

Lion, Tiger, Bear

Chapter 3

July 19

Libya-Egypt border

“Get that bloody arsehole off our fucking *tail!*” yelled Bea frantically, pulling up hard on the yoke and turning sharply into her pursuer at full power, a lone Italian Macchi 202 dressed in spotted tan desert camouflage like a Cheetah, its guns ripping apart the unarmed, twin-engined C-47 *Gooney Bird* transport. The other two transports had peeled off to the north to escape.

Copilot in several pieces, windshield cracked, wind deafening, the starboard cockpit had been ripped open by 20 mm cannon rounds, but the American-built plane was tough, built to take punishment. Blood painted the control panel and Bea, dust from the diminutive sandstorm was everywhere, and shrapnel bits were lodged in her arms and face; she shook violently with shock and adrenaline. Wild evasive action was taken, throttles firewalled.

Tossed about in the passenger compartment, mostly wounded veterans from the recent fighting at the Jalu oasis in Libya, ten Australians, four New Zealanders, and a Free French officer and his Malian sergeant bodyguard had smashed open the windows and were giving return fire with a two Bren machineguns and rifles, but their arc of fire was limited even when Bea yawed violently back and forth with the rudder. The floor was slick with the blood from the dead and wounded; brass was everywhere, a mess. Big shell holes ventilated the compartment. Out of the twenty-two, fourteen were left alive. Panic, steady nerves, discipline, yells, screams.

Screaming, the Malian let go a full clip with his Bren, hitting the Italian fighter and causing a vapor trail from the wing, his starboard fuel tank hit. Running low on fuel, out of cannon rounds, the Italian plane fled.

An alarm. “Gods, no!” Hit severely, the starboard engine was now on fire; Bea feathered the prop, cut the fuel pump, and flipped the control for the extinguisher and the fire went out slowly. Control cables damaged, Bea had much reduced input on her yoke; the transport weaved back and forth on its own. “Now what?” Oil pressure warning lights on the port engine came on,

a few stray rounds had found their quarry. Oil streaks plastered the left wing. “This is a bloody daymare!”

The Malian came rushing in head down, stepping over the dead pilot that Bea had removed from her seat. The man was six foot four, strong, black as coffee, a *sergeant-chéf* named Gwafa, and spoke a heady mix of French and English with a perfumed eastern African accent. “He’s gone, *madame! Eye-tie bastard*. Many are dead. I clipped him with the Bren.”

The rough desert terrain filled her view. “We’re losing altitude! Port motor’s losing pressure.”

“*Mon Dieu, merde.*” Gwafa wiped blood and brain bits off the throttle quadrant, translating English labels in his mind. “We must re-start the starboard engine. It can run with many cylinders gone.”

Bea struggled with the yoke, hands full, left rudder trim full, eyes wide, the vibration immense. Her teeth chattered. “You’re a m-m-mechanic?”

“Yes. Mostly *les camions*, but I’m damn good. Flew a Mureaux-113 once or twice. *L’armée* trains us well, no questions asked. I used to steal motorcars and aeroplanes as a profession. A *voleur*, thief.”

“Well done.” Bea spied the port engine oil pressure gauge, it wasn’t pretty. “Follow my instructions.”

On the overhead panel he reset the generators, set the fuel and pumps, opened cowl flaps to half, mixture lever to half of maximum, flipped the primer switch two times, and hit the red starter button. The prop twirled as the starter motor strained. “Come on—*vite, vite!*”

“Burn out the booster coils—do it! We’re drifting, rudder’s shot up.” Bea compensated for the reduced power, but she was way off course to the south, blown there by the sudden storm, her altitude 7300 feet and descending fast. Way points and familiar topography were long gone, but a large salt pan was off to port, probably Siwa. *Disputed territory*, she thought. *Under the horse’s hooves of destruction we are*. “Errghhh. Come on you ruddy rudder, do your damn job!”

Gwafa eased off the mixture and hit the starter again. Prop twirling, the starboard radial engine repeatedly backfired loudly then came alive at seven then finally eleven out of fourteen cylinders spewing black smoke. He ran the throttle up slowly, checked the cylinder head temperatures, then eased off when the wounded engine found its sweet spot. Manifold pressure up a bit, Bea had an additional thirty-five percent thrust.

“God bless Pratt and Whitney!” she exclaimed.

“*Victoire!* R-1830 is as tough as the plane. That’s what I read anyway.” He pulled out his knife, cut the straps, then pulled what was left of the copilot out of his seat one chunk at a time; his stained kepi fell off his head.

The oil-leaking port engine became weaker, sputtering. The fuel pressure gauge died, the line severed. “It’s packed up, we’re going in. Help me with the yoke.” Bea adjusted her trim, goosed the power up a tad on the remaining engine, and aimed for a narrow valley between two wind-blown plateaus. “Tell those wankers back there to get down on the floor, *prone.*”

“*Oui, madame.*” He leaned back and caught eyes with a New Zealand corporal. He used his hand up and down. “Get down!” The men did so.

Weaving, pitching, hydraulic pressure weak, she kept the wheels up for a belly landing in the desert northeast of the lake. “Just *once* I’d like to land a crate in good fettle...”

They hit hard, the rocky desert terrain unforgiving. The fuselage snapped in half just behind the trailing edge of the wings. Cargo crates, mail, medical supplies, men, and bodies were scattered behind like so much confetti. At the bottom of a large, reddish rocky plateau, a stepped *hammada*, the front fuselage came to an abrupt halt, sand and stone filling the cockpit.