

THE TEN KINGS OF THE SEA

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Translated from the French

by Carla Sherman

CHAPTER 1

"Here we are."

Kurt stopped the other two with a gesture.

They remained motionless for a timeless moment in the night.

It had been a very long day for the young and ambitious Kriegsmarine Korvettenkapitän, Kurt Müller.

During all that afternoon, in the dilapidated quarters of the Old Port, he had felt the hostility that his presence and, most of all, that of his two companions members of the S.D.* had awakened in their passage. In spite of their civilian clothes, the officer and his two bodyguards had not passed unnoticed in the maze of old streets, sometimes swarming, sometimes deserted.

Kurt now became aware that their attempt to integrate into that colorfully dressed crowd had been nothing but a failure. The long gray leather overcoats of his escorts and his own blue Marine raincoat, although lacking insignia, his blond crew-cut hair and the all too characteristic bearing of the other two had betrayed them.

With their turned-up collars and the soft brims of their hats turned down, they waited in the night in front of the car, parking lights off, facing the sea. Then Kurt, the only one who did not wear a hat, led the way. They crossed the Quay and by way of Martegales Street, passed through the first curtain of houses, towards Lenche Square and the Accoules.

There they should find their goal, which they had partially located during the day. They slowed down, quite imperceptibly.

A little bit higher in front of them, stairs cut through the narrow alley, the round-edged steps worn down over the centuries by the many feet that had trod upon them. In the subdued center of the stairs, a thin trickle of water oozed following the slope. A cold and humid draft blew down from the top of the hill bringing noises to their expert ears, sounds other than the murmur of the night.

It was a war night, sad and dead.

In the silence, the water rustled. Dirty as it was, it still mirrored in the darkness. The creaking of a flapping shutter made them look up.

Sheets, freshly laundered shirts and pants hung across the street, waving in the darkness. There was no light behind the closed shutters. The inhabitants of that neighborhood, so turbulent during the day, must be afraid of curfew penalties. Or maybe it was simply boredom and wartime deprivations that made them go to bed early.

Silently, they walked towards a gate located a little higher on their left. A finely worked cornice surmounted the dark opening. A big crown was flanked by two dolphins. In the center, a barbed and crowned god with a fish tail and armed with a trident seemed to triumph. "Poseidon," whispered Kurt. "Poseidon."

This was much more than a simple coincidence. Pensive, he stopped. "What are we waiting for?" One of the guards was becoming impatient.

A thought crossed the mind of the young officer. He had more ties in common with those who must have lived here once than with his two companions.

"Nothing. Let's go."

They entered the passage carefully.

The rough walls were whitewashed and they sensed their pale contours in the dark. Sometimes, the dilapidated floor tiles cracked under their feet, the sound immobilizing them instantly. They came out into a backyard, opening directly towards the sky. In the diffuse light, the old house seemed to want to crush them with its weight. They were gripped by a strong saline smell. Dark patches of potbellied nets and ropes coiled up in piles stood out in the half-light.

In a corner, the arms of a cart stood up like the two antennas of some night creature.

Kurt's attention was suddenly attracted by a metallic reflection. He stood still, and was imitated by the other two. Hanging on a portico, on top of a rubber diving suit with dangling arms and legs, a copper and brass diving helmet reflected a faint ray of light that came in through the shutter of a window in the entresol. The man was there, that's for sure. They started climbing the stairs, cautiously placing their feet on the timeworn, irregular steps.

The officer's head was buzzing with images. It would soon be two years since May 1941. In successive waves, the tri-motor Junkers of the Luftwaffe released over Crete a swarm of paratroopers in the first airborne invasion in History. At the same time, Kurt disembarked from a submarine somewhere on the shore of the island. As the leader of an elite commando team, his precise mission was to contact and coerce a local sponge fisherman, a man whose importance did not seem so evident to him at the time.

It was a very beautiful spring morning and the contrast between the weeks of confinement in the narrow steel spindle-shaped vessel and the purity and luminosity of the sky had impressed the young submarine war specialist. The first ochre and golden streaks of the sun illuminated the steep cliffs of the shore, which the two inflatable rafts reached without difficulty. A tiny fishing port snuggled up deep inside a little inlet. The ancient palace of Knossos must be located right above, on the cliffs.

Kurt was wondering if there was a relationship between this and their goal. He could not find out at that time.

When the commando bolted into the house where their 'prey' should be sleeping, they found no person there. Standing in front of the whitewashed walls that shone in the first rays of the sun and the heavy open overseas blue door with almost transparent reflections, he felt a bit frustrated.

It was evident that in spite of the strict surveillance, the man had escaped.

Luckily, things would not be the same this time. For months, Kurt had woven his net patiently, thanks to countless pieces of information, sometimes quite incredible. This man with a disconcerting reputation could not escape him anymore.

In the huge silence, the three men stood still on the stone landing. Kurt lit a powerful torch and directed the beam to the door. The door was also painted with this curious overseas blue, which under the intense lighting acquired the dark and moving transparency of the ocean.

Intrigued, Kurt moved the circle of light on its surface and stopped over a business card pinned to the door.

GIORGIOS MARKANTAKIS
Deep-sea diver

He hesitated for a moment. Then, with a sharp movement, he lowered the latch. The door was not locked. When he pushed down the latch, the door opened completely and the officer rushed into the room, his Luger in his hand. The other two men followed him.

Behind the long table that served as his desk, a man got up. Books, documents and rolls of navigation maps were piled up hodgepodge on the table.

“Don’t move,” shouted the officer in Greek. “We don’t want to harm you.”

“I have been waiting for you for a long time, Kapitän Müller. Your visit is not a surprise for me.” The fisherman answered in German.

They looked into each other’s eyes and Kurt felt an unpleasant sensation. He had just called him by his name. In this game of cat and mouse, he was not

sure that he was playing the role of the cat anymore. The presence of the two bodyguards helped him overcome this first moment of confusion.

Kurt observed the man closely. He was big and powerful. An intense sense of restrained vitality emanated from him. His face had regular features hardened by two deep grooves in his cheeks. It was surrounded by an untidy red beard. Thick and curly hair covered the high forehead; his cold light-colored eyes, overhung by deep eyebrows watched closely.

The blue and white striped knitted fabric, the disparate objects from the ocean depths spread out in a jumble on the table or scattered around, all evoked in Kurt the image of a Neptune who had escaped from his underwater kingdom.

Responding to a gesture from the officer, the two guards holstered their guns and positioned themselves each to one side of the door.

“Are you Giorgios Markantakis, deep-sea diver by profession?”

Met with silence, he added curtly, “I’m sorry, but you are my prisoner.”

“Prisoner! This is a very big word. In reality, my dear Müller, the elements that have determined our encounter escape you. Besides, we either talk freely or it’s useless to go any further.”

Slightly disconcerted, the German saw his mistake.

“Don’t be mistaken about my intentions. Don’t forget that Germany is at war and I am forced to take some precautions.”

Still and quiet, the man stared at him.

For Kurt, the matter seemed now to be much more complex than he had anticipated. In the beginning, all the measures surrounding his mission had seemed excessive. It was, after all, just the capture of a simple sponge fisherman. Later on, at the Central Command, in the face of his precise instructions, he had to admit to the importance of the mission. During the time of his investigation, while he was tracking the man, amazement and skepticism alternated in his mind. In that moment, still in a confused way, he could sense that this man represented much more than the simple business card pinned to his door indicated. That day spent last summer at the Obersalzberg came back to his mind now, and it all became more understandable.

In the company of the guests of the day, he had climbed the wide stairs that led to the entrance, under the arcades of the Berghof, the villa that the Führer of the Third Reich had built in the Bavarian Alps.

While he waited, he admired the varnished paneling of the ceiling in the big hall. Then, the secretary came to get him — a man with a round, cunning face and a stocky silhouette.

The Führer was standing next to a big world map globe, accompanied by a high dignitary of the Wehrmacht, who stepped aside in order to leave the two men alone. Behind the panes of the immense picture window, the eternal snow of the Untersberg displayed its immaculate splendor.

“I’m not going to need you, Martin.”

The man’s look, bourgeois and commonplace, had surprised the strict Marine officer that he was. His singing Austrian accent had even sounded vulgar to his Northern German ears. Only the gray and piercing look gave up the ferocity of his personality.

The brief conversation was forever etched in his memory.

“My dear Müller... I hear many great things about you... brilliant, efficient and athletic. These are three qualities that are rarely found in the same individual. I love men like you. It’s these men who, reversing the decadent course of History, will forge our Great Reich. You have a role to play, and it might well reveal itself to be essential in this implacable fight that we find ourselves in. I have chosen you as an underwater world specialist. The Oberkommando of the Kriegsmarine has informed you about what they expect from you. Nevertheless, in many aspects, your mission will seem strange. But I count exactly on your power of reasoning, power described to me as being exceptional, to bring to a practical reality the facts and the information that may seem to pertain to the realm of dreams. Regarding all that seems to go beyond the scope of this war mission, I want you to speak only and directly with me — your Führer.”

Suddenly, without further ado, he turned towards his secretary, who was coming back accompanied by another guest.

From the change in Markantakis' attitude, Kurt felt that the man was going to start speaking. Psychologically, he would gain a first point over his adversary. But his task was complex. It would be necessary to convince this giant to give him the whole set of unbelievable information — information to which he alone held the key — the existence of a range of giant underwater caves under the continental plateau of the Bahamas. Completely invisible from the surface, they would be converted into operational bases for the pack of Kriegsmarine U-Boats, in the heart of the economic and financial system of the United States. These caves would represent a terrible weapon, a decisive asset in this merciless combat that would lead them to victory.