

# The Convoy of Destiny

*Translated by Graeme Dibble*

“This mechanism is called the Paul Revere Clock,” boomed the ranger self-importantly. “It was part of the regalia of the Grand Master of the Boston Freemasons Lodge, but its origins are unclear. We don’t know if Paul Revere made it or if he inherited it from his predecessors or if it was just a reconstruction of an older model. It is also possible it comes from the Old Continent,” she admitted, “because there’s a document where Paul Revere states that his brothers in Europe asked for the clock to help fan the flames of freedom. It finally came back to the United States in 1993 during a visit by the Czech president, Václav Havel. He brought the clock as a gift for the Smithsonian Institute, who have in turn lent it to us. As you can see, the clock has two main dials, a large one at the bottom and a smaller one at the top, another three dials are inserted into it and four connect...”

An overweight American dad, dressed only in shorts and a T-shirt despite the dreadful cold, couldn’t stand it any longer.

“What kinda use was that thing?” he said, interrupting the guide. “Clocks don’t look like that,” he added resolutely to show he was no hick from Iowa, which he undoubtedly was...

..He reckoned the SMS *Jizera* hadn’t suffered any damage. Quickly, however, the silhouette of the frigate began to change in front of his very eyes. The shield for the front gun disappeared and in its place appeared a curious structure in the shape of a slanting letter “H”. It seemed to have been sketched out of smoke, and it also disappeared like smoke and in its place there was a gun tower again, but a different one, larger and with a twin gun. The simple mast behind the prism of the bridge had been replaced by a lattice mast with several radar antennae. The bridge itself seemed to expand: all of a sudden it was covered and had windows on the front, and above it was a bulky sight with the tube of a rangefinder and the parabola of a fire-control radar. Only the most modern American destroyers had these. If that wasn’t enough, there was something on the gangway under the bridge which looked like a triple torpedo tube. Torpedoes against submarines?! He had never heard of such a weapon. The bridge superstructure had also expanded, as had the entire hull: behind the superstructure he spotted the edges of some kind of cuboid which seemed to be connected to the superstructure. He could only see part of the front of it with two vertical square covers, and he had no idea what it could be, though he had the feeling the information was lodged somewhere in his brain. The stern was lost behind the edge of the pier – that meant that the deck fell away there, which was normal for “River” class frigates. It seemed that the structure of the *Jizera* was merging with another ship which he had never seen before, but which he knew well...

...*Dance macabre*, that was the most appropriate name for the scene in front of them as the damaged SMS *Cheb* emerged for a third time from the smoke screen. At the same time, half a mile to the right, HMS *Artemis* appeared with plumes of smoke

pouring out of her ventilators. Behind her surged the serpentine line of Vian's other cruisers, engulfed by masses of water from the geysers created by the Italian shells – the Italian battleships were no longer at a safe distance of seventeen kilometres and were firing their enormous guns into the Brits from a third of that distance, and getting even closer. A British cruiser suddenly vanished in front of Mark's eyes. It flashed as though it had been struck by lightning – and the ship was gone. Above the area where the water had been churning a fraction of a second before, an S-shaped cloud floated up into the sky – a mute question mark at the end of the eternal question of destruction.

In the background the destroyers were fighting their own battle. Vian had obviously sent them into a torpedo attack from the right flank, as he sensed the battle was reaching a climax and it was necessary to hit the Italians with everything they had. But Iachino must have had the same feeling as he had also sent his own destroyers on the counterattack. The two formations engaged each other and a massacre ensued. Where the smoke screen ended, amid the columns of smoke from the burning destroyers, the gigantic geysers of water and clouds of steam from the torpedoed shipwrecks, the guns still blazed as the destroyers, crippled and ablaze, continued firing furiously.

Suddenly there was a monstrous roar above their heads and the noise of battle was drowned out the screeching and scraping of broken metal. The yard of the rear mast crashed onto the starboard side and pierced the deck on the right under the auxiliary bridge like a lance. One of the broken steel mainstays swept across the platform of the auxiliary bridge and smoothly, quicker than a guillotine, cut off the head of a signalman standing at the right-hand barrier. The wind immediately scattered the geyser of blood from his neck, spraying the white uniform of Lieutenant Doubrava, who was standing three steps behind him...

"The name's Fleming... Ian Fleming," said the well-dressed gentleman by way of introduction.

"You remember, we met three years ago aboard the *RMS Viceroy of India*."

"I remember you, Mr Fleming," acknowledged Marek. "What brings you aboard my ship?" he asked in a coolly official tone.

"I've been authorised to take possession of the items you collected from the site where the *Elektroboot* sank," replied the visitor, somewhat taken aback. He had obviously been expecting a warmer reception. But he quickly recovered.

"Might we discuss it in a more agreeable setting, Captain?" he asked jovially.

"Certainly, Mr Fleming," replied Marek. "Come with me."

"Mrázek," he said, turning to the chief petty officer "you will light the way."

He could now ask him without his dignity as a commander suffering.

"And what about the guard, sir?" asked Mrázek in Czech, shining a light on a marine with a Thompson submachine gun on a strap, who until then had been standing in the shadows behind their visitor.

"He isn't a German agent, Mrázek! Naturally, the guard will wait by the door," said Marek irritably.

.. "Forgive me for robbing you of your sleep, Captain," he said, "but I couldn't come earlier and I won't be able to leave until we've finished refuelling. So you'll have to put up with me for a while."

"That's all right," said Marek. "So what was the other reason?"

Fleming looked him straight in the eye. It was obvious he was weighing up how to proceed.

“The third reason is the fact,” he finally took the plunge “that you and your ship represent hope for change, that you’ve been chosen by fate to alter the course of the war.”

Marek had thought that his unexpected visitor could no longer surprise him. He was wrong. He stared at him in confusion, not knowing whether this British gentleman meant it seriously or if he was making a joke.

“What does that mean? How am I meant to understand this?!”

Fleming shrugged.

“It’s a prophecy, the reading of the tarot cards given to us by Madame Odille when we asked her what would happen to the convoy.”

The answer seemed quite absurd to the captain. He stared at Fleming doubtfully.

“Madame Odille?! Who in God’s name is that?!” he finally blurted out.

“Madame Odille is a psychic and fortune-teller who advises our service on important issues. So it was obvious we’d ask her about the fate of the convoy and she said that your ship would prove to be the decisive factor. She also divined that you have onboard a more formidable weapon than even you are aware of, and that compelled us to investigate. One of our agents at the American shipyards discovered that in addition to rockets, you also have that jamming equipment onboard. Fortunately, we had to hand a man – actually two men – who we managed to add to your crew.”

He must have looked confused and sceptically.

Fleming shifted in the armchair to stretch out his legs in comfort, and an amused expression appeared on his face.

“Didn’t you know that all the intelligence agencies in the world use clairvoyants?”

“Hitler has them too,” he continued, as Marek maintained an appalled silence. “His team is led by Hanussen and Wiligut. And we also know that they use an ancient mechanical oracle which they call the Nostradamus Clock, because it looks like a clock with many dials and was supposed to have been made by Nostradamus.”

At that moment, Marek was overcome by such a powerful sense of impropriety that his head spun and his vision blurred. He had definitely seen such a contraption, but where, where...

When he was able to focus on Fleming again, he noticed his guest had inserted another cigarette into the holder. This NID agent wasn’t as calm as he was trying to appear. However, his voice did not waver. “There are indications,” said Fleming in his polished Oxford English, “that it was because of this oracle that Hitler deferred the attack on Stalin’s Russia, which he planned after occupying your country. The oracle revealed to him that if he attacked Russia, then his Thousand-Year Reich wouldn’t even last five years.”

The visitor finally took out his gold lighter and lit the cigarette. The commander reached over and poured them both more whisky. Slowly the idea was getting through to him that some crazy woman had him down as the saviour of Europe.

“I had Madame Odille read the tarot cards for me as well,” said Fleming, returning to the fortune-teller as though they were linked by some kind of spiritual bond. “She told me that after the war I’d become a world-famous writer of spy novels, which would be made into films and shown all over the world,” he said, exhaling smoke, and it seemed to the commander that he finally looked more relaxed. “Assuming, of course, that Hitler loses. So, as you can see, I have a vested interest in your success,” he added with a sardonic smile, placing the cigarette holder into the groove of the ashtray and reaching for his glass...

..The commander hadn't even managed to take a step when an enormous pale-blue surface with a black-and-white-edged cross on it flashed past the front windows of the bridge. This was followed a fraction of a second later by a plume of black smoke with red flames flickering out of it, and then the nightmarish vision disappeared.

All of those on the bridge froze like statues.

"Christ, that was close," cried out one of the signalmen. "Mate, if it hadn't been for you..." he said, turning to the helmsman.

"Shut up!" cursed the commander through clenched teeth, which he had a hard job stopping from chattering. He made to move once more, but again he was unable to complete a step. From the window on the right rose up a thrashing mass of foaming white water which crashed down on the bridge. Inside it sounded as though the *Jizera* had gone over the Niagara Falls. Above them jets of water thundered as they broke on the roof of the bridge and poured down all the windows in streams. Then there was another jolt and the frigate listed to port and leapt sideways like a boxer dodging his opponent's punch with a sidestep. There was a shudder and the men on the bridge grabbed on to whatever was at hand. The helmsman was flung across the wheel onto the binnacle, striking it with his right shoulder. It was only then that the ship slid smoothly down the other side of the wave caused by the seventy-tonne bomber falling into the sea and then exploding.

"Hey, hold on to the wheel!" Marek shouted at the helmsman, who was grimacing in pain and rubbing his right shoulder with his left hand. Then the commander pushed against the steel door on the starboard bridge wing. When he managed to open it, salt water gushed out from a groove above the door, hitting his neck. But he didn't even notice it running down his back, so fixed was he on the upper superstructure of the frigate. Nothing appeared to be damaged; the lattice mast with the antennae was still sticking up in front of the funnel, which was billowing out light-coloured smoke – a sign that the mazut under the boiler was working at maximum efficiency. As the *Jizera* got back on course, he spotted the wreckage of the plane. By chance, the mottled grey tail of the machine had remained intact and its twin rudders were still sticking up vertically from the white cake of whipped water, about one hundred metres diagonally behind the stern. It quickly receded and grew smaller as it plunged beneath the surface; nevertheless, the commander was able to make out a black swastika on one of the rudders before it disappeared completely. All that remained was twisting black smoke and a greyish cloud of steam.

As the commander returned to the pilothouse, he could feel the salt water burning his eyes. He tried to alleviate the pain by rubbing them.

"Damage report," he said into the mouthpiece of the telephone when control connected him to the centre for damage repair.

"OK, nothing too serious then," he acknowledged with relief when Lieutenant Commander Doubrava confirmed that the reports from all areas were negative – at most some broken china in the officers' canteen.

It wasn't entirely true.

When he hung up the receiver, Poldinand appeared in the pilothouse and walked up to him. He stood at attention, looking anxious.

"I think you should know, sir," he said almost conspiratorially, "that Miss Dubská is injured. It's nothing serious – just some scratches and shock. The jolt knocked her out of her bed and slightly damaged the cabin. I'll sort it out, sir, but perhaps it would

be better if you went to see her. Dr Urban is with her, but even so..." Poldinand didn't finish the sentence and looked at him with concern.

Miss Dubská's cabin – or rather the first officer's cabin – had evidently been in the place where the wave caused by the impact of the German bomber had hit the hull of the *Jizera* with the greatest force. Not only had it buckled the plating but also some of the ribs, either twenty-two or twenty-three, as the plating behind the bunk was cracked and bulging inwards. The wardrobe beside the bunk had also broken free and, with half the door detached was dangling over the contents which it had disgorged onto the linoleum.

Winka sat in a small armchair beside a desk while Doctor Urban leaned over her, wiping the blood from her forehead with some gauze.

"Talk to her, David," he said to Marek informally. "She should go to the medical bay, but she doesn't want to."

"You said yourself, Doctor, that the wound on my forehead doesn't need stitches," she snapped abruptly. "And apart from that I'm fine. Just a few bruises, but I'm not going to show them off to you. Not even to the captain," she said, looking defiantly at the commander.

Marek realized that the laceration on her forehead was in the same place where she had been injured once before – during the air raid on Boston when her uncle died. Their eyes met and betrayed the fact that both of them were aware of this. Marek's heart was filled to bursting, and this must also have been apparent in his gaze as Winka lowered her eyes in embarrassment.

"Keep your head still," the doctor reprimanded her, wiping the wound, and then tossed the gauze into a bowl on the table.

"She might have concussion," he remarked to Marek, and then bent over Winka again. "But the bleeding has stopped. It is just a superficial laceration and stitches would only make the scar more pronounced. I'll put some sulphonamide powder on it and a plaster. But at least lie down and don't get up for a day or two. And if you are sick or feel dizzy, then let me know at once."

"It'll be better if Miss Dubská moves to my cabin for those two days," said the commander. "I've been sleeping in the sea cabin on the bridge anyway. A repair team will need to come here to take down the wall and find out what damage's been done to the hull."

He turned to the steward.

"See to it, Poldinand."

"I'm not moving anywhere," said Miss Dubská stubbornly. "No-one's going to go rummaging through my private things and my underwear!"

"There is no need to worry, Miss," countered Poldinand with dignity. "I can assure you of my discretion, Miss. On the *Queen Mary* I looked after ladies such as Mrs Simpson, Pola Negri and Archduchess Sophie. The money I could have made if I had gone to the press..." added Poldinand, walking over to the pile of clothes and underwear which had fallen out of the overturned wardrobe. Winka wanted to get up, but the doctor pushed her gently but firmly back into the armchair.

In the meantime, the steward had knelt down and was deftly tidying away some blouses and sweaters which were lying on the top. When he picked up a pair of culottes, underneath it was a box made from inlaid wood – cedar and ebony, judging by the colours. Commander Marek was so captivated by it that he forgot about Miss Dubská's feelings and walked towards the pile of clothing. From behind Poldinand's

back he could see that the box was missing its lid and its contents were visible – a cluster of dials with overlapping hands like artillery synchros and cogs made of brass. He looked over his shoulder at Winka.

“Is this yours, Miss?” he asked in surprise.

This time the doctor couldn’t hold Miss Dubská back.

“Don’t touch that!” she shrieked, twisting free of the doctor and rushing across the cabin to the tilting wardrobe. “That’s a very valuable antique I inherited from my uncle. It’s been in our family for two hundred years.”

“It’s just some kind of table clock,” concluded Poldinand, and he began clearing away more clothes from around the box. It was lying on its back and had bronze feet in the form of miniature lizard’s legs.

“Well, we can’t leave it lying there like that,” he said soothingly, and gently placed the box on its legs. Now it really did look like an extremely complex timepiece. “It doesn’t appear to have been damaged,” he noted. “The transparent rear plate isn’t even cracked.”

“Give it to me,” ordered Winka, and, holding the clock in her arms as though it were a baby, she returned to her armchair.

Marek thought he finally understood why she had been so reluctant. She was probably afraid that someone from the crew would steal her antique.

“If you are worried about the... clock...I can put it in the ship’s safe,” he said, trying to allay her fears.

“No,” she cut in. “If I have to move, then only with the clock,” she said, placing the box on the table. As she sat down, the commander noticed how pale she was. She was obviously in shock, but he could rely on the doctor to keep an eye on her in his cabin as well. However, there was something else preying on his mind – and the doctor’s as well.

“She’ll be fine, she just got a fright,” he said reassuringly on their way back to the lobby after they had accompanied her to the commander’s cabin. “What I can’t understand is why she brought such a valuable item with her into the middle of the Battle of the Atlantic when there are hundreds of bank vaults in America, not to mention the one Masaryk has at the embassy.” ...

But back to my wife. She travels a lot – doing congresses, lecture tours and suchlike, but over the past two years she has added a series of readings in all of the European Community of Russia and, naturally, Russia itself. All because of her book *The Europe of Nightmares*, which took her about five years to write and was published two years ago. Since then it’s been brought out in twenty-two languages including Chinese and even Albionese. You see, my wife is a counterfactual historian and in this book she analysed all of the bifurcation points of the past millennium and deduced what the opposite scenario would have caused. She reached the year 1223 and the Battle of the Kalka River, where an alliance of Russian princes and Cumans were able to repulse Genghis Khan’s Mongolian armies, led by Jebe and Subutai the Valiant. The Russian leader, Prince Mstislav III, was not fooled by the feigned Mongolian retreats, as if he had been warned they were a trap, and instead he set about fortifying his camp. When the Mongolian horses had eaten all of the grass in the surrounding area, the Mongolians left empty-handed and Genghis Khan turned his attention to China. My wife wrote that this battle was vital for the fate of Europe. If Mstislav III had lost, Kiev would have fallen within twenty years, along with all of the

other Rurik principalities. The Tartars would have established a new khanate on Russian territory and prevented the development of the Russian state to the extent that it wouldn't have had the strength to intervene in the vipers' nest which the European peninsula was turning into...

..I also know another secret – how that book actually came about. My wife has a kind of standing clock in an old bureau in her boudoir. It doesn't really look like a clock, but that's the thing it resembles most closely. Apparently it's an ancient family heirloom that the Dubskýs have cherished for two hundred and fifty years. And when she was writing her book, she had the clock beside her typewriter and would occasionally rearrange the hands on its dials.