

## **Wrecking Ball**

Adventures in Time, Love and War

By S D Anugyan

### **From Chapter 3: Intriguing**

“Do you want another go, Jackie?” the flight lieutenant asked.

“No thanks, Jim,” Donnel replied, “I prefer to sit behind a pair of Brownings up in the sky.” He didn’t want to admit the Lee Enfield had kicked like a mule and after only ten rounds he was feeling it in his shoulder. How soldiers put up with this self-inflicted injury, he had no idea.

“You didn’t do too badly,” the man smiled.

The sounds of guns of various descriptions and size rebounded off the hills, accompanied with smells of cordite drifting across the cool Dartmoor air. Paradoxically, the scene of various Army and Air Force teams competing had an aura of peace about it. It wasn’t just that the matches were friendly, but perhaps also because they were ultimately on the same team, held by the all-encompassing serenity of the moor.

This last contemplation of Donnel’s was interrupted by the roar of low-flying engines overhead. Many of those on the ground let out a cheer, but there were also cries of “You bastards! Crash, why dontcha?!” and so on, as the planes diminished in the grey sky.

“If you can’t keep it together now, what would you do if they were the enemy, you ponces?” demanded one team leader viciously.

“That’s 276 on their way back,” commented the flight lieutenant.

“And showing off,” said Donnel.

“Looks like they’re all there though, that’s the thing.”

Their conversation trailed off as the English officer focused on the team’s current performance, and Donnel had his attention seized by a commotion further along, and down the slope to his right. There was a group of soldiers at

the pistol range, mostly men and some women; but one of the women wasn't Army, she was Air Force. Her light blue shirt stood out against all the khaki, her hair untamed once again beneath her cap. It was Maggie Drummond. She was perfectly poised, calm, as she blazed away at a target twenty yards away with a pistol. She knew what she was doing.

There were shouts from the men and cheers from the women as she emptied the magazine. Smiling, trying not to show how pleased she was, she accepted the hugs and pats on the back from the ATS girls, some of whom were taunting the men.

Donnel made his way down the slope. Their eyes met.

"Done well obviously."

She nodded, glad to see him, but also there was an uncertainty there. Perhaps he had intruded. As things turned out, if he were where he should not have been, he was hardly alone in that.

He watched as she took the magazine out of the pistol. He noticed that it was a Colt 1911, US Navy issue.

"A gift," she explained, noting his gaze.

"Are you on the team?"

"Not really." She glanced around at the celebrating women. The men, prepared to forget their defeat in the name of festivity, were starting to celebrate with them, laughing at their own humiliation. Cigarettes were being passed around and someone had produced a hip flask.

"I was in the vicinity and the girls asked me to help settle a bet."

"Are they as good as you?"

"Better sometimes. It's the benefit of moving in privileged circles before the war. Firearms and aristocracy go together."

"You have a varied role around here."

"Well, it beats card-indexing," she said with a meaningful, though abstruse, look. "I was in a women's gun club in America," she added.

"Ahh. That makes sense," he said ambiguously. "It seems the smaller the weapon, the worse I am at using it. I can't hit a target with a pistol at ten yards. I've tried..."

"Please, hide this," she said suddenly and unexpectedly, moving close to him, shoving the pistol into his hands. "My jacket's in the car. Try and cover me."

Swiftly he slid the weapon under his jacket pocket, whilst looking around to see three Army officers headed towards their ebullient group.

“Heads up, guys,” he warned the others, as he and Maggie moved further down the slope, away from them. He took care that she remained on the other side of him from the officers who were still some distance away. Before they rounded the hill and were out of sight, he glanced back to see the shooters tidying up as the officers descended. The women seemed the most unfazed. Was that evidence of good breeding? Donnel wondered.

They made their way through hundreds of British troops going in various directions on the lower track, their puttees splattered with mud. A Queen Mary pushed by, carrying a tank under tarpaulin, its wheels spraying everyone in the vicinity with more mud. Still shielding her, he got the worst of it.

He recognised her car nestled amongst the trucks and jeeps.

“How did you get here?” she asked, visibly more relaxed, after retrieving her jacket, putting it on and fastening the buttons. It was as if, after letting her guard down, she needed to put on armour to feel secure.

“With the team in a truck. They won’t miss me, if I can get a ride with you...”

“It’s the least I can do.”

After they got in, he handed her the gun. She took it in her long slender fingers, and held it for a moment, thoughtfully, nervous again. “You didn’t see this,” she said decidedly, opening a compartment in the car door, and sliding the weapon in where it fitted neatly. “You didn’t see anything. I should have been more discreet. Hubris always gets the better of me.”

“No problem.”

They left the camp unhindered except for the sheer amount of traffic. This hardly lessened on the road between Okehampton and Tavistock, where there was a constant stream of traffic both ways. To the east the rising ground of the moor reminded Donnel in some way of a prehistoric beast lurking in the background. Its presence was always felt, especially now with the low layer of black cloud lit in gold-yellow flecks by the sun, which had emerged in its last moments before reaching the horizon.

Maggie was a careful driver and didn’t overtake, preferring to pull back from the rambunctious GIs in the back of a truck. “I don’t know if they’re leering at me, or jeering at you for being the passenger,” she joked.

Along a straight stretch, an American jeep filled with officers came right behind, then pushed past, weaving into the distance.

“It’s like something’s up,” Donnel commented. “Maybe we’re getting closer to the big push.”

Maggie ignored this, smiling at the departing jeep. "I was impressed the first time I saw the way Americans just charged across the grass. It was an oddly liberating experience. Me, I'm stuck in this clumsy heap."

"Oh it's not so bad," Donnel grinned. "It's nice, isn't it."

"What is?"

"This...co-operation."

She smiled at him with what could have been kindly condescension.

"Right up until Pearl Harbor happened," she said, "Standard Oil was refuelling U-Boats in New Jersey."

"Are you saying...?" He couldn't finish.

"I'm merely suggesting that our two countries weren't necessarily always so cosy."

"Things are very different now," he protested. He felt his world view under threat.

"I would say, yes, since a few months ago things have improved considerably. Even the Army and Navy are talking to each other."

"What circles do you move in?" Once again with her, as was often the case with the English, he suspected the preference for discretion – almost fetishistic – to be naturally flowering into national secrecy. Secrecy and honesty might not always be antonyms, he pondered.

"You saw my circle back there," she laughed finally, interrupting his thoughts. "My other circle is you chaps."

"Us...you mean...at the hut?" It suddenly dawned on him, and he was pleased. He had no idea she felt that way about them.

"Of course. Everything else is just my job."

"Well, Sergeant Drummond," he said, leaning back, "your absence was noted at last night's soirée."

"I had things to do."

"We even have a gramophone now."

"That sounds good. Can you teach me the jitterbug?"

"If you teach me the waltz."

Their lightness was brought to an end by a sudden melancholy on her part.

"The Germans," she said after a while. "And the Japanese. They dance, they do the waltz, everything we do..."

"Presumably."

"Yet they fight like people who do not know love."

They were entering Tavistock alone. No other vehicles, military or civilian, were in sight till they reached the centre.

Donnel eyed the people walking about. "It looks like a friendly town," he commented. She made no reply as they rattled through the streets. When they emerged the other side of the town, and were pushing up the leafy hill to Clearbrooke, they became stuck behind another army truck, British this time, and she pulled back.

"You're a really good shot," he remarked, eager to keep chatting. "After the war you should compete or something."

She glanced at him wistfully. "I often wonder if, once you become really good at something, the best thing is not to just quit it and go onto something else."

At the top of the hill, as they approached the airfield, a white plane with US Navy markings lifted up in front of them, glinting as it turned towards the setting sun.

"Catalina. Looks like top brass to me," Donnel commented. "Wonder what they're up to." He received no reply, and they remained in silence until getting to the main gate.

He reached for his ID only for them to be waved through.

"You're a popular girl," he remarked.

Only her smile – a constant, subtle default when she was not lighting up a room with her broader smile – said anything, until she turned off the road abruptly and they bumped over the grass towards the huts. "I learned from the best," she laughed.

There were cheers from the various representatives of the US Navy as they rattled past them; whether for her audacity, being a woman or being an audacious woman, wasn't clear.

They parked next to their own hut – Donnel was pleased to consider it as such, meaning it belonged to their whole little group. As they got out, Maggie was peering over to the Bellman hangar.

"Is that Trevor?" She was indicating a Walrus currently engaging the attentions of a team of men, one of whom was crouched on the top wing.

"Yes, it is. You really have excellent eyesight."

"Said the pot to the kettle. Will he be all right up there? What's he doing?"

"He started today. A lot of salt water damage on those craft. The paintwork needs constant attention. He wanted to start with the basics, get into the swing of things. Guess he has to prove himself."

“Better not let Joyce know. She’ll give him a tongue-lashing.”

“As delightful as that sounds, she’s been sent to Roborough today for some meeting.”

“So who’s at home?” she asked.

“Let’s go and find out,” he said as they stepped towards the door.

*End of ‘Wrecking Ball’ sample*

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