

The Storm: A Novel from the Numa Files

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Extract

Prologue

Indian Ocean September 1943

The S.S. *John Bury* shuddered from bow to stern as it plowed through the rolling waters of the Indian Ocean. She was known as a 'fast freighter,' designed to accompany warships and used to traveling at a decent clip, but with all boilers going full out the *John Bury* was moving at a pace she hadn't seen since her sea trials. Damaged, burning, and trailing smoke, the *John Bury* was running for her life.

The ship crested a ten-foot wave, the deck pitched down and the bow dug into another swell. A wide swath of spray kicked up over the rail and whipped back across the deck, rattling what was left of the shattered bridge.

Topside, the *John Bury* was a mangled wreck. Smoke poured from twisted metal where rockets had pounded the superstructure. Debris littered the deck, and dead crewmen lay everywhere.

But the damage was above the waterline, and the fleeing ship would survive if it avoided any more hits.

On the dark horizon behind, smoke poured from other vessels that had been less fortunate. An orange fireball erupted from one, flashing across the water and briefly illuminating the carnage.

The burning hulks of four ships could be seen, three destroyers and a cruiser, ships that had been the *John Bury's* escort. A Japanese submarine and a squadron of dive-bombers had found them simultaneously. As dusk approached, oil burned around the sinking vessels in a mile-long slick. It fouled the sky with dense black smoke. None of them would see the dawn.

The warships had been targeted and destroyed quickly, but the *John Bury* had only been strafed, hit with rockets and left to run free. There could be only

one reason for that mercy; the Japanese knew of the top secret cargo she carried and they wanted it for themselves.

Captain Alan Pickett was determined not to let that happen, even with half his crew dead and his face gashed by shrapnel. He grabbed the voice tube and shouted down to the engine room.

'More speed!' he demanded.

There was no response. At last report a fire had been raging belowdecks. Pickett had ordered his men to stay and fight it, but now the silence left him gripped with fear.

'Zekes off the port bow!' a lookout called from the bridge wing. 'Two thousand feet and dropping.'

Pickett glanced through the shattered glass in front of him. In the failing light he saw four black dots wheeling in the gray sky and dropping toward the ship. Flashes lit from their wings.

'Get down!' he shouted.

Too late. Fifty caliber shells stitched a line across the ship, cutting the lookout in half and blasting apart what was left of the bridge. Shards of wood, glass and steel flew about the compartment.

Pickett hit the deck. A wave of heat flashed over the bridge as another rocket hit ahead of it. The impact rocked the ship, peeling back the metal ceiling like a giant can opener.

As the wave of destruction passed, Pickett looked up. The last of his officers lay dead, the bridge was demolished. Even the ship's wheel was gone, with only a stub of metal still attached to the spindle. Yet somehow the vessel chugged on.

As Pickett climbed back up, he spotted something that gave him hope: dark clouds and sweeping bands of rain. A squall line was moving in fast off the starboard bow. If he could get his ship into it, the coming darkness would hide him.

Holding on to the bulkhead for support, he reached for what remained of the wheel. He pushed with all the strength he had left. It moved half a turn, and he fell to the ground holding it.

The ship began to change course.

Pressing against the deck, he pushed the wheel upward and then brought it back down again for another full revolution.

The freighter was leaning into the turn now, drawing a curved white wake on the ocean's surface, coming around toward the squall.

The clouds ahead were thick. The rain falling from them was sweeping the surface like a giant broom. For the first time since the attack began, Pickett felt they had a chance, but as the ship plowed toward the squall the awful sound of the dive-bombers turning and plunging toward him again put that in doubt.

He searched through the ship's gaping wounds for the source of that noise.

Dropping from the sky directly in front of him were two Aichi D3A dive-bombers, Vals, the same type the Japanese had used with deadly effect at Pearl Harbor and months later against the British fleet near Ceylon.

Pickett watched them nose over and listened as the whistling sound of their wings grew louder. He cursed at them and pulled his sidearm.

'Get away from my ship!' he shouted, blasting at them with the Colt .45.

They pulled up at the last minute and roared past, riddling the ship with another spread of .50 caliber shells. Pickett fell back onto the deck, a shell clean through his leg, shattering it. His eyes opened, gazing upward. He was unable to move.

Waves of smoke and gray sky rolled above him. He was finished, he thought. The ship and its secret cargo would soon fall into enemy hands.

Pickett cursed himself for not scuttling the ship. He hoped it would somehow go down on its own before it could be boarded.

As his eyesight began to fail, the sound of more dive-bombers caught his ear. The roar grew louder, the banshee scream from their wings calling out and announcing the terrible inevitability of the end.

And then the sky above darkened. The air turned cold and wet, and the S.S. *John Bury* disappeared into the storm, swallowed up by a wall of mist and rain.

She was last reported by a Japanese pilot as burning but sailing under full power. She was never seen or heard from again.

Chapter One

Northern Yemen, near the Saudi border August 1967

Tariq al-Khalif hid his face behind a cloth of soft white cotton. The kaffiyeh covered his head and wrapped around his mouth and nose. It kept the sun, wind and sand from his weather-beaten features as it hid him from the world.

Only Khalif's eyes showed, hard and sharp from sixty years in the desert. They did not blink or turn away as he stared at the dead bodies in the sand before him.

Eight bodies in all. Two men, three women, three children; stripped naked, all clothes and belongings gone. Most had been shot, a few had been stabbed.

As the camel train at Khalif's back waited, a rider moved slowly up toward him. Khalif recognized the strong, young figure in the saddle. A man named Sabah, his most trusted lieutenant. A Russian-made AK-47 lay slung over his shoulder.

'Bandits for certain,' Sabah said. 'No sign of them now.'

Khalif studied the rough sand at his feet. He noticed the tracks disappearing to the west, headed directly toward the only source of water for a hundred miles, an oasis called Abi Quzza – the 'silken water.'

'No, my friend,' he said. 'These men are not waiting around to be discovered. They hide their numbers by sticking to the hard ground, where no tracks are left, or they walk on the softest sand, where the marks soon fade. But here I can see the truth, they're heading toward our home.'

Abi Quzza had belonged to Khalif's family for generations. It provided life-giving water and a modicum of wealth. Date palms grew in abundance around its fertile springs, along with grass for the sheep and camels.

With the growing number of trucks and other forms of modern transportation, the caravans that paid for its gifts had begun to dwindle, and the role of camel-raising Bedouins like Khalif and his family were fading along with them, but they were not yet gone. For the clan to have any prospects at all, Khalif knew the oasis must be protected.

'Your sons will defend it,' Sabah said.

The oasis lay twenty miles to the west. Khalif's sons, two nephews and their families waited there. A half dozen tents, ten men with rifles. It would not be an easy place to attack. And yet Khalif felt a terrible unease.

'We must hurry,' he said, climbing back onto his camel.

Sabah nodded. He slid the AK-47 forward to a more aggressive position and nudged his camel forward.

Three hours later they approached the oasis. From a distance they could see nothing but small fires. There were no signs of struggle, no ripped tents or stray animals, no bodies lying in the sand.

Khalif ordered the camel train to a halt and dismounted. He took Sabah and two others, moving forward on foot.

The silence around them was so complete, they could hear the crackle of wood in the fires and their own feet scuffling in the sand. Somewhere in the distance, a jackal began to yelp. It was a long way off, but the noise carried in the desert.

Khalif halted, waiting for the jackal's call to fade. When it died away, a more pleasant sound followed: a small voice singing a traditional Bedouin melody. It came from the main tent and flowed quietly.

Khalif began to relax. It was the voice of his youngest son, Jinn.

'Bring the caravan,' Khalif said. 'All is well.'

As Sabah and the others went back to the camels, Khalif walked forward. He reached his tent, threw open the flap, and froze.

A bandit dressed in rags stood there, holding a curved blade to his son's throat. Another bandit sat beside him, clutching an old rifle.

'One move and I slice his neck,' the bandit said.

'Who are you?'

'I am Masiq,' the bandit said.

'What do you want?' Khalif asked.

Masiq shrugged. 'What don't we want?'

'The camels have value,' Khalif said, guessing what they were after. 'I will give them to you. Just spare my family.'

'Your offer is meaningless to me,' Masiq replied, his face twisting into a snarl of contempt. 'Because I can take what I want, and because . . .' — he gripped the boy tightly — 'except for this one, your family is already dead.'

Khalif's heart tightened. Inside his tunic was a Webley-Fosbery automatic revolver. The self-cocking revolver was a sturdy weapon with deadly accuracy. It wouldn't jam even after months in the desert sand. He tried to think of a way to reach it.

'Then I'll give you everything,' he said, 'just for him. And you can go free.'

'You have gold hidden here,' Masiq said as if it were a known fact. 'Tell us where it is.'

Khalif shook his head. 'I have no gold.'

'Lies,' the second bandit said.

Masiq began to laugh, his crooked teeth and decay-filled mouth making a horrific sound. Gripping the boy tightly with one arm, he raised the other as if to slice the boy's neck. But the child slipped loose, lunged for Masiq's fingers with his mouth and bit down hard.

Masiq cursed in pain. His hand snapped back as if he'd been burned.

Khalif's own hand found the revolver and he blasted two shots right through his tunic. The would-be murderer fell backward, two smoking holes in his chest.

The second bandit fired, grazing Khalif's leg, but Khalif's shot hit him square in the face. The man fell without a word, but the battle had only just begun.

Outside the tent, gunfire began to echo through the night. Shots were being traded, volleys flying back and forth. Khalif recognized the sound of heavy bolt-action rifles, like the one in the dead thug's hand, they were answered by the rattling sound of Sabah and his automatic rifle.

Khalif grabbed his son, placing the pistol in the young boy's hand. He picked up the old rifle from beside one of the dead bandits. He plucked the curved knife from the ground as well and moved deeper into the tent.

His older sons lay there as if resting side by side. Their clothes were soaked with dark blood and riddled with holes.

A wave of pain swept over Khalif; pain and bitterness and anger.

With the gunfire raging outside, he stuck the knife into the side of the tent and cut a small hole. Peering through it, he saw the battle.

Sabah and three of the men were firing from behind a shield of dead camels. A group of thugs dressed like the bandits he'd just killed were out in the oasis itself, hiding behind date palms in knee-high water.

There did not seem to be enough of them to have taken the camp by force.

He turned to Jinn. 'How did these men get here?'

'They asked to stay,' the boy said. 'We watered their camels.'

That they'd played on the tradition of Bedouin generosity and the kindness of Khalif's sons before killing them enraged Khalif further. He went to the other side of the tent. This time he plunged the knife into the fabric and drew it sharply downward.

'Stay here,' he ordered Jinn.

Khalif snuck through the opening and worked his way into the darkness. Moving in a wide arc, he curled in behind his enemies and slipped into the oasis.

Preoccupied with Sabah and his men at their front, the bandits never noticed Khalif flanking them. He came up behind them and opened fire, blasting them in the back from close range.

Three went down quickly and then a fourth. Another tried to run and was killed by a shot from Sabah, but the sixth and final thug turned around in time and fired back.

A slug hit Khalif's shoulder, knocking him backward and sending a jolt of pain surging through his body. He landed in the water.

The bandit rushed toward him, perhaps thinking him dead or too wounded to fight.

Khalif aimed the old rifle and pulled the trigger. The shell jammed in the breach. He grabbed the bolt and worked to free it, but his wounded arm was not strong enough to break loose the frozen action.

The bandit raised his own weapon, drawing a bead on Khalif's chest. And then the sound of the Webley revolver rang out like thunder.

The bandit fell against a date palm with a puzzled look on his face. He slid down it, the weapon falling from his hands into the water.

Jinn stood behind the dead man, holding the pistol in a shaking grip, his eyes filled with tears.

Khalif looked around for more enemies, but he saw none. The shooting had stopped. He could hear Sabah shouting to the men. The battle was over.

'Come here, Jinn,' he ordered.

His son moved toward him, shaking and trembling. Khalif took him under one arm and held him.

'Look at me.'

The boy did not respond.

'Look at me, Jinn!'

Finally Jinn turned. Khalif held his shoulder tightly.

'You are too young to understand, my son, but you have done a mighty thing. You have saved your father. You have saved your family.'

'But my brothers and mother are dead,' Jinn cried.

'No,' Khalif said. 'They are in paradise, and we will go on, until we meet them one day.'

Jinn did not react, he only stared and sobbed.

A sound from the right turned Khalif. One of the bandits was alive and trying to crawl away.

Khalif raised the curved knife, ready to finish the man, but then held himself back. 'Kill him, Jinn.'

The shaking boy stared blankly. Khalif stared back, firm and unyielding.

'Your brothers are dead, Jinn. The future of the clan rests with you. You must learn to be strong.'

Jinn continued to shake, but Khalif was all the more certain now. Kindness and generosity had almost destroyed them. Such weakness had to be banished from his only surviving son.

'You must never have pity,' Khalif said. 'He is an enemy. If we have not the strength to kill our enemies, they will take the waters from us. And without the waters, we inherit only wandering and death.'

Khalif knew he could force Jinn to do it, knew he could order him and the boy would follow the command. But he needed Jinn to choose the act himself.

'Are you afraid?'

Jinn shook his head. Slowly, he turned and raised the pistol.

The bandit glanced back at him, but instead of Jinn buckling, his hand grew steady. He looked the bandit in the face and pulled the trigger.

The gun's report echoed across the water and out into the desert. By the time it faded, tears no longer flowed from the young boy's eyes.