess. The midshipman led him to the seat and poured two tall glasses of a brown ale. "Please, sit," motioned Malcolm, already at the table. Intrigued, Saxon took his seat, already noting that this was not a typical dinner at the officer's mess.

"This is Tennants. It's brewed not far from where I grew up," Malcolm said, pointing to the glasses. "I thought tonight, you and I should get to know one another a little better. Up until now, we haven't had much of an opportunity to talk, what with our duties and all. But I thought we ought to become better acquainted. To that end, the meal tonight is the type of meal that I prefer. And it will be much less formal than Captain Collins' dinners. Cheers," he said raising his beer glass and taking a long draught.

"Cheers," replied Saxon in a somewhat bemused tone of voice. He did have to admit that he rather enjoyed the beer, but he had little experience with beer against which to judge it.

Malcolm indicated to the midshipmen that they should bring in the food. The midshipmen brought the plates and uncovered them with a flourish. Saxon was surprised to see what looked like a very thick stew with vegetables and meat sitting underneath a mound of mashed potatoes.

Malcolm picked up his fork and indicated that Saxon should eat. Saxon looked and noted there was only one dinner fork.

Saxon hesitantly prodded the food with his fork. "Forgive me ignorance, but what exactly is this?"

Malcolm paused to finish a bite. "Shepard's pie. Although it might technically be cottage pie since there's no lamb. Actually, I'm not sure what the meat is, but for now I'll pretend it's beef."

"You make it sound so... appetizing," Saxon said drolly.

"It's better than it looks. And the potatoes are particularly good. I'll give Chef one thing—he knows how to cook potatoes."

Saxon wrinkled his nose, took a forkful of the food and hesitantly ate it. Surprisingly, it was quite tasty. Simple, but tasty. "You're right, this is good," he said as he started to eat in earnest.

Malcolm smiled, "Thank you. This is one of my favorite dishes." Silence fell as the two continued to eat. Malcolm ate his meal with great relish and Saxon had to admit that he found the meal quite satisfying. When dinner was finished and the dishes cleared, Malcolm brought out the Auchentoshan and two glasses. He poured a finger for both of them.

"Whisky is my preferred after dinner drink. I never could stand the port that Captain Collins liked to drink."

Saxon was at least familiar with whisky. He sipped slowly, savoring the flavor. "This is quite excellent."

"Thank you. This is made at a distillery not far from my hometown."

"Where is that?" inquired Saxon.

"Kilmacolm. It's a small village not too far from Glasgow. Many people live there and commute to Glasgow by train. My father did that. He worked in the shipyards, until..."

"Until?"

"There was an accident; he was a welder and a large sheet of metal fell on him, crushing his left side. He survived, but it's difficult for him to get around and do anything. After his accident, I left university and enlisted in the Navy. What about your family?"

"Not much to say really. It's an old family, but I am from a poorer branch. While I was growing up, we stayed with various relatives, at least for as long as they could stand us. I have lived many places throughout England and Scotland, but I can't call any one place home. When I came of age, I was given a choice of making a career in business or the military. The thought of being stuck behind a dreary desk counting coppers everyday was enough to drive me to madness. I opted for the military and the Navy, in particular. Since I have no permanent home, the travel of the Navy appealed to me."

Silence fell between the two as they regarded their whisky. Malcolm looked up. "I never had the chance to thank you for helping me out with Bromley at the captain's dinner. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I'm curious, why did you do it?" asked Malcolm.

"Growing up as the 'poor' relation, I have been the butt of many jokes from my so-called betters. I hate to see that happen to anyone. And besides, Bromley was a pompous twit and I rather enjoyed watching him turn every shade of red when you did nothing wrong that night."

"It was rather amusing. It's a good thing the doctor was there; I thought Bromley might become apoplectic," Malcolm said, laughing. "Did you know him very well?"

"I can't say that I did. I believe that he was the son of some landed gentry. Had a House in the Midlands I believe. He knew that I came from similar stock, so he left me alone. But he certainly liked to show his superiority to those of humbler starts, like yourself and the doctor."

"The doctor? Really?"

"Oh, yes. I heard tell from one of the older officers that there was a historic row between the two of them such that the captain had to intervene. He told Bromley in no uncertain terms that he was not to insult the doctor and if he did, he'd be transferred to a watch post in the Orkney Islands. The way I heard tell, the captain was not kidding." Saxon stopped for a moment and asked, "Do you play chess?"

"I have, but I don't think I've touched a board since university," Malcolm said.

"Good, that will make you easy to beat," quipped Saxon. "You bring this exquisite whisky, I'll get my board and I'll meet you in your office."

"Very well." Within five minutes, Saxon had returned, the game board was set up, glasses were refilled, and the battle was joined. Malcolm, as white, started immediately with a bold strategy, freeing his queen and harrying many of Saxon's positions. Saxon, for his part, dodged most of Malcolm's forays and in counter, led a couple of feints that siphoned off pieces from Malcolm's defenses. Soon, through crafty maneuvering, Saxon had Malcolm pinned down and it looked like Malcolm was finished. Malcolm could see the end coming when suddenly he came up with a plan. If he could lure Saxon into taking his queen, he might be able to reverse the tables on Saxon and use his configuration to pin his king.

Malcolm began the trap with reckless attacks with first a knight and then a bishop. Saxon fell for the bait and moved into position to take them. Malcolm brought his queen forward and boldly put her next to Saxon's king. At this point, although Saxon could not reach the queen with his other pieces, his king could. He guessed that Saxon couldn't resist the prize and his guess was correct. Saxon hesitantly reached for the queen, trying to make sure that he was in no danger. What he hadn't seen was Malcolm's rook hidden in back that had a straight path to end the game.

When Saxon removed his fingers from the king, Malcolm took his rook the length of the board. "Check and mate, I believe," he said finishing the last of his whisky. Saxon stared at the board for a few seconds and realized Malcolm was correct. "Congratulations," he said as he raised his glass in salute. Saxon stood and began to pick up the pieces. "Thank you for a most illuminating game of chess sir. I should go as I have early watch tomorrow, sir."

"Please, call me Malcolm," Malcolm said.

"Only if you call me Charles."

"Very well. Thank you, Charles."

"Thank you, Malcolm," Saxon said offering his hand.

The two men shook hands and Commander Charles Saxon left the captain's office. Malcolm smiled as he poured another finger of whisky. Yes, it had been a most illuminating night.

CHAPTER 8

The Daedalus reached the coast of Russia that morning. Once land was sighted, Malcolm went to the radio room to radio for additional information. The response was: "Welcome Daedalus. Report to The Khodynka Aerodrome, coordinates 55.7883 N, 37.5333 E."

"That was bloody useful," Malcolm muttered as he took the orders back with him to the makeshift bridge. Handing the navigator on duty the coordinates, he met with Saxon and discussed the day's duties. They agreed that they should arrive in St. Petersburg looking like the best representatives of His Majesty's Air Service. Using the ship's radio, Malcolm informed the crew that there would be ongoing inspections that morning and all were to be in dress uniforms for the approach to Khodynka.

Malcolm and Saxon decided to split the inspections so they could cover more ground; Malcolm suggested that he inspect the gunnery stations while Saxon would inspect the engine room. For the rest of the day, the ship was a beehive of activity, and crewmen could be seen working feverishly or running from one point to another. After much spit and polish, both Malcolm and Saxon thought that the Daedalus was ready. Late that afternoon, the Daedalus gradually descended to dock with the mooring tower of the aerodrome.

When the Daedalus settled, the crew lowered the gangplank and the escort started out. Malcolm and Saxon, in their dress uniforms complete with white gloves, looked at each other nervously.

"Do you know any Russian?" asked Malcolm.

"None that won't get us shot on the spot for propositioning someone," replied Saxon.

"Alright, then, I better do the talking. After you, Commander."

Saxon followed the escort, with Malcolm bringing up the rear. As he concentrated on marching and keeping his bearing erect, he vainly tried to recall the protocol of landing in another country. Although he had landed in several foreign countries in his Air Service term, he had mostly spent his time in the engine room.

Malcolm marched to the receiving delegation, appraising the group. First was a man in a Russian military uniform, most likely the base commander; a decidedly British looking man in a morning coat and bowler, likely a diplomat from the British Embassy; and finally, the most beautiful woman Malcolm had ever seen. She was medium height, her auburn hair almost glowed in the afternoon light and her bright green eyes seemed to be lit within from fire. Malcolm arrived in front of the line and gave his sharpest salute, swallowing hard. The Russian in uniform returned the salute and immediately started speaking. Within seconds, the woman translated, "I

am Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, Commander of the Imperial Russian Air Service. Welcome to our country." When she finished her translation, he tipped his head slightly.

Malcolm bowed to the grand duke. "I am Malcolm Robertson, Captain of His Majesty's Airship Daedalus and as a representative of His Majesty King George V, I am honored to be your guest."

"Well done, young sir," said the British diplomat. "I'm George Buchanan, His Majesty's Ambassador to the Court of Tsar Nicholas II." Malcolm shook the ambassador's hand. "And this is Special Envoy Joan de St. Leger."

Malcolm took her proffered hand and kissed it gently, remembering his gentlemanly manners. Her fiery green eyes locked on his and he thought for just a moment, the corner of her mouth turned upward as if in a smile.

"This is Commander Charles Saxon," Malcolm said, remembering at last to introduce him to the delegation. At the mention of the name, he thought he saw a flicker of recognition from the ambassador, but it passed so quickly that Malcolm was not sure if he had imagined it. He exchanged greetings with the grand duke and the ambassador and likewise kissed the proffered hand from the special envoy in a much more charming manner than Malcolm.

"Very good. The grand duke has graciously set up barracks for you and your men here at the airfield. The Daedalus will be moved to hanger A shortly so work can begin on reconstruction of the bridge. I can't imagine how you made it this far."

"It was a wee dodgy at first, but we were able to keep her together," Malcolm said. He immediately regretted the words as they passed his lips. They made him sound like the bumpkin. This time, Malcolm was sure he saw a smile on the young woman's lips.

"With the help of the grand duke's staff, I've drawn up the lodging assignments. Please relay these to your crew and arrange for your personal effects to be brought to your quarters. Your presence is required at the British Embassy for discussions about your mission," Joan said passing copies of the lodging assignments to both Malcolm and Saxon. Her voice, although husky, had a very cultured accent.

Malcolm and Saxon looked at each other and then Malcolm said, "Yes, thank you. We'll see to the disposition of the crew. We'll be back shortly. Grand Duke, Ambassador, Miss de St. Leger," Malcolm said bowing to each in turn before leaving to return to the crew. When Saxon was level with him again, he murmured in a low voice, "I don't like the sounds of that. The meeting at the embassy."

"They can't hang us for treason, because we finished the mission. The worse that could happen is a court-martial for dereliction of duty or gross incompetence and life in the brig," Saxon said sarcastically.

"You're a ray of sunshine, you are," laughed Malcolm.

"I try to look for the worse possible outcome," offered Saxon. "That way, I'm seldom disappointed."

Malcolm and Saxon reviewed the lodging assignments, briefed the other officers on what would happen, and assigned crewmen to bring their affects to their new quarters. Malcolm drew Mr. Frye aside for a quiet conversation. "I want you to keep an eye on the reconstruction on the bridge if I'm unavailable."

"Why? Aren't you staying here?" asked Frye.

"Perhaps not. Commander Saxon and I are to leave shortly to go to the British Embassy. I don't know how long I'll be there. In the meantime, I want you to take charge of the crew and offer any assistance you can in the repair. There should be a copy of the blueprints with all of my modifications."

"In the engine room," Frye finished. "I've seen you pull those blueprints out so many times, I see it in my sleep."

"Yes..." Malcolm said, caught off guard. "One thing. If I'm not back when they rebuild the flight controls, make sure they put a ship's wheel back, just like Captain Collins had."

"I thought you hated that thing and it was, and I quote, 'A bloody waste of manpower and engineering to rig that primitive control to a state of the art airship.'"

"Aye, that's true," said Malcolm. "But because we had that primitive control, we were able to connect in the flight controls somewhere else. I like having that bit of redundancy. Just make sure they don't run off with the levers."

"Aye, aye, sir," Frye replied, now understanding the captain. "Consider it done."

"Good man. Good luck," he said, offering Frye his hand.

"And to you, too," Frye said, shaking the hand and then throwing a quick salute.

Malcolm returned the salute and strode over to Saxon. "Ready to face the firing squad?" Malcolm asked.

"I told you, they can only try us for gross dereliction of duty or incompetence. That's only punishable by prison."

"Ever the eternal optimist, eh?" smiled Malcolm. He sighed and said, "Let's get this over with" as he and Saxon walked back to the waiting delegation.