

ARCTIC FIRE

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To my Mom and Dad...
Gertie and George Byers
Thank you.



CHAPTER ONE

April 14th, 1912

“Up scope,” the Kapitan called out. As he waited patiently for it to rise, he began humming *Alexander’s Rag Time Band* quietly to himself. It was a catchy tune he’d first heard last year when he was in America, assigned as a naval attaché in Washington D.C. Though it was frowned upon in some circles back home in Germany, he was becoming a fan of this new style of American music. When the scope reached chest height, he turned his cap around, flipped down the handles and peered into the eyepiece. Still humming, he slowly turned the periscope, sweeping the ocean, searching for his prey.

It was a moonless night and the sea was a glassy calm, a beautiful, yet somehow disturbing sight. The sea was supposed to be alive, always moving, pulsating, teeming with life, but tonight the waters were flat and stiff, as if she had lain down and died and rigor mortis had set in. In his nearly twenty years before the mast, he could remember only one other time when the sea was this stagnate.

In the old days of tall ships and sailing with the wind at your back, some would have called this a becalmed sea, an omen of bad things to come. But these were modern times; man no longer needed the wind to move across the sea, or in this case, under it. Men of the twentieth century no longer believed in such things as becalmed seas, monsters that rose from the depths to devour whole ships or the likes of the *Flying Dutchman*. But in spite of modern

technology and his belief in logic and sound reasoning, he had seen things at sea that would set a prudent man's mind wondering.

Then he saw her, and at that moment, all thoughts of superstitions evaporated in an instant. Even with the moon refusing to show her face, and even peering through the tiny lens of the periscope, it would have been hard for a blind man not to see the magnificence of the ship as she sliced through the plate glass sea.

Festive lights shone through nearly every porthole on the floating city, piercing the darkness and reflecting off the mirror sea, making it look like two ships traveling side by side. He estimated that she was still several kilometers off, giving them plenty of time to maneuver and get into position. These were ideal condition to evaluate the new system.

"Status, Mr. Kappel?" the Kapitan said, unable to take his eyes off their prize.

"The boat is handling like a lumbering whale full of blubber Kapitan. Even with the calm seas, five knots is the best we can manage with all the added weight of the scaffolding and ice, and you can forget about trying to turn. So, if you just want to go straight, and go slower than my dead grandmother, then everything is ship-shape...sir."

First Officer Barrett Kappel snapped to attention and mockingly saluted the Kapitan after his report. He then rolled the cigar butt from the left side of his mouth to the right, as if that were the proper military way to do things. Though smoking was never allowed on a submarine, the first officer was never found without a cigar sticking out of his mouth.

Kapitan Claus Haufmann peered around the periscope with amusement in his eyes and a smile on his lips as he looked at his first officer. "Now Barrett, I know you don't much care for this assignment but you know it is necessary. Discontent and unrest are sweeping across Europe like a rising breeze, a breeze that I fear will

soon turn into a hurricane, and we must be ready. This observation mission will be critical to tracking the movement of enemy shipping, both military and civilian, and doing it without being seen.”

Haufmann paused and stretched as he spoke. He was tall by any standards, but at six-foot-two, he was a giant for a submariner and was constantly bending and stooping as he contorted his lanky frame inside the confining bowels of their steel whale.

“Camouflage,” Haufmann continued, as he rubbed the last kink out of his neck, “...is the art of seeing without being seen, and what better place to hide than in plain sight? Yes, the scaffolding surrounding the boat and refrigerating unit installed to generate and maintain our facade of being an iceberg certainly weighs us down, but I believe the benefits of blending in with our surroundings outweighs our ability to be able to move faster than your dead grandmother.

“Come Barrett, see for yourself. Helm, port two degrees, let’s get a little closer.”

“Port two degrees,” echoed the helmsman.

Kappel stepped up to the periscope to look while the Kapitan continued. “Remember, Barrett, this is just a prototype, a training mission to see if it is feasible. But just stop and think about it. How valuable would it be to be able to monitor the enemy’s ship movements, to know exactly where their ships are at all times and to be able to strike at will from seemingly nowhere?”

“My God that thing is big!” Kappel said in awe. He stepped away from the periscope. “I understand Kapitan, it’s just that I’d hate to have our shark turned into a wallowing flounder.”

“So do I my friend, but sometimes sneaking in the back door is better than trying to bash down the front door.” Kapitan Haufmann peered once again through the periscope. “She’s making good speed. Send up the lookouts. We’ll maintain course, get to within two hundred meters, then let her slip past us.”

“Aye sir.” Kappel looked toward the back of the boat and barked.

“Lookouts one and two, topside now!”

From the stern, two young sailors spilled into the control room like puppies trying to run across a linoleum floor. One was wearing a white, fur-lined parka with white binoculars hanging from his neck; the other was wearing a dark blue parka.

Kappel stared at the two; there was no mistaking that they were brothers. He'd seen it a hundred times before. Country peasant boys tired of the farm, looking for adventure and glory by serving in the *Kaiserliche Marine*. Some of these boys were so wet behind the ears that he feared if he had a crew full of these peasant farmers, they would surly sink to the bottom. Both boys, Thayer and Damien Lehmann, were desperately trying to grow mustaches to make themselves look older, and failing miserably. He couldn't fault them though; he himself had escaped grueling factory work for the freedom of the sea and it had served him well, but these two had a long way to go.

“Where is your white parka crewman Lehmann? We are supposed to be an iceberg. I have not seen too many dark blue icebergs,” Kappel said, shifting his cigar for emphasis, “Have you?”

The young crewman snapped to attention. “No sir, I tried but I couldn't find my white parka sir, sorry sir. I can take it off and go up in my uniform sir!” Thayer replied.

“What, and have you freeze to death within the hour? I don't think so. This is just a training mission so go on up, but if this had been a combat situation, then I would let you freeze. Do I make myself clear crewman?”

“Yes sir!”

“Good. Now go. If they spot you perhaps they will just think you are a giant Dodo bird who has stopped to rest on the ice.” Both men scrambled up the ladder and disappeared through the hatch into the conning tower. Everyone felt a wave of cold air invading the control room when the hatched was opened.

Once through the hatch, they closed it and Damien, in the white parka, reached over and slapped his brother on the top of the head. “Nice going Thayer. You’re such a dummkopf, but you know what? I do like what First Officer Kappel called you. I think that will be your new nickname: Dodo.”

“Shut up Damien, it’s not my fault. I know you hid my jacket somewhere.”

Damien had a look of mock hurt on his face. “Now why would I do such a thing as that? Mother said I should take care of you.”

“Yeah, she didn’t mean it like that.” He glared at Damien for a moment then sighed; he could never stay mad at his older brother, no matter what he did. “Let’s just take our stations.”

Thayer stood on deck for a moment and breathed in deeply, tasting the fresh, crisp salt air. Even though they had only been at sea for a few weeks, the air in the submarine had already turned into a flat, stale taste that lingered in your mouth. Diesel fuel, cooking odors, battery acid and the sweat of thirty-five men crammed together in a tight space made the air so thick at times you could almost take a knife and spread it on your biscuit.

Thayer inhaled another breath then adjusted the hood on his jacket. Even though the air tasted sweet, the wind was still a bitter cold.

“Are we going to take our stations or just stand here and look at the ocean and skip stones...Dodo?” Damien mocked.

Thayer reached over and slugged Damien hard on his shoulder. He looked at him for a moment, then both men burst out laughing. Thayer just shook his head, then grabbed a pair of headphones and climbed into his position on the right side of the mast.

Before him was a strange sight that he still hadn’t gotten used to yet: instead of seeing the sleek, dark gray bow knifing through the water, there was a huge, bulky mass of white. A series of scaffoldings and supporting cooling pipes were attached to the hull, making the

submarine look like a giant swimming porcupine. White canvas covered the scaffoldings, supporting several inches or more of ice, all kept frozen by the cooling pipes.

When running, the sub would blow its ballast tanks and the whole “iceberg” would raise about two feet out of the water, allowing the submarine to move. With the added topside weight, the sub would sway back and forth in the water, so giant outriggers were attached to the hull and ran to the outer edges of the berg. When they were stationary, the sub would take on water and would “sit” the berg down on the ocean surface.

Damien grabbed the other set of headphones and took up his lookout position on the opposite side of the mast from Thayer. Thayer tapped his brother on the shoulder and pointed behind them to the left. With binoculars raised, both men paid little attention to anything else as they stared in an almost trance-like state, totally mesmerized by the moving city that was quickly overtaking them.

“Damien, I can see people up on the boat deck, see there, just behind the first funnel.” Thayer said excitedly, “and listen, I can hear the band playing.” For a moment, both men were silent as they just watched the great ship.

“Look, on the main deck, just below the third lifeboat, I see a couple kissing.” Damien replied. “Oh isn’t that sweet, they look just like you and Gretchen smooching when we left home—kissy, kissy.”

“Shut up!” Thayer glared at his brother, then focused back on the ship. “I wonder where they are all going, what their stories are?”

“I know that we’ll be going to the brig and that our story will be a court-martial if we don’t report in.” Damien turned on the small switch on his headset. “Lookout to Con, the ship is about three kilometers. Port aft.”

“Con to Lookout, aye.”

The electric motor whined as the periscope slowly began to descend back into the bowels of the submarine. A moment later they

heard the hatch open. The Lehmann brothers looked down to see the Kapitan and the First Officer coming onto the conning tower. Both officers were wearing white parkas. When Damien saw them, he pointed at them, then to Thayer and mouthed the words *Dooo-dooo*. Thayer gritted his teeth and threw daggers out of his eyes, as that was all he could do at the moment with the Kapitan there.

With both officers concentrating on the ship, Damien turned his attention to the surrounding area. After a moment he stopped and stared in front of them.

“Mr. Kappel,” he said. “Why is there a hole in the sky?”

Kappel looked at the Kapitan and shook his head. “And to think that I was worried about Thayer there. What are you talking about Damien?”

“Over there sir.” Damien pointed, just off our port bow.”

Kappel raised his binoculars; it did indeed look like a hole in the sky. It was as if someone had taken a knife and carved out a section of the night sky at the horizon, removing the stars and leaving a blank, empty hole. Almost immediately, Kappel started screaming.

“You idiot! Were you both staring at the ship this whole time instead of doing your jobs and looking around?”

“What is it?” Damien asked, panic rising in his voice.

“It’s an iceberg, you idiot!”

Kapitan Haufmann spun around and raised his binoculars and looked at the iceberg, horror filling his eyes. “Hard right rudder. Now!” he barked, down through the open hatchway to the control room below.

Startled by the intensity of the shouted order, the young helmsmen spun the wheel hard and fast, and despite its bulk, the submarine responded quickly and lurched to one side. So sudden and quick was the maneuver, the outrigger on the left slammed hard into the water. The force of the impact was so abrupt and great; it sent shock waves reverberating throughout the submarine and

through the scaffolding, which acted like giant tuning forks. A large block section of ice hanging over the stern broke off and swirled underneath the submarine and hit the rudder, bending it back to port and lodging itself at the hinge point, jamming the rudder.

“The helm is not answering!” Came a frantic cry from below deck.

“Full ahead port engine, full reverse on starboard engine!” Haufmann commanded.

The three men were sitting in the engine room playing cards. First Class seaman Elmar Hirsch was sitting near the bulkhead trying not to smile. At last he had a decent hand and hoped to win back some of his money, aces over eights. Chief engineer Dieter Schwab was sitting across from him, also smiling on the inside. He wasn't smiling because he had a winning hand but because he was amused at Hirsch trying to hide his. Mechanics Mate Otto Grün, was sitting with his back toward the forward hatch, ready to fold, it seemed lady luck had left him high and dry.

When the chunks of ice fell off the scaffolding, a huge slab tore a long gash in the port ballast tank, then snagged on a cross beam and swung under the hull with such force that it punched a large hole in the engine room. The force of the impact popped several of the rivets, and one shot out like a bullet, hitting Hirsch in the back of the head. He was dead before his crumpled body hit the deck. Schwab sprang to his feet to help his friend but slipped in the onrush of water and went down hard, jamming his knee on the deck and slamming his head again the side of the metal worktable. He cried out in pain and nearly passed out, but managed to struggle to his feet and grabbed Hirsch. He felt a wave of nausea sweep over him as he pulled his hand from the back of the boy's head; it was covered with blood. Grün rushed to help his crewmates but had taken only two steps before he was slammed against the bulkhead as the rest of the rivets gave way and the hull collapsed. The deluge of water hurled

him against the other bulkhead, crushing him in an instant.

“Why are we still moving?” Kapitan Haufmann shouted down the hatch to the control room. At that same instant, the sub lurched back to the left when the ice bent the rudder and jammed it in the opposite direction.

Thayer was still high on his lookout post, paralyzed with fear, staring at the moving city that wasn't wavering from its imminent collision course. Within moments, an immense wall of moving steel was literally within arm's reach and even though he was fifteen feet above the deck of the submarine, he still couldn't see onto the deck of the liner. Thayer looked at Damien for reassurance but instead of finding comfort, he saw the same wild-eyed look of fear that he had in his own eyes. He was even more terrified now because he had never seen fear in his big brother's eyes before.

He vaguely heard the Kapitan shouting something and then the submarine lunged to one side with such force that he heard the scaffolding breaking and saw huge chunks of ice falling off the sub. Suddenly the submarine lurched back the other way and Thayer felt his hands being torn from the railing and then he found himself falling through the air. With a bone-jarring thud, Thayer landed painfully hard, face down, onto a floating slab of ice.

With dizzying, agonizing pain, he lifted his head and watched through blurry eyes as his submarine continued on without him. The last thing Thayer Lehmann remembered was how cold the ice was and wondering why they were leaving him behind.

“KAPITAN!” Kappel shouted.

Haufmann no longer needed his binoculars to see that less than one hundred meters away, 882 feet of steel was bearing down on his tiny submarine at twenty-one knots.

“I need right full rudder NOW!” Haufmann barked out, but he already knew it was too late and that only a miracle could save his submarine now. The words had no sooner left his mouth than the

submarine shook violently and the sounds of grinding, scraping, ripping metal vibrated throughout the boat as the two vessels collided.

The scaffolding and piping of the U-boat bent, twisted and snapped away like dry twigs crushed underfoot. The left bow diving plane punctured the hull of the immense ship and suddenly the submarine was being pulled along by the ship, hitching a ride like a flea on the back of a Great Dane. For a fleeting moment, the Kapitän was beginning to think that they just might have their miracle, that they just might cheat Death and simply bounce off the great ship. But Death would not be cheated; it would not be denied. For tonight, Death was about to go on a gluttonous rampage.

Haufmann felt the submarine jerk as the dive plane began tearing a great gash in the liner's side. In an instant, the wound had grown to several dozen meters, and in that moment he knew there would be no miracle.

Suddenly the dive plane caught on a main bulkhead of the ship and instead of sheering off, the fine German engineering and craftsmanship proved their undoing as the dive plane held and it twisted the submarine, pulling her onto her side. The remnants of the scaffolding and ice shattered against the hull of the ship like a snowball thrown against the side of a house.

The submarine continued to roll and the conning tower was dragged under and smashed against the hull of the great passenger liner, like a tin can placed on a railroad track for a passing freight train to crush. The piercing screams of metal scraping metal alerted no one. They were lost, drowned out by the steady, throbbing heartbeat of the giant liner's engines. The cries of help from the men trapped inside the submarine, once their home, now their coffin, would never reach the living. Their muffled screams were softened into melody as they mixed and mingled with the sounds of music and laughter, floating down from those strolling casually on

the decks of the ship six stories above them.

Few, if any of the passengers of the *R.M.S. Titanic* felt the slight vibration as 53,000 tons of swiftly moving ocean liner brushed aside the 600 ton gnat that was unfortunate enough to get in its way.