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an extract from

Demons of Dunkirk

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It had been carnage over the last few days. Further evacuations would only happen at night. By now, the rule about having three crew members had been waived.

Fuelled by corned beef and strong tea we set off across the waters again as the moon slipped fleetingly from beneath its quilted cover, cutting a silver path for us to follow. A light breeze pulled us forwards on that warm spring night. Bill wondered at the calmness of the water.

"Sailed these seas many years – never seen it so flat," he said.

Flecks of fire danced from oil drums on the beach around which moved little black dots. Little black dots too, stood in the sea like sentinels, spread out in lines. Bill cut the engine and slowly the tide pulled us towards the men, their whispered anticipation close enough to hear.

A strong wind relieved the calm breeze, our thick, black covers were pulled from us. Clouds left the moon, revealing many boats near the beaches. These night poachers beneath the moonlight, drifted painfully slowly towards their catch. The men couldn't move any further. We couldn't move any quicker. Time seemed to stand still. We willed the waves to pull us faster towards the men freezing in the waters. The waves lapped over them, their helmets disappearing briefly before emerging again.

Finally, Bill and I launched the fishing net from the port side towards the thickest patch of men. Slowly they made their way towards us, weighed down by their cumbersome backpacks and frozen limbs. The first hand that grasped mine sent cold shivers through my body. In tandem, Bill and I hauled the men from the net, grabbing them by whatever we could and throwing them into the boat. Most didn't speak, but those who did muttered thanks or muttered nonsense. We had caught about twenty men when we heard a sound so chilling that it ripped the hope from my heart. Grumbling

and rumbling towards us was a line of shapes intent on our destruction.

"Stukas," said Bill, with a voice calmer than the look on his face. From the East they swooped, and meeting no resistance they began to deliver death. As the first bombs hit the water I felt the shock waves shake the boat. The men on board cowered in the corner. The formation of bombers roared closer, depositing bombs in waves. The water pulsed with energy, the skies crackled with flames. The screaming of men and destruction of ships shattered the ears and consumed the senses. The Stukas were now bearing down on us, their pointed noses twitching with menace, their growling engines pressing down upon us. There was nothing to do but pray and hope our time was yet to come.

Holding one man by the hand I looked up to see the bomb hatch open and its load fall and whistle towards us. The desperate hollowed white eyes of the man I held were the last thing I remembered. The screaming of men remained but it was louder, closer, drowning the ringing that shook my head. I was lying in water, the cold sea pushing then pulling me, the soft sand scraping beneath me. Something stopped me moving: shock, fear, complete disorientation. Lying back, soft sand for a pillow, I opened my eyes for a moment. What I saw forced them shut again.

The golden glow of flames illuminated the smoke billowing backdrop, revealing true horror. Chaos had taken grip of the beach: men lay writhing, screaming in pain, motionless bodies all about them. Others were running in a state of delirium, crazed by the incessant bullets that scattered sand as they fell.

Possessed by fear, horses bolted in every direction – felling men as they charged: every crackle of gun, or burst of flame adding to their frenzy.

Two hands pulled me backwards out of the water and across the sand.