

Kirov Saga



Season 3, Vol 3 in the Kirov Series

Winter Storm



An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Winter Storm

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

We ended Nemesis at the edge of a confrontation in the Helo Bay while the action was building on the east front, and that is where we will begin again, settling affairs on the ship before returning to Guderian's drive for Tula. He ran into unexpected Soviet reinforcements in the first of Karpov's promised Siberian Shock Armies. Now we return to those battles, large and small, some fated, some deferred to another day. The action now underway in Russia marked a decisive turning point in the history Fedorov knew, and its resolution will be a key factor in this alternate history as well.

That action will reach a real crisis point in this volume, and then we must also visit General Rommel again as the British launch Operation Crusader. Finally, 1941 ends with Japan's Operation Z, the dramatic attack on Pearl harbor. Only this time, in these altered states, things will be different. Yet it is also said that the more things change, the more they stay the same. I will blend the tried and true with the seed of change in this retelling of those events. And now that the thorny issues of paradox and the ripples of chaos it creates are behind us, we enter a new kind of chaos zone in this volume. For the war has already lost its innocence, and now becomes the terrible and desperate struggle it always threatened to be.

The clouds are darkening, the wind is up, and lightning scores the rain streaked sky. It is time for Winter Storm...

- John Schettler

Part I

Chain of Command

“He who wishes to be obeyed must know how to command.”

— Niccolo Machiavelli

Chapter 1

“Mister Orlov!”

The Operation’s Chief seemed to freeze with that voice, his eyes widening. Even Grilikov flinched, his confrontation with Troyak momentarily distracted, granite head turning to see Karpov standing at the far end of the Helo Bay near the open hatch. Orlov gave Grilikov a quick, but urgent look, inclining his head to call his attack dog off, and the big man took that step back Troyak had demanded, though the look on his face remained hostile.

Yet the sudden presence of Karpov on the scene seemed to overshadow everything else. The security men behind Orlov shrunk back, their hands loosening on the weapons they were brandishing. Grilikov seemed extremely edgy, the look on his face dissolving with each sharp footfall as the Captain approached, a sheen of perspiration on his brow now, and his neck reddening near his broad shoulders. Orlov felt much the same, this unaccountable uneasiness in the presence of Karpov, an unnerving, almost quailing feeling that left him very unsettled. His normal jaunty attitude melted away, and he suddenly had a hangdog look on his face.

Ever since they made port, and the Admiral left the ship, Karpov seemed very different. There was a sinister air about him that one could literally feel as he approached. It wasn’t his physical presence, though Orlov knew he seemed darker, more hardened, twisted like a steel coil. Yet the Captain was not a big man, not like Grilikov, or Troyak, or even Orlov himself, who stood a head taller. No, it was not his physical presence, but there was nonetheless an aura of sheer menace around the man now, and the crew hushed when he passed in the corridors, sensing and feeling it like a dark shadow moving among them on the ship.

“Captain on deck!” said Troyak, and every Marine stood to attention.

Karpov stepped up to the scene, arms clasped behind his back, taking in the situation with a studied, narrow eyed glance. “At ease.... What is the problem here?”

“Sir,” Orlov began, then stopped, swallowing and clearing his throat. “Sir, I came to take inventory as ordered, but the Sergeant and his Marines

do not seem cooperative.” He gave Troyak a quick look, dark and unfriendly.

“You came to take inventory?” Karpov turned slowly towards the Chief, looking him up and down, and the bigger man seemed to shrink under his withering regard. “Who told you to do that? The Marines manage affairs on the Helo Deck. You know that as well as I do. I told you to request that Sergeant Troyak make this inventory, and have it sent to me by 15:00. Now it seems I have to see to the matter myself.” The censure and disapproval was evident in every word Karpov spoke.

The Captain looked quickly at the three security men. “And what are you dragging these men around in your wake for? Why are they armed?”

“Sir, I... I was thinking there might be difficulties...”

“You were thinking?” Now Karpov leaned in to the Chief, lowering his voice, and staring him directly in the eye. “I will do the thinking on this ship, Mister Orlov. You will execute my instructions, which said nothing of an armed security contingent to accompany you here. No one carries a weapon aboard this ship except on my direct order. Is that clear? These men are to return to their regular station at once, and locker those rifles.”

Even as he said that, the three men stiffened with a salute, heels clicking, and ready to move off, which was another rebuff to Orlov. When senior officers spoke to one another, the enlisted men were merely statues on the scene, deaf and dumb until receiving an order to act. Hearing Karpov’s order, it was Orlov who should have then turned to dismiss the men, the directive passing down the chain of command. The soldiers’ immediate and reflexive response to Karpov’s words, as if Orlov were not even there, was another reproach for the Chief, who seemed in command of nothing whatsoever at that moment, completely discombobulated.

“Stand where you are!” Karpov raised his voice, ever so slightly, a command directed at the guards, and with obvious displeasure. He had not failed to notice the blatant breach of protocol, and waited, giving Orlov an impatient look, even as he also gave him back just a little measure of dignity in the situation.

Orlov finally realized what was happening, and then turned to order the men off. His neck was even redder than that of Grilikov now, who stood stone still, eyes averted, waiting like an automaton in the thick tension of the moment.

“You have other rounds to complete this morning?” said Karpov.

“Magazine check,” Orlov returned sheepishly.

“Very well, please see to that with Martinov, but he is to prepare the inventory, and see that it exactly matches the readout we get on Samsonov’s board in the CIC.”

“Yes sir,” said Orlov. “Will that be all?”

“For the moment. I’ll want to speak with you in the officer’s briefing room in thirty minutes. Dismissed.”

Orlov swallowed, waved a hand at Grilikov, who started to turn until he saw Karpov look directly at him, which froze him in place again.

“Mister Grilikov, wait at the far hatch. The Chief can handle his affairs without your assistance. Mister Orlov, thirty minutes.”

The Chief nodded, saluting and walking with Grilikov to the far hatch, where the Sergeant stopped and stood like a Titan, tall and hard by the open entry. Now Karpov turned to Troyak, giving Zykov a brief glance, his careful eye seeing the weal on his upper cheek, and knowing what it meant, knowing everything that had happened here in one glance, and everything that might have happened had he not come on the scene.

“Sergeant Troyak,” he said. “Forgive the Chief’s meddlesome ways. I will speak with him on the matter later. I trust there was no problem here?”

“None sir,” said Troyak.

“Good, because I want no discord on this ship, particularly no friction with the security contingent that boarded in Severomorsk. I will see that proper protocols are followed, and have those men well briefed. Should there be any further difficulties, please inform me directly if you have any concerns. As to the matter of the inventory I sent Orlov to request, will you handle the matter personally?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Excellent. I want a complete accounting of everything in your larders, munitions of every type, and all weapons, equipment, and special modules available for loadout on the helicopters. That includes Oko panels, sonobuoys, infrared systems, everything. Understood?”

“Sir, yes sir. I will have a complete inventory ready for you by 15:00 as requested.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. I would like to meet with you briefly when you present that report. I will be in the ready room off the main bridge at that time, and you may report to me directly. No need to involve Chief Orlov.”

“Very well, sir.”

Now Karpov looked at Zykov. “Corporal, he said with a half smile, it seems you and I have both become the walking wounded of late.” He gestured to the gauze that was still on his cheek, part of the ploy he had devised to mask his scar for the first few days aboard ship, and obviously taking notice of the mark on Zykov’s cheek.

“It was nothing, sir. Just a stumble.” Zykov still had his girly magazine behind his back as he stood, half at attention, half at ease, and inwardly glad that Orlov and his warthog had been put in their place. He was also relieved that the fearsome confrontation between Troyak and Grilikov did not reach the point of an explosion that would have been terrifying, to say the least. He had seen Troyak fight before, in training and in combat, and the Sergeant was lethal when he wanted to be, and utterly fearless.

“Just our big feet,” said Karpov. “Thank you, gentlemen. As you were.” He turned, walking quickly to Grilikov, and simply raising a finger to take the man in tow. The Titan cast one backwards glance over his shoulder as they went, thinking to find Troyak’s eye, but the Sergeant Major completely ignored him, turning to his Marines and growling out an order.

“You heard the Captain. All section teams to report with full inventory, and on the double!”

The men sprang into action, needing no further encouragement to get to work, and each one inwardly proud at that moment, as much as they, too, were relieved. The situation with Orlov had cascaded to a near disastrous confrontation, but the sanctity of their deck was upheld, and something in the fact that Karpov instinctively understood and reinforced that in his actions there that day, earned the Captain a measure of their respect.

Karpov was twenty paces down the corridor, before he stopped, not even turning, and spoke.

“Sergeant Grilikov. You will not lay a hand on any member of the Marine contingent again. Not for any reason. Not ever. Understood?”

“Sir, understood sir. And begging the Admiral’s pardon.”

“Captain, Mister Grilikov. We are not aboard Tunguska. On this ship you will address me as Captain.”

“Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

“And as commander of my personal security contingent, you will see that no man of that detail bears arms unless I so order it. Not on this ship. Is that

also clear?"

"Clear sir."

"Very good. Follow me."

The Captain continued, the shadow walking on, the massive hulk of Grilikov following, both men passing quickly down the long corridor and taking the ladder up.

They were headed for the Officer's quarters.

*

When the quiet knock came, Fedorov did not expect it. It was rare for anyone to disturb him in his quarters, and for a moment, he thought, and even hoped, it might be Nikolin. He wanted to see if he could persuade the communications officer to send out another quiet message, though he knew that would be somewhat risky. In fact, he also knew that he was putting any man he recruited into jeopardy here, and that thought was also a burden as he considered his situation.

I was very lucky, he thought. It was clear that Karpov was very suspicious of both the Admiral and myself. Yes, he was our nemesis, and we were the same to him. Karpov was clearly trying to ascertain what we knew, who we really were, and I hope to God he bought our little theatre. The Admiral was very adroit with his pose at that moment, but did Karpov believe it?

"Come," he said, wondering who it was, and crestfallen when the door to his cabin slowly opened and the Captain leaned in.

"Mister Fedorov," he said. "May I come in?"

"Certainly sir," said Fedorov, standing to offer a salute.

"Wait here, Grilikov. And no need for formalities, Mister Fedorov." The Captain stepped in and closed the door firmly behind him. He spent a moment, his eyes scanning the room, noting the books on the shelf above the desk, the unkempt bunk, the half eaten roll on the desk, wrapped in paper.

"I see housekeeping hasn't called this morning," he said. "May I sit down?"

"Of course. Here sir." Fedorov gestured to the chair by the desk, waiting until the Captain was seated before taking a seat himself on the bunk.

"I trust you have calmed down now after our discussion ashore?" Karpov

gave him a searching look, and Fedorov knew he had to be very cautious here.

“It was very confusing, sir... I mean the harbor, the whole city gone, and then this business with the Admiral. I always suspected we had moved in time. I was arguing that all along, but to finally realize it was true...” He had to play this part very carefully now.

“Yes,” said Karpov. “Very disconcerting, but you see, I have finally come round to your point of view, Fedorov. You should be grateful for that. I was beginning to think some rather grim thoughts about you.”

Karpov remembered what his brother self had told him now. Yes, Fedorov was a pest, and more. His other self had suspected he was a double agent. He had said and done some very unusual things in the tension of those first days after the 28th of July. Now Karpov was going to see just where that anchor fell, and pull it up if need be, to move his ship of thought along concerning this man. He started weighing in the anchor with his next question.

“About that radio message you asked the Admiral to send.... What was it, exactly?”

“Radio message?” Fedorov knew he could not play too dumb here, but his pulse quickened when the Captain started with this line of questioning. He tried to remember now, any and everything he might have said in those first days that would give away the fact that he knew much more than he let on, that he was, in fact, much more than he seemed.

“Oh, yes,” he recovered. “The Royal Navy command protocol. I knew about that from my reading, sir. It was clear to me that I was looking at British cruisers, County class, on those video feeds we got. Yes, that was impossible, and I clearly understood your dismissal. It was difficult for me to accept as well, but I’ve learned to believe my own eyes, and that started with the moon, as I tried to explain, sir.”

“The moon?”

“Yes sir. It was all wrong, phase and position, just as I told you, and the only time period where the current data was valid was this time, 1941.”

“Ah... Yes,” Karpov realized this must have been something Fedorov presented to his other self. The moon was wrong, something a navigator could not fail to notice. “You put the clues together very well, Mister Fedorov, and very quickly too. It was as if you knew what had happened to us all along.”

A thrum of anxiety underscored that remark in Fedorov's chest. "I suspected, and strongly, that the ship was not where it belonged. It wasn't just the moon, sir. The radio signals, those ships, were all evidence I could not easily dismiss."

"Then you got that message protocol from one of your books?"

"Yes sir."

"May I see it please?"

Again the rising adrenaline, for Fedorov knew damn well that he could not produce that evidence. What to do? "It isn't here, sir. I think I was researching that at my station on the bridge. But I'll bring it to you." How he would manage that, Fedorov did not yet know, but he had to seem fully cooperative, or his cover might be shredded here and now.

"There was a word in that message you begged the Admiral to send," said Karpov. "What was it? Ah, yes, Geronimo. What was that all about?"

"Just a code sir, signifying urgency. I got it from the Royal Navy signals manual." Fedorov knew he would have to prove that lie somehow as well, and his heart beat faster yet.

"I see... So the Admiral sends your message, and then this Admiral Tovey takes it upon himself to give us a nice polite call. Imagine that..." Karpov's eyes narrowed. "And imagine also that he wants to speak with our very own Mister Fedorov, a simple Navigator on a ship that had only just appeared in his world hours before. Very strange, wouldn't you say?"

The look Karpov gave him froze Fedorov's blood.

Chapter 2

“I did find it odd myself, sir.”

“You found it odd?”

“Of course, Captain.” Fedorov was quick on this point now, for he had given it considerable thought earlier. *“Why would this Admiral wish to speak to me—or to Admiral Volsky, for that matter? How would he know we even existed?”*

“A very good question, Fedorov. You have an explanation?”

“Not really, sir. It’s very puzzling. Why, it was almost as if this Admiral Tovey had dealings with us before, though I knew that was clearly impossible.”

“Quite,” said Karpov, his suspicion slowly building as he listened. *“In point of fact, Mister Fedorov, didn’t you say you had personally met the man?”*

“Met him?” Fedorov knew this was coming, the one thing he had let slip, thinking to use it as a way to convince the Admiral of what he had been saying earlier. Yet now it stood as a loose thread in the cloth he had been weaving to mask his identity, and he knew this moment was very perilous.

“I was certainly well acquainted with the man—in my reading and all. You have often been angry with me for my interest in this history, and I think it got the better of me at that moment. Yes, when I heard it was Admiral Tovey, I felt I knew the man personally. I’ve read so very much about him over the years.”

Karpov sat with that for a moment, thinking, considering. *“Then you didn’t mean to say you had personally met this British Admiral?”*

“Of course not, Captain. How could I have met him?”

“And yet how could he have known you even existed...” Karpov returned to that line now, watching Fedorov closely.

Fedorov hesitated briefly, not knowing what to say. Then he realized that Admiral Volsky had already come to his rescue, when they were ashore. When Karpov demanded control of the ship, the Admiral had offered this same objection, and then answered it himself. Fedorov could hear the

Admiral's words in his mind, a saving grace at that moment...

"You say Moscow was aware of our predicament? Then they had to learn of our presence here somehow, yes? How would that be possible?" Fedorov remembered the look of sudden realization glimmering in the Admiral's eyes, again a masterful performance in their effort to deceive Karpov at that moment. "Your history books, Fedorov! That's how they learned what happened to us!"

"Well sir," said Fedorov, suddenly rearmed. "I was trying to figure that out myself. It's only speculation, but perhaps it was as you told us ashore."

"What do you mean?"

"You said that the moment we arrived here, in the past, we became part of this history, and that our comrades in the future, in our time, must have found a way to get a message through to this time."

"Ah... Of course," said Karpov. "Then this is how you think Admiral Tovey learned about us? That does make sense, I suppose."

Even as he said that, Karpov remained suspicious, for he realized all too well that had never happened. There had been no message from the future warning the men of this day and time about Kirov, at least not that he knew of. No. Admiral Tovey had learned about us the hard way, he thought.

I put missiles on his ships! I damn near blasted his little navy from the face of this earth, just as I did with the Americans, and would have done the same to him, though that was probably unwise. Every blow I struck against the Western Allies that first time around, was ill considered. They were fighting with us, not against us. It wasn't until the war ended, and they carried on with their little Atlantic Charter, that things began to take a wayward course. I should have been clear headed enough to see that... As I am now.

"Yes sir," said Fedorov. "It's the only possible explanation. They learned about us from the future. That explained the recall order as well, all properly formatted. No man of this era could have done that. The information had to come from the future."

"Of course," Karpov agreed, just as he had ashore when they first met. "The moment we arrived here, we must have appeared in their history books. How very strange for them, Fedorov. We go out for live fire exercises, and simply vanish. Here we thought it was Orel and Slava that had disappeared, but in all truth, we were the one ship lost for certain in that incident. Yet the

moment we did vanish, we became part of this time, part of this history, and they could read all about it in their own history books. I wonder... would that information be here in our records—in your books?”

“No sir,” said Fedorov quickly. “I’ve checked that. The history recounted in all the books I have, remains as it was.”

“Interesting...” Karpov put his hand on his chin for a moment. “Then there is no mention of Kirov, or anything we might do here, in any of your books?”

“Not that I could see, sir. They remain unchanged, just as we are.” He reinforced that point. “None of that information got into any of our heads either.”

“Of course,” said Karpov, with a wan smile. He sat for a moment, thinking. “Then I suppose Admiral Tovey received this message directly? Could that be the case, Fedorov? Is that why he asked to speak with the Admiral, and to you?”

“I can think of no other explanation,” said Fedorov. “Why I was chosen still escapes me. I’m just the ship’s Navigator...”

Karpov smiled. “You are very clever, Mister Fedorov. Who knows, perhaps you make a name for yourself in the days and years ahead. Perhaps the people back in our time read all about that, all about you and your exploits here, and so they may have put that into this Admiral Tovey’s head. I know that must sound very strange to you—to realize you will do things that will shape all future history from this moment on, but if you think about it for a moment, you will see that is very possible now. Kirov is here, that much we have finally determined, and this ship has power beyond the imagining of any man in this time. Oh, perhaps they were told about us, or even warned. But one thing is certain, we are here, and our presence here will change things. You are here, and so you will be a part of that change. Understand?”

“I think so, sir, but it is still very confusing.”

“Yes... And I know you respected the Admiral a great deal, and regret his dismissal, but I will ask you to do your very best for the ship now. We are in a most difficult situation here—a very perilous one. I need clear heads and sound minds to plot a course forward, to put it in terms you can easily grasp. You know the history of this time very well, and I can use that information. I know we have had our difficulties in the past. I perceived you as a meddlesome, and somewhat impudent young officer, opening his mouth when

he should have kept it closed, but I see now why you felt so compelled to speak your mind, and you were correct to do so. I would like to put that behind us. Can I rely on you as we go forward now?

“I will do my best, Captain. But may I ask, sir, where are we going? You have asked me to plot a course to the Kara Sea for a rendezvous. What is that about?”

“We will meet elements of the Siberian Air Corps there. This is not something you will find in your books, Fedorov, but I was briefed by Admiral Golovko on this. Since we will be taking the northern route to Vladivostok, most of your charts on current ice floe conditions will be useless. So the good Admiral is providing us with three airships we can use to scout ahead and report on these conditions.” It was a very easy lie, because it was also true.

“Airships?”

“Yes, an anachronism in our time, but they were building new designs, even in 2021. Something I must tell you now, Fedorov, is that the history has changed here, just as I said back in Severomorsk. Remember? Stalin is dead, and Sergei Kirov rules the Soviet Union, or what remains of it. Our nation is fragmented in this history. It did not survive the revolution intact.”

“You were told this, sir?”

“Yes, when I was summoned ashore in an urgent message to learn I was to take command of the ship on the direct order of Sergei Kirov. Imagine my surprise to be told a dead man was ordering me about! That was when I learned what had happened here.” It was a very convincing lie, thought Karpov, watching to see how Fedorov reacted.

“They did not brief the Admiral,” Karpov continued, “and for obvious reasons, as he was being asked to relinquish command. So things are not as you might read about them in your books. Who knows why? Perhaps our presence here has caused this, or perhaps it was simply a roll of the dice, but this world is different. Our very own nation is not the same—fragmented, and our present course now takes us along the northern coast of Siberia. That is one of the new independent states, Free Siberia. You will learn more about this in time, but since we are navigating their territorial waters, they have sent these airships to serve as scouts and guides. We will rendezvous with them in the Kara Sea.”

“I see...” Fedorov was relieved that he had skirted the one torpedo that might have sunk him here—the fact that Admiral Tovey in this time seemed to

know of his existence, and even requested to speak with him personally.

"Then I guess that explains it sir, just as you suggested. Admiral Tovey was told about us, and that is how he learned about Admiral Volsky and myself. It is still very odd to think I might become important to this time, but it is certainly something to ponder."

"That is true," said Karpov, again with that thin smile. "Now Fedorov... You were the first to realized what had happened to us here. In the days ahead, I want you to meet with the men in small groups, and see if you can bring them along. Understand? At the moment we have rumors and whispers all over the ship, and I have a lot to deal with here. Can I rely on you to help brief the crew—make them understand what has happened?"

"Of course, sir. I will do whatever I can."

"Excellent. Begin with the Bridge officers, then move to the junior officers, and so on. See if you can convince Zolkin too. The men come to him like a guru at times. If Zolkin understands all this, then he can help them when they line up at his door."

"I understand, sir, but may I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"Why are we going to Vladivostok?"

"You know the history. What happens in December of 1941, Fedorov?"

"Japan..."

"Yes, Japan. Well you will be very surprised to learn that they are more of a threat than you may know at the moment. I told you things had changed here, and you will be very shocked to learn that Russia no longer controls the port of Vladivostok."

"Sir?" Fedorov was playing out his role masterfully now, or so he thought, finally relieved to have the dangerous questions behind him.

"Yes," said Karpov. "They took the port from us after the Russo-Japanese war. Can you believe that? Russia has no port of call on the Pacific. In fact, the Japanese control all of what we might know as Primorskiy Province. They have troops as far inland as lake Baikal! I think we will have to see what we might do about that—about the Japanese. So I will need you soon, Fedorov. I will need your knowledge on all of this, and your good advice. If you get the time, you might bone up on that history."

"I will, sir." Fedorov chose not to raise the obvious objection, that all of that would have happened well before Kirov ever arrived in the past. How

could it be changed? At the moment, he just wanted this conversation to end.

“Good then...” Karpov stood now, a satisfied look on his face as he made for the door. “Very well, I must go speak with Orlov now. See what you can do to help the men, Fedorov. I’m relying on you.”

The Captain opened the door, stepping out into the looming shadow of Grilikov, who was waiting like a silent carved stone in the corridor. Then he leaned back in, a glint in his dark eyes.

“Fedorov—that Royal Navy message protocol... That code word you used. Don’t forget to look up that reference and bring it to me please. I may have dealings with the Royal Navy as we go forward. And one last thing... When we met ashore, I did not say anything about a message coming from the future. Yes, I did speak of the message I carried to Volsky from Moscow, but I said nothing whatsoever about men from the future reading about us in their history books. But you did, or rather the Admiral put that notion into your head. I merely agreed with it.” He smiled, giving Fedorov a lingering look, then slowly closing the door as he left.

That pulse of rising anxiety returned. Just when he thought he was safely across the river, Fedorov suddenly felt the ice beginning to crack beneath his feet! What was Karpov trying to say to him just now, that he saw through his ploy? It was very disconcerting, and Fedorov knew that his situation remained very shaky here.

Karpov had not returned to the taunting diatribe he had opened with when he first saw the Admiral ashore, thought Fedorov. He said nothing about the truth, but that last statement he just made seemed to leave the whole question of my real identity open. Was he merely hedging his bet? Did he still harbor suspicions about me, or was he merely fishing with that line? I must continue to be very careful here.

Yes, I was planning to see if I could slowly convince some of the other officers and crew of what has happened, and Karpov has just given me the perfect cover to do that. He’s asked me to go about the ship and brief the crew, but is he handing me the rope he will use to hang me? Suppose I tell Nikolin, to begin with someone I think I can work with here, or Zolkin. What if the Captain pulls Nikolin aside and grills him about things I’ve said? It was chilling there as he left, reminding me to bring him the reference on the Royal Navy message I sent. Now how in the world will I do that?

He thought for a moment, then realized what he might do.

I will simply have to fabricate this evidence. I can take a reference passage from one of my books and generate that content as a PDF. Then all I need do is edit that document. I can do the same with the Royal Navy code words, and simply add the word Geronimo, and I had better get that work done before I do another thing.

Lord... It was an eerie thing to sit here with Karpov, both of us knowing everything that has happened, and yet both of us playing as though we were oblivious. Karpov is very clever. He's changed, so very different now. He seems quieter, calmer, yet sinister in a way that is difficult to grasp. Does he know the real truth about me, or does he merely suspect? And I wonder what happened to the Captain we left here aboard the ship when we went ashore? That wasn't the man I just spoke with. No. The man aboard this ship now is the Siberian Karpov. I'm certain of that. What has he done with his other self?

And as for my situation, how much can I really divulge to anyone else here now? Who can I trust that would not break under Karpov's suspicion, or interrogation? Nikolin is an easy man to convert to my side, but perhaps not reliable. Can you imagine what might happen if Karpov put Orlov onto him, or worse yet, that monster Grilikov? I think Zolkin would stand firm, and possibly Rodenko, and there is one other man I might go to—Troyak. The Sergeant was instrumental in our foiling Karpov's first bid for the ship. I need Troyak more than ever now.

But this is going to be very dangerous. First things first. Let me doctor those PDFs to clear up that threat, and then I'll see what I can do with Zolkin and Troyak.

Chapter 3

“Sit down, Mister Orlov. We need to talk.”

“As you wish, sir. About that incident in the Helo Bay—”

“Forget that. Just be careful to listen to my orders when I give them, and carry them out to the letter. I could see what happened there in a heartbeat. You got into something with Zykov, yes? He stood his ground, as any Marine would, and you put Grilikov on the man.”

Now Karpov leveled a finger at the Chief.

“Don’t ever do anything like that again. The Marines are a special detail aboard ship. You don’t supervise them, discipline them, or manage their work for them. You merely tell them what we want done, and then they do it. You are Chief of Operations, Orlov. Get that through your head and start acting like a senior officer, not some stupid lout willing to roll around in the mud with the likes of Zykov. He’s a fucking Corporal! I don’t know what you did there, or why, but you put yourself in a very bad situation just now. Start using your head with the men, and not those big arms and shoulders. Your authority here comes from the stars and bars on your shoulder, not the muscle beneath them. You don’t strong arm this crew, unless I give you a specific order to deal with a man that way. Understand?”

Orlov nodded. “Like Fedorov,” he said sullenly, well chastened by the Captain’s remarks. He could still not understand why he felt so cowed by Karpov now. Yes, he looked a little different since he returned from that brief excursion ashore, but it wasn’t the subtle physical difference he noted—it was something else. Before, with Volsky here, Orlov felt himself almost an equal with Karpov, just a rung down on the ladder of command, even though he was really two grades in rank beneath the Captain.

Yet now, with Volsky gone and Karpov elevated to full command of the ship, it was as if the man was a demigod. He was, in fact, the sole and final authority on the ship, and Orlov could feel those two grades of rank become a great chasm between them now. Yes, he was Chief of Operations, Chief of the Boat as the men sometimes called him, but he was at Karpov’s beck and call, and now there was another factor in the power equation here—Grilikov.

I was just about to let that monster square off with Troyak, he thought, and God only knows what might have happened there in the Helo Bay if the Captain had not come along.

He understood what Karpov was saying to him now. Yes, he was Chief of the damn Boat, and yet there he was, wrangling for a girly magazine with Zykov, a fucking Corporal, just as Karpov said. Orlov was suddenly ashamed of himself, and knew what Karpov was trying to say to him. He had to start acting like the officer he was.

“Fedorov?” said Karpov. “Explain.”

“Well, you asked me to keep an eye on him sir, and go have a little chat with him. We both know he was mouthing off on the bridge, and I had a mind to swat the man down right then, except the Admiral was there.”

“You had a chat with Fedorov?”

“Of course, sir. I told you all about it. You said you suspected he was a mole, but I thought he was something worse—a goddamned Zampolit, even though they say we don’t have that sort aboard any longer. Yet look how he was sticking his nose into things the minute that accident happened.”

“Go on,” said Karpov, listening with his eyes closed now, thinking. “Tell me about this meeting you had with Fedorov again. I’ve been so busy that I forgot all about it.”

“I sat down with him, and told him to mind his mouth, but the little shit had some backbone. I guess he thought he had the Admiral’s protection. I went to put the fear of the Lord into him, but he as much as told me to go fuck myself. You were right about him, Captain. He’s different now. He isn’t the same man at all, at least not the nerdy little rat he was before all this happened. You want my take on it? I still think he’s a stinking Zampolit. How else would he know all the things he’s been spouting? He can’t get everything out of his history books. Why did he ask us to investigate that outpost on Jan Mayen? Was that a setup of some kind?”

“Tell me about Jan Mayen again.” Karpov’s eyes opened now, like the dark eyes of a snake, watching, marking its prey.

“You heard my report, sir. The whole place was gone—not destroyed as you thought—but simply gone. All we found there was that tiny little weather station, not the big MET facility that should have been there. All we found were those two Norwegians and their damn dog. You saw that identity card I gave you.”

“Identity card?”

“Yes sir, the one Troyak found on one of the Norwegians. You said yourself that Fedorov predicted that was exactly what we would find, right down to the man’s name. You still have that card?”

Karpov took a long breath. “I put it aside,” he said. “Too much going on of late to worry about things like that. Refresh me again, Chief. What was it Fedorov predicted?”

“The whole damn thing! The Norwegians, their dog, and even that man’s name. It was right there on the ID card I fetched. So that was when you became suspicious of that little rat—Fedorov and his secret little code signals to the Royal Navy. You know he put Nikolin up to that. I choked that out of our young communications officer when you told me to see what was going on with Fedorov.

Karpov nodded. “Yes, Chief, that brawn of yours is good for some things now and again. But use it with a well measured cup.”

Karpov realized a good deal here. His other self had been more than annoyed with Fedorov’s behavior. He was becoming very suspicious of the man. Now the Captain began to reason it all out. Fedorov was different... Fedorov had spoken out of place on the bridge, curried favor with Volsky, conspired with Nikolin to send secret coded messages to the Royal Navy, and more... he had predicted things that would happen, almost as if he had lived through them all before...

Just like I have, thought Karpov. Oh, he covered his tracks very well just now when I met with him. He’s very clever, very resourceful, but he hasn’t taken the full measure of me just yet. He doesn’t know who he is dealing with. I wonder, does he know I am not the man he left aboard this ship when he went ashore with Volsky? Did he buy my little ploy with the gauze on my cheek? I wonder...

“As to Fedorov,” said the Captain. “I just had a chat with him myself. Yes, do keep an eye on him, Chief, but be very discrete about it. Don’t square off to him, or make it obvious that you’re watching him. And by all means, don’t threaten the man. If he is up to something, we need to catch him in the act. Don’t bluster about and play right into his game. You forget how smart he is.”

“Too smart,” said Orlov sourly. “When he gave me that lip in the dining hall, I wanted to put my fist right down his throat.”

“That’s the sort of impulse you must learn to control,” said Karpov. “Remember what I said, Chief—stars and bars. That’s where your authority lies on this ship, and that is why I don’t want you to take Grilikov with you on your daily rounds. You don’t need Grilikov, or even your surly temperament to get what you want done, you just need those stars and bars. Give an order, be professional about it, and if it doesn’t stick, then come to me. All it will take is one little transgression, and a man called in here to sit across that table with me before they learn their lesson—that when you open your mouth on this ship, you are speaking with authority that descends from god almighty on high—that’s me. I am the final authority on this ship, not Grilikov, not Troyak and his Marines, not those sixty security men I brought aboard at Severomorsk. They all answer to me. Understand?”

“Yes sir. But Zykov was being a real smart ass.”

“Perhaps so, but you made the mistake of elevating him to your level in the way you handled the matter, or worse, you got down on his level. What you should have done is go to Troyak. Chain of command, Orlov, chain of command. Troyak handles the Marines. Zykov gets out of line, you walk over to Troyak and damn well let him know about it. If you don’t feel that settles the matter, then you come to me.”

“Understood, sir. I can see what I did wrong now.”

“Good... Now as to Fedorov, be discreet; be cautious. For that matter, be clever about this situation. If he is more than he seems, he’ll be very sly about what he does on this ship. Watch him, but out of the corner of your eye.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good, because you are more important now than you realize, Chief. You are a very essential cog in the works here, and there is something that I must tell you now—something very important. Every man on this ship will know about it tomorrow, but tonight, I tell it to you personally. Fedorov knows. Yes, he’s already figured things out, and in that he was correct all along.”

“You mean all that crap about the ship being back in WWII?”

“Exactly.”

“Come on, sir...” The Chief smiled, but the look on Karpov’s face was so serious that it fell away in an instant. “You mean it’s true? This is 1941, just like Fedorov says?”

“Correct. That accident with Orel blew the damn sub to pieces, and did something very much more. It ripped a hole in time and blasted us right

through it—the whole damn ship. Were you up on deck when we pulled into Kola Bay?”

“No sir, I was below deck making sure everyone else was staying put. Admiral’s orders and all.”

“Yes, the Admiral was very clever about that too. It was almost as if he knew what we would find there, though I think he probably got that notion from Fedorov. Well it’s all true. The whole damn story is true. This is 1941, and that’s why there was nothing out there on Jan Mayen. Those facilities were never even built yet! And had you been up on deck, you might have seen that Severomorsk was not the way we left it—no, not at all. For now, since you didn’t see it with your own eyes, all you have is my word on the matter. But God’s truth, Chief. We’re in 1941.”

“Then... we can’t go home? Ever?”

“That remains to be seen, but for the moment we have work to do here.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re sailing east... To Vladivostok. We have business with the Japanese.” Now Karpov told Orlov the same things he had shared with Fedorov concerning the fragmented state of Russia, and the incursion the Japanese had made in the east.

“You mean they pushed all the way to Lake Baikal? Damn...” Orlov was astounded.

“Yes, it is hard to believe, but that is what happens when you let your guard down. Someone was weak when he should have stood firm. Now the Japanese took all our eastern provinces. They have a nice little empire out there, with troops in China and even incursions into Tibet. And soon they will join the war, but we are sailing east to settle accounts, Orlov. You and I will set things right.”

“We will?”

“Of course. You are Chief of the Boat. Don’t you understand? There is no Severomorsk back there any longer—at least not the one we left. There’s no one we answer to now. That whole reeking structure of the upper naval command is gone! I am now the final authority concerning the fate of this ship and crew, and you, as Chief of Operations, are my right arm on this ship. So I need you to stand up now, get a grip on all of this, and get ready for what lies ahead.”

“My God... What are we going to do?” Orlov gave the Captain a wide

eyed look now, waiting.

“Let me put this in terms you might understand,” said Karpov. “I’ve read your file. It’s no secret that you were once thick as thieves with the Russian Mob, the Bravta, the brotherhood. Yes, I know all about it. The brotherhood goes all the way back to the time of the Tsars. They ran the Gulags for Stalin, though I’ll tell you more about him later, and they ran quite a bit more as the decades past. You know the structure. Every gang has the Pakhan at the top, the big boss, the ‘Godfather,’ just like in the movies. He controls the cells with his Brigadiers, and two spies, men no one knows, watch the Brigadiers to keep them in line. Then comes the Sovietnik, the chief councilor and advisor for the Pakhan, and the Brigadiers run all the Boeviks beneath them, the warriors in the cells who get things done when so ordered. There are many kinds, the enforcers, contract killers, bodyguards. That was your job, yes? You were Byki, bodyguard for your Brigadier. Am I correct?”

Orlov nodded, wondering how all of that found its way into his personnel file. The navy knew more about him than he realized! “So I was Byki in the Grekov Group for an underboss, what of it?”

“Well you are about to get a promotion. Let me put it to you this way. I am Pakhan on this ship now, the big Boss, Godfather of the Northern Seas, and Volsky is out to pasture back in Severomorsk.”

Orlov smiled at that, a little bit of a sneer in his smile, for he often thought the Admiral was beyond his ‘sell by’ date, though he never dared say as much.

“Now then... Grilikov is Byki to me. Understand? He covers my back, and he is absolutely loyal. I will explain how I knew this man before, but there’s no time to get into that now. Let’s just say that if I told Grilikov to cut off his balls and eat them, he would. Enough said on that. But now we come to you, Orlov. Grilikov is Byki, so you get a new job. I’m bumping you up to Kassir, the man of authority, the bookmaker, the man who collects from all the Brigadiers. And guess what, you won’t be running a small group of six to ten cells, like you might back home in Saint Petersburg with the Grekov Group. No. Beneath you is the entire crew of this ship, and you are Kassir, Chief of the Boat. Understand? The other officers like Rodenko and Samsonov, and even Troyak, well, they are your Brigadiers, and the men beneath them are all Boeviks and Shestyorkas in those Brigades, the warriors, runners, messenger boys, you get the drift. We call them mishman

and matocks. Some are torpedo men, missile men, and you know who they are. Others are messenger boys like Nikolin.”

“What about Fedorov?”

“Funny you should mention him,” Karpov smiled. “He’s too damn smart to be a Shestyorka, but he doesn’t have the temperament to be a warrior, or even a Brigadier. He might make a good Soveitnik, a councilor for me once I vet the man thoroughly. So you get another job in that for me. You are my spy keeping an eye on Fedorov.”

“Right,” Orlov nodded, instinctively leaning in closer to Karpov now, as though he was taken into the confidence of his old Pakhan back in Saint Petersburg, and being given a very important job. He always did think of himself as more than a simple muscle man, even though he never got that high in any mob structure, until he joined the navy. Karpov was putting things in terms he inherently understood, and the situation was very clear to him when the Captain proceeded.

“As to the Japanese, think of them as a rival gang, and a big one, a very dangerous one. They’ve been welching on the agreement they struck with us after the Russo-Japanese war. They’ve moved into our territory, busted up our cells out east, and took over all that business. They run our old neighborhoods and districts, and by God, I won’t stand for that any longer.”

“Damn right,” said Orlov.

“Good... You understand, and now you know why we are sailing east. This ship has a new Pakhan, and you’re looking at him. And this ship has power—real power, Chief. I’m going to use it, carefully, at just the right time and place, and I’m going to run the damn Japanese out of Vladivostok and every other territory they took from us. You are the only other man I’ve spoken to about this. You are my number one, Kassir.

“What about Rodenko?” asked Orlov.

“I need to see how he plays the game. Frankly, being Kassir in a gang like this is a great deal of responsibility, and only you really understand how it should work. So that is why you need to step up now, and act like a man with real authority. A little push or a shove may be necessary at times, but remember what I said.”

“Stars and bars,” said Orlov.

“Exactly. I think we have an understanding.” Karpov smiled.

Part II

Disclosure

“Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.”

— *Jane Austin*

Chapter 4

When Fedorov appeared at his door, Doctor Zolkin was very happy to see him. “Come in!” he said with a warm smile. “You know, I was meaning to speak with you, Mister Fedorov. I trust you are feeling well? No more headaches?”

“Quite well, sir. I’m my old self.” Even as he said that, Fedorov could not escape the irony. Where was his old self, the man who might have come here in his place before the hand on Time’s clock struck that Paradox? He still felt a strange sense of guilt, for everything now, but even more keenly in thinking he was responsible for the death of his own self.

“Good,” said Zolkin, “because I was very remiss in not properly attending to you. Yes, the line at my door was quite long after that incident in the Norwegian Sea, but that is no excuse. Forgive me, Fedorov. I should have provided you with better care. And another thing... That P.A. announcement by the Captain this morning. It sounded like you two have reached an accommodation.”

“Yes sir, for the moment. He wanted me to go about the ship and speak with the crew. I’ll get to that in time, but I thought it best to begin with the officers, and you were first on my list.”

“What is this all about? News of the Admiral? I hope nothing has happened.”

How to begin, thought Fedorov? “Sir, I went ashore with Admiral Volsky, at his request. There we were met with a security team, and strangely, the Captain appeared. There was a letter from Moscow. The Admiral was relieved of command.”

“What? Because of that accident?”

“Partly, but that is just the beginning of the story.” He took a deep breath. “Doctor Zolkin, you heard my interpretation of these events, and what I believe happened, yet I am thinking you attribute my tale to some aberrant mental state—to that fall I took, hitting my head.”

Zolkin folded his arms, nodding. “I will be frank with you and say that I did have a growing concern about you, and all the more reason for me to

have seen to your care.”

“Well sir... I have been asked to deliver some news to the entire crew, and you will find it quite shocking. To be blunt about it, my assessment of what has happened to us has now been proven correct.” He left that there, watching closely to note Zolkin’s reaction.

“You mean that story you told us about WWII? The Captain asked you to explain that all to the crew? Mister Fedorov, the last time I saw that man he was fairly well convinced that you were a lunatic, or worse, a traitor concocting this story as a means of covering up your complicity with the British.”

“Yes, sir. But he no longer believes that, because everything I have said was proved correct, and the Captain has finally accepted those facts. You may ask him yourself.”

“Proven? You mean this moon business? What are you talking about?”

Now Fedorov shared his story of the mission ashore, making a detailed description of the condition of the harbor, the city virtually gone. Zolkin had a strange look on his face, for he had heard much the same, in whispered confessions from crewmen who had caught a glimpse of the harbor from their stations, particularly the men who were assigned to the boat launch detail, and one of the Marines, Zykov. The man had been in here saying something terrible had happened to Severomorsk, and he thought it was war, but he seemed very confused. Could it be true? Could all the rest of Fedorov’s story be true along with it?

“You’re asking me to believe that this is now 1941?”

“I know you were down here, below decks, and you didn’t see anything of what I have described, except that moon I pointed out when I spoke with you and the Admiral. If it is any comfort to you now, Doctor, I will also tell you that the Admiral accepted all of this. He was finally convinced.”

“But then who sent that recall order?” Zolkin protested. “I know he was tussling with all of this, but that was the one objection he could not seem to overcome.”

“We solved that at Severomorsk. And now I must tell you something even stranger about all of this. But I will begin by saying this to you. While we were ashore, the Admiral told me to come to you with all of this, and to ask that you believe me in every respect. I have said he was convinced of this truth, by the evidence of his own eyes at Severomorsk. I know you were both

long time friends, and so I ask you to have faith that what I say to you now is true.”

Zolkin gave him a long look, waiting. “Very well, Fedorov. Tell me everything my old friend came to believe, everything you now say the Captain believes. I will give you an open ear here.”

And so Fedorov explained it all again, the reasons, all the evidence, and then he also recounted the encounter with the patrol ship Tuman, something even Zolkin knew about from the history. When he came to the mission ashore at Severomorsk, he lowered his voice.

“Doctor, I have already said why I knew all of this was true—that I had lived it all through before. Yes, you thought I was experiencing *déjà vu*, perhaps as a result of that bump on the head I took, but that is not the case. I did live through all of this once, and the memories are so clear in my mind that it seems like it all happened yesterday.”

“I will be frank with you,” said Zolkin. “Yes, I took all of that to be evidence of a mental disturbance. I believed you were fantasizing because of the stress of your confrontation with the Captain. He can be a most intimidating man.”

“It was no fantasy, sir. It all happened. You were involved in it all as well, and came to believe everything I have told you just now, because you lived through it with me.”

“Yet only you remember these things? No one else?”

“Apparently not.... God, I wish I could produce a log book, something tangible, but I’ve checked for that on the bridge with Nikolin. He keeps the logs, and there was no evidence there. Then I remembered why, because we purged the files.” Fedorov had a frustrated look on his face now, for he needed Zolkin to believe here, and the man’s own intelligence and training was working as an adversary to that. Then Zolkin had a strange look in his eye, as if he recalled something very important.

“Fedorov... Log entries... I was wanting to speak with you, because I was consulting my medical logs the other day, and came upon something very odd.”

“Tell me.” Fedorov’s eyes were dark and serious.

“Oh, I was just reviewing my records, looking for something that might explain away an old bloodied bandage I found in my medicine cabinet. That may not seem like much, but I’m a very meticulous man, and somewhat of a

creature of habit. So I wanted to see if I had made a log entry detailing an incident when that bandage might have been used. I couldn't remember anything about it... then I found something very odd, an encrypted file. Apparently I put a strong password protection on it, because I tried several of my old favorites, and it eventually opened."

"I see... What was it, Doctor?"

"A list of members of the crew... An Autopsy report on each name I found there."

That hit Fedorov like a wet fish in the face. Autopsy reports? Now he remembered what had happened in Vladivostok when the Inspector General came aboard, with that damn intelligence officer, Ivan Volkov. There had been a list of names, all the members of the crew that they had lost in combat during those first harrowing missions in time. Volkov managed to force Zolkin to surrender that list, and it was then found that Moscow had no record that any man on the list ever existed! His heart beat faster as he realized what this might be—that very same list, encrypted and hidden by the Doctor during that period before they made port, when the effort was made to erase all evidence of what had happened to them. Of course, that was why I could find no computer logs. But Zolkin did not erase his files, he merely encrypted them!

All this passed through his mind in a heartbeat, and now his eyes widened as he looked at the Doctor, knowing exactly what to ask.

"Doctor Zolkin... Did the list you found have a report on a crewman named Markov? Did it include a man named Voloshin? Another named Lenkov—the man from the galley?"

Zolkin had a stunned expression on his face. "Yes! All of them. My God, the moment I saw that list I knew you were the one man I needed to speak with about it... I just knew... But how could you know this, the names of those men?"

"Because I can tell you how each man died." He went on about Markov, and how he was simply reported as missing in action while working at the Primorskiy engineering facility. Then there was Voloshin, found dead in his own quarters, an apparent suicide. There were others he remembered, men he knew who had died in the reserve battle bridge, or at some other station during the many hours of combat they had endured. He could not remember them all, did not even know some who had given up their lives, their very

existence, though he felt responsible for all of them. Then he came to Lenkov.

“He was found, half embedded in the galley floor, and then later the rest of his body, his legs in fact, were discovered in one of the Marine lockers...”

Zolkin shuddered. It was exactly as he had written it up in his report, that ghastly incident of which he had no recollection. Much of it was garbled, but there were enough clear segments in the file for him to realize that Fedorov somehow knew about everything he had written into those files. Could he have found the log entry? Could he have broken the encryption? Fedorov was very clever, but that would have been a difficult task, if not an impossible one. Then Fedorov spoke again, telling him the impossible truth yet again.

“Yes, Doctor, I know what you must have written into that file, because I was there when all those events occurred. I lived through them all, just as I told you earlier. Can you believe me now? Admiral Volsky did.”

“God almighty,” said Zolkin. “Then it is all true. Those things really happened? Even that ghastly write-up I discovered on Lenkov? I haven’t looked at the man the same way since I found that file.”

“It all happened.”

“Then everything else you told us also happened? Karpov tried to take the ship?”

“Yes sir, and he’s done it again, only not the same way. You see, we never got a recall order the first time I experienced these events. After we investigated the facilities on Jan Mayen, we turned south, and ran the Denmark Strait into the Atlantic, just as I told you earlier.”

Zolkin shook his head. “What in the world is going on here? I was so quick to diagnose your own mental condition, but now I begin to doubt my own sanity!”

“No sir, you are quite sane. Yet all these insane things did happen to us, and to this ship—God’s truth. I think if I saw that list of yours, I could tell you how every man there died, and why.”

“But Lenkov... That was gruesome!”

“Very strange. That happened just before the ship made its final shift.”

“Using that control rod you told the Admiral and I about?”

“Yes. You see, in the course of all these shifts, we ended up in 1940. We stayed there for some time, but as we approached this time, the time the ship first appeared here, these strange things began to happen. Was Orlov on your list?”

“He was, but I edited that entry, and that was very puzzling. I had written him up as a K.I.A.”

“In a helicopter incident involving the KA-226?”

“Yes!” said Zolkin, amazed again that Fedorov knew the exact contents of that entry. “Fedorov, are you certain you never saw or read this file before? Swear on your Mother’s heart.”

“Oh. I’ve seen it before, Doctor, but that was when these events were actually taking place, just as I’ve told you. You know that list is something completely aberrant. How could you possibly account for such a list? From your perspective, we just left Severomorsk a few days ago for those life fire exercises. None of those events had even happened, but they did once. This is what I’m telling you. You know damn well that you didn’t write that list in your sleep after we left Severomorsk. The password you used to encrypt it was very personal, am I correct?”

Zolkin nodded grimly. “So... I did write it, but not me... not this confused idiot in front of you now, but another version of myself? Is that what you are telling me now?”

“Apparently so. You were on the ship with me through all those events. You endured it all too. I only wish you could remember.”

Zolkin was silent for a moment, his mind in a deep well on something. Then he got up, went over to his desk, and opened a drawer, producing, to Fedorov’s surprise, a soiled bandage, stained with blood.

“I found this in my medicine cabinet, as I mentioned earlier. That was what set me to looking through my files, because I could not remember how or when a bandage like that was ever used on this ship.”

But Fedorov could, and now the look on his face was deeply sympathetic, an almost painful expression, for he recognized that was the arm bandage Zolkin had used to dress his own arm during that terrible incident on the bridge, way back in 1908, decades past now. He hadn’t witnessed the incident, for he was still aboard Kazan when it happened, but for days after, he remembered seeing that bandage on Zolkin’s arm.

“Doctor,” he began slowly. “I think if you analyze the blood type on that bandage, you will see it matches your own.”

“Damn if that isn’t so!” said Zolkin. “Then...”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “That is your own blood on that bandage, and now I will tell you how and why it is there.”

Zolkin sat down, almost as if his legs could no longer hold his weight. He settled into a chair by the wall, hand on his chin, waiting.

Chapter 5

“Then it’s all true,” said Zolkin. “Everything you have said, the whole impossible story. You have lived through it all before, and apparently I have as well! My God, why can’t I remember it clearly, like you can.”

That statement jolted Fedorov. “Remember it clearly? You mean to say you get memories that seem fuzzy on some of this? Things you can almost grasp, and then they slip away?”

“Exactly. The first was the moment I found that bandage in the medicine cabinet. I could not think why it would be there. That space is reserved for things of importance, but now I see why I would have put it there. So I stood up to that bastard and he actually shot me! That is hard to believe, but you know, I wouldn’t put anything beyond that man. Fedorov... Do you think Karpov knows any of this? Might he be catching snippets of these events in his recollection as well? That would make him a very dangerous man if he should learn all of this—all that you know.”

“Quite true, but things are far more serious than that.” Fedorov gave him a dour look. “He does know all of this. He lived through it, just as I did.”

“You mean he can remember? Then why was he so damn adamant that your story was nonsense when you first started to explain the evidence?”

“Because the man up there on the bridge is not the same one who leveled those charges against me when we met here with Admiral Volsky.”

“What? Not the same man? What do you mean?”

Fedorov took a long breath. “There are things I haven’t told you yet. When we went ashore, I told you Karpov was suddenly there, and with a message from Moscow for the Admiral. The moment he saw us, he began to taunt us, saying things that he could only have known if he had lived through the events I described to you. I think he was trying to see how the Admiral and I would react—trying to see if we remembered those events as well. Thankfully, the Admiral was quick enough to realize the danger in that, and he played dumb. I went along with that as well.”

“I don’t understand,” said Zolkin. “How would Karpov know any of this—unless he does remember it, just like you do? But then why would he play

dumb with us here on the ship, particularly when he was trying to convince the Admiral your story was hogwash, and you were some kind of traitorous spy for the British?”

“That wasn’t the Captain—not the one we left on the ship when we went ashore. That was the man who fired that gun at you on the bridge.”

Now Fedorov laid out his theory, that somehow, by some strange twist, the other Karpov, at large in Siberia, had managed to survive the hour when the ship appeared on July 28th.”

“I once thought that would be impossible,” he said. “How could that man survive, as well as the Captain still being here on the ship? You remember my saying how stunned I was when I first saw the Chief here, and then also learned Karpov was here as well. I think that literally drained the blood from my head, I was so shocked by it, and that’s what caused me to keel over! From my perspective, Karpov was long gone the last time we shifted. He was not on the ship, but I knew he existed, at large in Siberia, and a very meddlesome presence there. He had worked himself into a position of great power.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” said Zolkin.

“Yes,” said Fedorov, “I even had evidence of that, and how we first learned of his existence. You see, after that incident in 1908 on the bridge, we all thought he had perished. Then we find he was alive in Siberia, and had positioned himself as Admiral of the Free Siberian Air Corps.”

“He’s a power grubbing monster, in any form,” said Zolkin.

“Have you seen him since he came aboard?”

“Only from a distance, in the dining hall. I saw that gauze on his cheek, and meant to ask him about it, but you know how he keeps to himself when he eats.”

“True, well it may be that he is hiding something with that. When I saw him ashore at Severomorsk, it was very obvious to me, knowing all I’ve told you, that this was the Siberian Karpov, and not the Captain that shifted here with us just days ago. He said things to us that he could not have known unless this was so. And so the shock of that was on me again, to realize both men must have survived that hour on July 28th.”

“Are you certain? Might it be that he simply remembers things, just as you do... Just as I struggle to recall things when something suddenly hits me, like when I first touched that bloodied bandage.”

“No,” said Fedorov. “I’ve spent a good long while with him since then. In fact he was just visiting me in my cabin for a little chat. I think he was still probing to see if I might know more than I let on. While ashore, I realized how dangerous that would be for me, and the Admiral, bless his soul, realized it too. We both played dumb, and I think Karpov bought our act, but he remains leery about me. I could sense that when he spoke to me in my quarters. He’s still probing; still suspicious. I let a good deal slip when I was trying to convince the Admiral of what had really happened. I was afraid I may have said something to compromise my real identity.”

“Your real identity? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I am not the same man who left Severomorsk on this ship a few days ago either, Doctor. I know this to the depth of my bones. I sometimes bite my fingernails when I am thinking or worried about something. Before that last shift, we were in battle, and things on the ship were very serious, very dangerous. Look...” He held out an index finger and Zolkin could see how the nail was bitten down so far that the fingertip had bled.

“I remember doing that before... But in the Atlantic, right before that final shift. Then I found myself here on this ship, but look at that finger. It may seem an insignificant testimony to what I am saying now, but I know it to be true, just like everything else I’ve said. I am the man who was at sea in the Atlantic, in May of 1941 when we made that final shift. I am not simply Fedorov, remembering things I once lived through. I’m the man who lived out each and every one of those moments, and up on the bridge, Karpov is the same. That man wasn’t with us when we sailed from Severomorsk. He arranged to meet us there. It was he that sent that coded recall order—the only man alive in this time who could have known how it should have been formatted, and known the confirmation code word. ”

“Good Lord, Fedorov! You mean he’s replaced our Captain—the man who was in here arguing you were a spy?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s... some kind of duplicate? A Double?”

“A doppelganger,” said Fedorov. “It’s a German word—means Double Walker. This is what I believe, though I’m not sure how it happened. I thought only one or the other could survive, but not both men, never two men alike allowed in the same time. But I was obviously wrong on that score.”

Zolkin scratched his grey-white hair. "Then what happened to the Captain who sailed with us days ago? For that matter, what happen to you—to your other self? Where is that young officer who was always lost in his history books?"

"I don't know. I think the Captain may have done something with his other self. Who knows, but the man aboard this ship now is the Siberian. I'm certain of that, and he is very, very dangerous."

"And your other self?"

Fedorov had a glum look on his face, the guilt obvious to Zolkin's careful eye. "I don't know... But I don't think that man survived..."

Now Zolkin gave him a heartfelt look, slowly nodding his head, thinking of all he had heard from Fedorov, and realizing all he had endured. Now he was standing there, head down, knowing he may be responsible for his own death.

"My good young man," he said. "You've been through purgatory here, worse than that. You've been through hell and back again. I'm so sorry... I wish I had believed you earlier, but you can surely understand why I came to those other conclusions."

"Of course... But that doesn't matter. Now you know the real truth, but I have been posing as if I were still that unknowing young officer. Yet I don't know how long I can hide that way. I'm telling you Karpov is different, and if you spend any time around him in the days ahead, you will notice that too. Well I'm different too. I have been through hell and back, and that has to change a man. Can you see that in me now?"

"That I can, Fedorov," said Zolkin softly.

"Others may notice it as well," said Fedorov. "Orlov tried to pull his tough guy routine on me a couple days ago, and I stood up to him. He had to know that wasn't the Fedorov he knew me to be. Others may have noticed things about me too."

"Volsky certainly did," said Zolkin. "Me? I was busy diagnosing your mental state, and seeing those differences as a result of anxiety. Now I know better."

"Yes? Well I'm worried Karpov may soon figure this out himself. He's been asking me some very probing questions—about that message I asked the Admiral to send out. I tried to cover for that by saying I got it from one of my books, but he asked me to produce that reference."

“How will you get around that?”

“I’ve already taken care of it. I just doctored a few files I had on my pad device. It will account for that little oversight on my part, but at that time, I was not aware of what had happened with Karpov. I’ve gone over and over everything I could remember saying or doing, looking for a loose shirttail. If he discovers I know all this...”

The implication was very obvious to Zolkin.

“Alright...” said the Doctor. “It seems I was your ally once in all of this, Mister Fedorov. You can count on me again, as God is my witness. You’ve told me what that man up there is capable of, no, you’ve told me what he’s actually done! My God! He used special warheads on the men of this era? Amazing! Well, you say that isn’t happening now, and things are different. The ship is taking a different course. Perhaps we can change all those things he did, Fedorov. If I understand what is happening now, this is a kind of replay of all those events you lived through, and it only happened because the ship somehow slipped to a time before the first moment of its coming.”

“Yes, that’s how I understand it,” said Fedorov.

“Well,” said Zolkin, a determined look on his face. “Then I want to do everything possible to see that I never have to write those damn autopsy reports...”

Yes, thought Fedorov, the reports in that encrypted file. Somehow they had survived too, just like the evidence the British had uncovered in those file boxes at Bletchley Park. All of this is starting over again. They were now rewriting the history they had ravaged in their first coming. Those men might not have to die.

“But the ship is heading east,” said Fedorov, greatly relieved to be through this with the Doctor, and to know he had gained his understanding and support. “We’re going to Vladivostok. Those were our orders after the live fire exercises, but it’s 1941 now, and I’ll tell you another impossible thing. The history here has changed.”

He gave him that part of the story now, Stalin’s death, the rise of Sergei Kirov, his hunt for Orlov, and how that damn intelligence officer, Captain Ivan Volkov, must have followed his trail along the Trans-Siberian rail.

“Lord almighty,” said Zolkin. “This all happened at the railway inn? What is the world coming to? You could move in time just by using that stairway?”

“It has something to do with the time and place that stairway brought me to,” said Fedorov. “It has something to do with the Tunguska Event. I’ve come to think that impact did more than we realized. It fractured spacetime. In fact, it may have cause this instability in time that makes the ship prone to slip. That control rod I told you about? We later learned it had materials used in it that were mined very near the impact site at Tunguska.”

“This gets even more twisted the longer we talk about it,” said Zolkin, exasperated.

“Yes, there’s so much more I could tell you, but our immediate problem is this... Karpov is taking the ship east to Vladivostok, but Russia doesn’t control that port any longer. The Japanese took it from us years ago, during the time before the revolution, and possibly because of our own meddling in all of this history.”

“The Japanese?”

“Yes, and think now, Doctor. It is 1941, and in a few months it will be December of that year. What happened in the Pacific?”

“Pearl Harbor,” said Zolkin darkly. “Japan will be entering the war soon.”

“Exactly. So now do you see why I am worried about the course that man up there has set for this ship? Karpov was dead set on restoring Russia’s presence as a Pacific power. In fact, Admiral Volsky and I were trying to prevent his intervention, trying to preserve the history, but once a plate cracks, it is never really the same, no matter how much glue you use.”

“So you think Karpov is planning something now—with the Japanese?”

“Most certainly. He said as much to me in my quarters earlier. I don’t know what he has in mind to do, but it was clear that he laid a very careful trap to get control of this ship again. He’s going to do something when we get out east, and I fear the Japanese are in for a big surprise.”

Zolkin nodded, seeing the gravity in the situation now, and realizing Fedorov was trying to find a way to prevent Karpov from rewriting the history again.”

“Then you believe he will attack the Japanese? Try to force them to relinquish control of Vladivostok by using the power of this ship?”

“He was certainly on that same course before,” said Fedorov. “He’s asked me to study up on that history, and I think for no good reason. He’ll want to use my knowledge as a weapon against Japan.”

“Yes,” said Zolkin. “Knowing what your enemy is going to do, even before he does it, is certainly an advantage.”

“How can I stop him, Doctor? Before it came down to a real struggle for control of the ship. Sergeant Troyak and his Marines were enough to stop him the first time, but not before he set loose a special warhead. Then later, we had to come for him aboard the submarine Kazan to try and stop him. That’s another long story I’ll tell you later, but that time, it took the entire bridge crew standing up and refusing his orders, and you nearly paid with your life. Had Karpov’s aim been true...”

“I understand,” said Zolkin. “Do you think we can find a few other allies here, Fedorov? Might we bring Sergeant Troyak in on what we know?”

“That was going to be my next move, but have you seen those other men that came aboard at Kola Bay?”

“I’ve certainly heard a good deal about them, and a big lout the crew call Grilikov.”

“Karpov brought sixty security men aboard with him,” said Fedorov. “Grilikov leads that contingent.”

“I see...” Zolkin folded his arms. “Mister Fedorov, God bless you for carrying all of this, and holding up as you have.” He put his hand on Fedorov’s shoulder. “But you’re not alone now. There’s two of us who know the real truth, and perhaps I may even recover my memory of these events. But one thing is certain, I’ll be at your right shoulder from this moment on.”

“Thank you, Doctor. That is a great relief. Perhaps together we can find a way to stop this man, the Siberian, or at least answer that question.”

“What question?”

“It isn’t just a matter of how to stop him,” said Fedorov. “I must also decide whether I should even try. The Allies are losing this war, and now Japan will soon join the Axis. We could lose it all, Doctor. Germany, Italy, Orenburg and Japan could win this war...”

Chapter 6

Karpov was pacing, as he sometimes would do on the bridge of the ship, feeling restless and dispossessed. The Admiral's stateroom aboard *Tunguska* was comfortable, with well appointed furnishings, a gas heater and stove, ornate samovar for tea, and a beautiful writing desk. When he saw these things he gave an instinctive nod of his head, realizing they would have been the very same things he would have collected in a stateroom, but now they gave him little comfort. All he could think of was the ship, *Kirov*, his command at sea now the province of his other self, another version of his very being, impossible but nonetheless there.

Tyrenkov sat quietly in the chair opposite the Admiral's desk, waiting to complete his briefing, but the Captain had been too restless to sit. Eventually, to press upon him the urgency of the moment, the intelligence Chief stood, his gloved hands clasped before him, still waiting.

"Very well," said *Karpov*, in that same impatient tone of voice *Tyrenkov* had become so familiar with. The acorn never fell very far from the tree, but which was the tree? This man before him was the root and stem of the Siberian, with every same potential, though all of it unrealized.

"What is so important about *Ilanskiy*?" said *Karpov*. "I know the place in my day, an insignificant little railway town east of *Kansk* near the Naval Weapons Armory."

"I was instructed to leave that briefing to the Admiral, but to press upon you the importance of the place as our new fleet operations center and headquarters."

"*Ilanskiy*? Why there? It is far from the front lines."

"The Admiral will acquaint you with the reason for his decision to locate our operations center there. I was merely to convey that fact, and the Admiral's directive that its defense and security is of paramount importance. The enemy has already mounted two airship raids on that location. They are very keen to control that place, and so the first priority of our fleet operations planning involves the defense of *Ilanskiy*."

"Very well," said *Karpov* sullenly. "How many ships do I have?"

“Six remain from our original fleet, including the fleet flagship, which we are presently standing on. Of these, three are permanently stationed at Kansk and Ilanskiy, Abakan, Angara, and Talmenka. These are considered heavy cruiser class airships, with eight guns, mostly 76mm recoilless rifles. This ship is much stronger, as you have seen.”

That failed to impress the Captain, who rolled his eyes momentarily, before asking his next question. “The other two ships?”

“They are east at Irkutsk, one ship by that name, and a second in the same class, Novosibirsk. These are twelve gun battlecruisers, as compared to Tunguska, which has sixteen guns, our only true battleship. And as you can see off our port side, we have just taken lend lease on two more battlecruiser class airships, from the Soviets, the Riga and Narva.”

“And our enemies? What about this Orenburg Federation you’ve told me of?”

“Their fleet was originally composed of twenty-four ships, but recent engagements have reduced it to sixteen. Our present intelligence indicates they have no new construction underway, while we will have one more ship in the Tunguska class available soon, to be named Baikal.”

“Then they will still outnumber us sixteen to nine.”

“That ratio will soon be addressed. Sergei Kirov has agreed to move his Black Sea Fleet airships north and cede them to our control.”

“Big of him,” said Karpov. “Considering that it is our troops marching off to defend his capital now.”

“Our capital,” Tyrenkov corrected him quietly. “The Admiral has instructed me to refer to Moscow in that manner, as he sees the eventual reunification of the Soviet Union to include all of Siberia and the Orenburg Federation after Volkov is defeated.”

“Of course,” said Karpov, half attending to the briefing now, his mind seemingly lost in the clouds as he gazed out the port side window.

“Three more airships will join us within the week,” Tyrenkov continued, the Odessa, Rostov, and Sevastopol. The addition of these five Soviet ships, along with our newly built Baikal, brings our fleet to eleven battle worthy units. And we will have an advantage in firepower, even though the enemy might still outnumber us, because many of their airships are in the smaller cruiser class. The three new arrivals are flying directly to Ilanskiy as we complete the expanded mooring tower facilities at Kansk. Riga and Narva

will depart soon to bolster the Far Eastern Battle Squadron, which can also be quickly reinforced from Ilanskiy.”

“Very well.” Karpov waited. “What else?”

“Your land force in the west has presently been reduced to four rifle divisions. Three are still manning our fortified Ob river line east of Omsk, though the enemy has pulled all but two divisions from that sector for their operations against Volgograd. One division is now assigned as a permanent garrison at Ilanskiy, the 78th Siberian Rifles.”

“Garrison? What for?”

“Sir, the enemy airships can transport troops. I will brief you on the operations recently concluded, but they have the capability to repeat that if they so choose, and move the equivalent of a decent brigade sized formation by airships. A rifle division on defense is now deemed sufficient to hold Ilanskiy secure, and we do not anticipate any overland threat from the west. At the moment the principal concern of the Admiral is the Japanese.”

“Yes, and he’s taking my ship to the Pacific to see about that.”

“Our ship, sir,” came Tyrenkov’s subtle correction again. “The battlecruiser Kirov has now been designated the flagship of the Free Siberian Navy.”

Karpov smiled. “I suppose you will tell me all about that now.”

“Not much to speak of,” said Tyrenkov. “As you know, we have no real Pacific port of any size to accommodate a fleet, and no shipbuilding program or dry docks of any kind. But we do have three destroyers, five submarines, mostly lent to us from the Soviets. To there you can add several corvette class gunboats, coastal lighters, and a small merchant fleet operating in the Sea of Okhotsk out of Magadan.”

Karpov shook his head. “I still cannot believe the Japanese have taken Vladivostok.”

“That and much more, sir,” said Tyrenkov. “They control all of Primorskiy Province, southern Khabarovsk, and all of Amur Province. They have also occupied all of Sakhalin Island, and the Kuriles, as far as Kamchatka.”

“They control that as well?”

“They invaded southern Kamchatka six years ago, but do not have any significant military presence there now, perhaps only a few naval battalions at Petropavlovsk, as they perceive us powerless to do anything much about

their presence there, having no navy, and with land communications so forbidding in Koryak Province to the north. That may change with the outbreak of war. My intelligence indicates the Japanese have a plan to move against the Aleutians. In this case, we may see a reinforcement of their facility at Petropavlovsk.”

“Then we would be wise to move before they do,” said Karpov, his mind slowly warming up to the strategic situation in the far east. Do we have troops out there?”

“Twelve divisions, mostly in the vicinity of Irkutsk and Baikal, to keep an eye on the Japanese Kwantung Army. They’ve shown no inclination to push farther into our territory, and frankly, I do not think they will at this point. Kolchak was a fairly experienced naval commander, but not much on land. Thankfully, we have good generals there to mind those affairs, and you should know that these men will now answer to the Admiral, and by extension, to you.”

“To me? What about Kolchak?”

“He was eliminated.” Tyrenkov’s statement was as cold and heartless as the operation that ended Kolchak’s life. A simple hunting accident, or so it seemed, and so it was reported. Yet Vladimir Karpov was now named the head of the Free Siberian State, and, as he listened to Tyrenkov’s briefing, the Captain’s inner vanity and sense of self aggrandizement quickly embraced the notion that he was now much more than he once was, even though he stood in the shadow of his elder self.

“We must not underestimate the Japanese,” said Tyrenkov, qualifying his remarks. “Their Kwantung Group is still the largest and most prestigious Command in their entire army. General Tojo, the present Japanese Prime Minister, was once its Chief of Staff. During his tenure there, he increased Japanese penetration into Mongolia, and beefed up their presence near Lake Baikal. That army is presently commanded by General Yoshijiro Umezu, and his Chief of Staff is presently General Heitaro Kimura. It was he who led the Siberian intervention in 1918 to greatly expand Japanese occupation of our former territory. Now what was known as the Hokushin-rin, or ‘Northern Advance’ by the Japanese into Siberia, has been largely realized. It is my assessment that they will take a defensive posture, and concentrate their efforts in the South Pacific.”

“How many divisions do they have?” Karpov cut to the quick, the kind of

curt question Stalin might have asked, for in his mind that was all things came down to.

“Fourteen divisions, organized in a number of small armies, and two brigade sized armored formations, with numerous smaller supporting units.”

“Then we match them?”

“On paper, but their provision in artillery, armor, mobile units and air power greatly overshadows our Far East Command. We have been in defensive positions for the last decade. Oh, there was an engagement at Khalin Gol, but that was not much of anything, and it’s clear who now hold that ground. We’d like to see it a victory, but in reality, it is their army on our turf now, and not the other way around.”

“They have airships like ours?”

“No sir, they never extended that technology as we have. Their Kwantung Air Corps is nonetheless very powerful. We cannot match them in the air, by any means. Yet our airships are remarkably resilient to small arms fire. It will take a significant cannon to seriously bother one, at least 37mm or better. Otherwise, their present inventory of aircraft can annoy us, cause casualties, attack the gondolas and engines, which have only light armor. But we can out climb them, and mostly out gun them and make them pay a dear price for attacking us. They usually confine their air operations to ground support and reconnaissance.”

“That will change soon,” said Karpov. “They have a very well trained naval aviation corps. I will have to speak with... my brother, to plan our strategy soon.”

“I’m sure he is eager for that as well, sir.”

Karpov offered a thin smile. “Tyrenkov... The other men here. How will this be explained?”

“At the moment, they have been told nothing. In fact, they believe you are their commanding Admiral. And why should they think otherwise? In time, I believe it is the Admiral’s intention to present you as an identical twin brother, which is not very far from the truth, I suppose.”

The telephone on the desk rang, and Tyrenkov walked briskly to answer it. “Yes? Very well, I will inform the Admiral.” He set the receiver in its cradle, and smiled. “Our Air Commandant Bogrov has reported the ship is in sight. We will be making our close approach within thirty minutes.”

Karpov seemed very glad for the news, taking in a deep breath and

straightening his jacket. Kirov would soon be in sight again, beneath him, its tall battlements and radar domes gleaming in the wan sun. He went to the cabin window, smiling to see the telltale white wake of a warship ahead, and wishing he was back aboard.

"I suppose this is somewhat difficult for you," said Tyrenkov.

"Somewhat..."

"Do not fear, Admiral. You will settle into your role here soon enough."

"Yes," said Karpov, "that's a good way of putting it, isn't it—my role. This is all just nice theater for the moment, a little act to keep the men in line. Yes? Well, do not think of me as a simpleton, or a yes man, Chief Tyrenkov. I saw the wisdom in what my brother proposed, and I willfully accepted this post."

"Of course, sir."

"I did not think it came with such perks... that's quite a samovar there on the side table."

"A gift, sir, from Sergei Kirov."

"What? He gets twenty divisions and we get a samovar and five airships? It sounds like he got much the better of that deal." Even as he said that, the Captain knew quite well what else was on the scale in those negotiations—the ship, Kirov, the greatest concentration of raw military power on this earth."

"Did my brother know I was aboard that ship?"

"Sir? No, I do not believe he was certain. In fact, he thought this situation could not happen, that it would be either one or the other who must survive, but it never occurred to him that you would both survive the... incident."

"Then he did not scheme to take my command from me?"

"No sir. He schemed to take it from Admiral Volsky."

Karpov turned, not appreciating that remark, and Tyrenkov could perceive the frost as he spoke. "Make no mistake, Mister Tyrenkov. That was my command. Volsky was merely a figurehead aboard for live fire exercises. He was a desk Admiral in Severomorsk. The ship was mine."

Again, his need to use the past tense in that spoke unsaid volumes. Yes, it was once his, but no longer. He passed a moment with that, the uncomfortable feeling that he was again standing in another man's shadow, albeit his own shadow now in every real sense. Yet it nonetheless made him feel the same way when a superior rival was in the mix of his life, and his

instincts were always geared at finding a way around the man, a way to undermine and subvert him. But how could he do that now? Could he ever raise his hand against his very own self?

Yet the thought that he would muddle about, the outward sign of power that was really vested in his brother, was very disconcerting. He decided he would wait and see what developed, but wondered, deep down, what might happen should he ever come to a real disagreement with his other self?

As if to comfort himself, more than out of any need, he gave Tyrenkov an order. "Inform Bogrov that we are to hover over the aft quarter of the ship at 200 meters. No man is to be at any battle station, and all weapons will be unchambered and cold. Understood?"

"As you wish, Admiral." Tyrenkov noted one thing in the man. His tone and manner when he gave an order were identical to that of the Siberian. Even the way he finished the order with that single word, which Tyrenkov quietly repeated back for confirmation. "Understood."

Part III

Unmasked

“Wise were the kings who never chose a friend till, with full cups, they had unmasked his soul, and seen the bottom of his deepest thoughts.”

— ***Kahil Gibran***

Chapter 7

The Siberian was not satisfied. He had done a very thorough search of the ship's computers, and even spent time in the library, but he had come up empty. He was looking for any reference he could find to the British use of the word Geronimo in the second World War, but the data was very sketchy, and most of his hits related to more modern operations of the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan. In WWII, the American Airborne troops were said to have shouted out the name as they jumped from their planes. There was a liberty ship by that name, and a USS Geronimo, no more than an auxiliary fleet tug built in 1944. No other references were even that close.

There was one vague reference to a P-51 fighter pilot calling a British radio station code named Geronimo, but that was in 1944. Yet Tyrenkov had discovered the secret code handle some time ago, and informed him that the British were using it to refer to Kirov... So how could Fedorov have plucked it from his history books? Clearly his material must be much more detailed than anything available in the ship's library. He wanted to get to the bottom of this little mystery, and soon.

"This is the reference?" he said to Fedorov, who sat sheepishly across the desk from him in the command briefing room off the main bridge citadel on Kirov. There it was, a simple list of British code words of WWII:

GABLE - Eastern Fleet evacuation craft interception, 4/45

GABRIEL - Planned raid on Cotentin, 1942

GAMBIT - Midget submarine navigational markers, 6/44

GANGWAY - Planned Landing at Naples, Italy, 7/43

GAUNTLET - Allied landings & evacuation at Spitsbergen, 8/41

GEARBOX - Relief supplies to Spitsbergen, 6/42

GERONIMO – British radio operations center, London, 1941

"Where did you get this list? I could not find anything like it in the ship's library."

That put Fedorov on his guard, realizing that Karpov had been suspicious enough to investigate the matter himself. Would he believe this ploy?

"It was just a reference PDF I've had in my files for some time. This is

only the data for the letter G. I can show you the entire file if you wish, sir.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Karpov, scanning the rest of the page. “Interesting... Operation Grasp, the British takeover of French vessels in England, and a good name for that one. Guillotine, the transfer of RAF personnel and weapons stored to Cyprus. That was putting their heads under the blade, wasn’t it? The Germans have the place now, right along with Gibraltar and Malta... Gymnast, the planned landing in North Africa in February of 1942. Yes, they’ll have to have the skill of a gymnast to get past Gibraltar. That isn’t very likely now, is it Mister Fedorov?”

“That will depend on what happens with Rommel,” said Fedorov.

“I’ve heard the British have a new heavy tank in North Africa?”

“Sir?” Fedorov knew he had to play dumb on that score.

“Yes, I’ve had Nikolin listening in on long range shortwave chatter, and it was just a gurgle in the stream. Anything about that in your books, Fedorov?”

“Not that I recall, sir, unless that refers to the Matilda II tanks replacing the earlier models prior to Operation Crusader.”

“Crusader?”

“The planned British relief of Tobruk in November of 1941.”

“I see... Another code word. Well, I suppose that settles the matter. As for your research, have you been studying the Japanese plans for December as I asked?”

“Yes sir, I know that history fairly well.”

“Good. You and I will sit down and have a long talk about it. Now that the weapons transfer to the Siberian airships is complete, we can set our minds on the journey east.

That was the one thing Fedorov had been worried about. He had gone down to the Helo Deck to see Troyak and sound him out, trying to think of a way he might broach the subject he had just discussed with Doctor Zolkin. He remembered that mission with Troyak, along the Trans-Siberian rail, and how he had first told the Sergeant of his amazing experience on the stairway of Ilanskiy. Yet this was something else entirely. This Troyak would have no recollection of that, or any of their other missions where he served so ably—the rescue of Orlov with the Anatoly Alexandrov, and that incredible amphibious assault he led. Then there was the mission to the desert to rescue O’Conner, Operation Scimitar in Syria, the attack at Habbaniyah to relief

that beleaguered garrison, the raid at Palmyra.

All of that happened. The sergeant had already done things in 1940 and earlier that same year that he would now have no recollection of... Unless there was some strange way to trigger the memories, like that bandage had with Doctor Zolkin. That was very odd, something that had clearly survived from the old ship. How could it remain here, along with those files Zolkin had discovered? What did Time accomplish in this little shell game it was playing with the two ships. Clearly this was not the ship he had last set foot on. The presence of a fully functional battle bridge aft was testimony enough to that fact, and there was no other sign of damage. But yet... there were these strange remnants, fragments of the time he had lived through earlier, even digital records in Zolkin's medical computers.

It remained an inexplicable mystery, but also a sign of hope for Fedorov. Might he find something else like this that could serve as a trigger with Troyak? He decided to test his proposition, rustling the branches and leaves of memory on the tree to see if any fruit might fall.

"You're from Siberia, correct Sergeant?" he had asked Troyak.

"Chukchi Peninsula. Small town there."

"I hope all was well with home when we left."

"Still there," said Troyak, a man of very few words.

"I suppose you've heard a great many taiga tales over the years. Ever hear of a thing called the Devil's Teardrop?"

Troyak raised an eyebrow, his face registering recognition. "An old story," he said. "Tunguska."

"Tunguska? What do you mean?"

"The sky light. It goes back a good long way. Something fell, maybe a hundred years ago or more. Nobody knows what it was, but things were found on the tundra, or so it's been said."

"I see... May I ask what you think of our present situation? The Captain has asked me to brief the crew, and you and your men were high on my list. You've heard the news, yes?"

"Very strange," said Troyak. "Severomorsk..."

"Ah, yes, you were ashore, and also aboard the Tuman. I suppose it was quite a lot to swallow. I was the first to argue that we had slipped somehow. Who knows how? Probably that accident on the Orel. It's quite a mystery."

Troyak simply nodded, and Fedorov continued probing a bit.

“Sergeant, ever get the feeling you’ve lived through this before? They call it Déjà vu.”

“Can’t say that,” said Troyak, apparently oblivious.

“Can you handle what has happened to us? And your men?”

“I serve this ship and crew,” said Troyak, “on any sea, on any mission.”

“Yes, but could any of us have ever expected this would happen?”

“Never expect anything,” Troyak had said quietly. “Be ready for everything.”

Fedorov nodded, recalling his conversation with the dour faced Sergeant, and then realizing he could use something from that here. He had dodged a bullet just now with this doctored PDF of the code listings for the letter G. All he had done was extract that page from a document, add the reference to Geronimo, and re-saved it as a PDF. But it was clear to him that Karpov remained wary, and he would have to be very cautious. That question about the heavy tanks was a good example. Was Karpov probing?

Fedorov knew he needed some way of covering for any stumble he might make, and his question to Troyak was the perfect answer. He could act as if he were getting odd snippets of memory returning to him, a sensation of Déjà vu. Yet even as he embraced that thought, he realized it might also endanger him further. What if Karpov thought he might suddenly remember things that would be... Dangerous?

“So tell me, Fedorov...” said Karpov. “What will the Japanese be doing now concerning this plan against the Americans?”

“Training,” said Fedorov. “Their Chief of Naval General Staff, Osami Nagano, will not approve the plan until the 3rd of November, and in fact, the General Staff was against the operation from the very first. It was Yamamoto’s brainchild, and he had to threaten to resign to get the Navy to go along with his plans for Pearl Harbor.”

“What was the General Staff worried about?”

“It was a very risky operation,” said Fedorov. “Japan’s six best fleet carriers would have to make a two week journey east, risking detection the whole time, and they also argued the loss of those carriers would not provide enough fleet air cover for their offensive into Southeast Asia.”

“But Yamamoto got his way,” said Karpov, “and the Americans took their lumps. Strange that it had no real lasting effect on the Pacific war.”

“It did set the Americans back on their heels,” said Fedorov, “but they

recovered quickly, mostly because there were no carriers at Pearl Harbor, and the Japanese failure to destroy the fuel bunkers.”

“Where were their carriers?”

“Yorktown and Hornet were actually at Norfolk Harbor on December 7th. Wasp was at Bermuda.” At least in one telling of those events, thought Fedorov silently, until we arrived, but he could never voice that objection.

“Ah,” said Karpov, recalling how Fedorov had begged him not to attack the American carrier. He knew now that had been a mistake, but a part of him still exulted to the fact that he had dealt the real nemesis of the Russian navy such a telling blow.

“And the other carriers?” he asked.

“Saratoga was in San Diego. Lexington was delivering aircraft to Midway, and Enterprise was also out to sea, returning from Wake Island when the attack came in. Those were really the only carriers at risk, but there were 96 ships of all types in the harbor that morning, and they were not among them. The Japanese hit 21 of those ships, but only twelve took enough damage to keep them inactive for more than a few months. Three of those were the battleships they sunk, Arizona, Oklahoma and the old Utah. That ship was going to be used as a target ship for gunnery practice! The other battleships they hit, California, Tennessee, and West Virginia, all eventually returned to action.”

“So the Japanese didn’t really hurt the Americans that badly.”

“No sir. They really only killed about ten percent of the ships in Pearl Harbor, and those represented only about 15% of America’s total naval strength, except in the battleship category.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “So it wasn’t the decisive victory Yamamoto had hoped for. And what about those fuel bunkers? They were fools to overlook that.”

“That would have been more difficult to pull off than you might expect. The Japanese were carrying mostly armor piercing bombs, and very few incendiaries. They could have damaged the fuel farms, and it certainly would have caused trouble for the Americans, but the Japanese planner, Mori Genda, made no provision to attack those fuel tanks. Even if they had hit them, they were surrounded by dikes that would have contained the oil, and much of it would have been recovered.”

“Not burned?”

“That fuel is much harder to set on fire than one might think. And face it, sir, the United States would have moved mountains if necessary, and rebuilt those stores in a matter of months. If the Japanese had taken out a lot of their fleet oilers, however, that might have hurt them more than the loss of the fuel farm. Operations at sea required considerable refueling capabilities in the Pacific. And there were many other logistical targets the Japanese ignored—dockyards, repair facilities, machine workshops—and military targets like the submarine pens that would have counted for more than the old battleships they sunk. In fact, they attacked only 15 U.S. merchant ships between Hawaii and the West coast in December, and then only four more during the next ten months! Their mentality seemed to perceive those soft targets as unworthy of battle. Meanwhile, a single submarine they left untouched at Pearl Harbor, USS Tautog, would go on to sink 26 Japanese ships during the war. That is more damage than Nagumo’s attack inflicted on the US Navy.”

“Agreed,” said Karpov. “The damn submarines were the real threat.” The Captain found Fedorov’s knowledge refreshing. He had reached an accommodation with the man once before, and even saw him become a promising young officer. Yet his reluctance to disturb his history was his great downfall, as Karpov’s saw things. Fedorov didn’t realize it was simply impossible to preserve the course of events as he might read them in his books. In fact, there was no way to know for certain if any of what Fedorov had just said was really going to happen again. Tyrenkov was fairly certain the Japanese were still planning to attack Pearl Harbor, but the battle could play out very differently.

“What if those facts no longer hold here?” he asked Fedorov.

“That is a real possibility, sir. These are details that one might think would be lost in the wave of change that seems to have overtaken this time period. Considering that Russia is a divided state, why should Lexington be delivering planes to Midway, just as it was when the history remained intact?”

“My point exactly,” said Karpov. “I suppose that would be a matter for a good intelligence network to discover. Yet if the Japanese do carry out this attack, do you believe their route would change?”

“You mean the approach to Hawaii? No sir, they chose the most efficient route to evade shipping lanes and achieve the surprise they wanted. Yet that, too, contributed to their downfall. The attack so angered the Americans that

the outcome of the war was inevitable. But sir... May I ask why you are so interested in this operation? Are you planning to intervene?"

"A fair question, Mister Fedorov. This is not likely to be a pleasure cruise. We have no place to hang our hat and coat in the Pacific. The Japanese have Vladivostok. They call the place Urajio. Well, I would like to persuade them to make a graceful withdrawal, and to do so I will need some leverage."

"In what way, sir?"

At that moment there came a shudder, and the lights dimmed and fluttered. The two men passed a moment where each tried to ascertain what was happening, looking up at the overhead lights. Karpov quickly thumbed the intercom, punching up engineering.

"Chief Dobrynin, do we have a problem with the reactors?"

There was a brief delay. Then Dobrynin's voice could be recognized by its tone, but there was an odd static on the line that garbled what he was saying. Fedorov looked around, his pulse quickening. Then he remembered—Rod-25! He looked at his watch and saw the date, realizing that it was now the twelfth day since their initial arrival shift. How could he have forgotten this? Dobrynin was going to schedule rod maintenance today!

All this passed through his mind in an instant, as he chided himself for becoming so caught up with his subterfuge and quest for allies that he could have forgotten something so important. And yet, the ship had required the power of a nuclear detonation to disturb the continuum when they shifted before. That had clearly not happened, yet the static on the line made him very worried that something was amiss. Could the ship have reacted to Dobrynin's rod maintenance? The chief's voice finally cleared.

"... a flutter in reactor two. Yet all systems are still up."

"Then there is no danger?"

"No sir. The ship is safe."

A quiet knock on the door brought other news. It was Rodenko, stepping off the bridge where he was Senior Watch Officer in Karpov's absence.

"Captain sir..." he began. "You had better come to the bridge. That airship..."

"You mean Tunguska? What of it?"

"It's gone, sir. Damn thing just disappeared. All our bridge systems quavered at that same moment, but the airship... Well we can't even see it on

radar now sir. It just vanished!”

Chapter 8

Karpov was justifiably alarmed at the news, up on his feet immediately and off to the bridge. “Come along, Mister Fedorov,” he said quickly, all business now.

The Captain knew more than anyone else in this situation. He knew that Tunguska was, in and of itself, capable of doing exactly what Rodenko had described. Karpov had vanished over the English Channel in that storm, and found himself amazingly in the early 1900s again. And he had safely used Tunguska to navigate the stormy waters of Paradox Hour, the very ship that had saved his own life. His brother self was there now, along with all the weapons that had been recently loaded onto the sub-cloud cars for transfer to the Captain on the airship. This thought was most troubling as he took stock of the situation on the bridge.

“Rodenko, was there any sign of an explosion?” He wondered if a weapon had been mishandled, or worse, if someone got too curious and foolishly set one off aboard Tunguska.

“No sir. I’ve had no reports of that, and there is certainly no flotsam on the sea. But that airship is gone. It was as if a grey fog just swallowed the damn thing. Then we got that flutter in all the bridge systems, and the next thing I know the airship had vanished.”

“What about the other airships? What about Riga and Narva?”

“They diverted some time ago, and were not on our Fregat tracks for the last hour.”

“Mister Nikolin,” said Karpov quickly. “Hail Captain Korenko on the Narva at once. Use the channel I discussed with you earlier. Hail Commandant Bogrov on Tunguska while you are at it.”

“Sir,” said Fedorov cautiously. “There’s another possibility. We may have vanished. The airships might still be there, but if we moved again...” Fedorov had to be cautious here. He could not reveal any knowledge of Rod-25, at least not yet. “The ship, sir. Our position in time may not be stable yet. If we moved again we would see the airship vanish, but for them, the inverse would be true.”

“Anything Nikolin?”

“Nothing sir, but I’m getting some odd static on those comm-link channels.”

“Shift to your regular station monitor. Try to ascertain date and time.” Karpov’s mind was working very quickly now, trying to run down every possibility. “Mister Fedorov,” he said. You are very good at analyzing sun and moon data. Get busy. Try to find out what the moon is telling you this time. Fedorov was at the navigation station keying in numbers to his computer at once. He soon determined the basic information he needed.

“Sun up all day at our present position. Moon rising at 23:00—a waning gibbous, sir. But Captain... The position of the sun is not correct for our last recorded time. It’s a few minutes after 08:00, but look how high the sun is already. That’s a late afternoon sun, but I can still taste my eggs and sausage from breakfast. Sir, on this evidence alone, I would suggest we have moved again—in time.”

Karpov’s eyes narrowed. “I am going to speak with Chief Dobrynin. In the meantime, use that head of yours to analyze where we might be, given the conditions you can observe. Rodenko, you have the bridge. Notify me if Nikolin hears anything significant.

Fedorov knew exactly why Karpov felt so compelled to get to engineering now—Rod-25. He wanted to answer the same question Fedorov had in his own mind, and he was almost certain the Chief had run his maintenance procedure. Dobrynin pulled a control rod, and in its place he dipped in Rod-25... But Karpov’s order was the question now. Where in God’s name were they?

The Captain was still scanning the sea, his eyes almost desperate, but the ship was nowhere to be seen. He received the very same startling news that his elder self had been given, only this time Fedorov’s premise was well proved. Tunguska had been hovering about 3000 meters off the starboard bow of Kirov, and then, the watchman ran in and said he could no longer make out the ship. Karpov went to look himself, finding the best pair of field glasses he could get his hands on. There was a low mist on the sea, but

visibility was fairly good from their present altitude. He considered setting up one of the *Oko* panels they had just received from Kirov, but knew it would be days before he could properly rig the power generation to make a good match with the new equipment. They would have to rig all new wiring to get adequate power to the unit. It was not simply a matter of plugging the system in and turning it on.

That said, the *Topaz* radar on the airship should have been enough to produce a return on the battlecruiser, but it saw nothing on the sea at all, out to its maximum range of fifteen kilometers. He gave orders to descend for a closer inspection of the water, but nothing was found, no wreckage, no ship. Kirov was gone.

He had only just come to terms with the possibility that the ship had actually moved in time, and had no inkling that *Tunguska* also possessed that capability. So in this instance, the younger Karpov correctly assumed that it was the ship that had vanished. But how? He knew nothing of *Rod-25*, and there had been no accident this time, no explosion.

“What could have happened?” he said aloud.

Tyrenkov was at his side, equally perplexed. “*Bogrov* says we are still at our old coordinates, and conditions indicate all is as it was before.”

“Yes? Well my ship is not where it was, and a battlecruiser does not simply vanish like that! This doesn’t make any sense!”

Oh, but it does, he thought as soon as he had said that. I was on the ship when Kirov did exactly that, bringing me here to this impossible time and place. And now it’s gone again, vanished, leaving me marooned here. He could hear the words of his other self when the Siberian had tried to explain it to him.

“The ship must have slipped through some hole in time, and then here it was, in the middle of WWII. It did this and it did that, and then it slipped again. I’ll make a very long story short. Eventually that ship out there found its way to the year 1940, a little over a year ago, and it has been here ever since, until it slipped again, vanishing last May.”

So it has slipped yet again, thought Karpov, reaching the only conclusion that could explain what had happened. But where did it go? Has it slipped back to our own time in 2021? Has it slipped further into the past? As far as he could determine, with reports from Tyrenkov and *Bogrov*, they were still drifting over the Kara Sea in August of 1941. But the ship was no longer with

them...

He passed a dark moment, wondering whether his elder brother had planned this? Did he know how the ship eventually came to move in time? Could he even initiate such a shift at will? Is that why he was so adamant that he should be the one to command Kirov in these early days. Did he plan this, plan to shift away and return home to 2021, leaving me here? Has that bastard stolen my life as well as my ship? It felt strange to call his own self that, but at that moment, with Kirov and the Siberian both missing, he felt very estranged.

All these thoughts passed through his mind on a pulse of fear, and he could feel his anxiety rising, his heart beating faster. Tyrenkov was watching his reaction to all of this very closely now. Studying him, but saying nothing.

“Don’t just stand there. What do you know about all of this?”

“Only what our eyes have already shown us. The ship was there, and now it is gone. Yet we are where we belong. That can only tell me that the ship has moved, but how or where I cannot say.”

Karpov walked over to the man, leaning in and lowering his voice so Bogrov would not hear. “Tell me this was not planned, Tyrenkov. Did my brother say anything to you? Tell me, by God, or I’ll order your own damn security men to pluck out your eyes!”

“Sir! I knew nothing whatsoever of this. No. There was no plan that I was aware of.”

“Then you are telling me this was another accident? We saw no evidence of that—no man reported an explosion.”

“No accident, no explosion,” said Tyrenkov. “But things happen—this I have learned well enough.”

Karpov gave him a frustrated look. Then he took a long breath, his mind already spelling out the inevitable truth for him. Kirov was gone, it had moved again, and he was standing here on this god forsaken Zeppelin, like a passenger at a train station with the wrong ticket and at the wrong time. If the ship went home again, he wasn’t going there with it. If it fled into the past, then it had to have moved to a time before he first arrived here, or so he reasoned.

So here I am, the new Siberian Karpov, so wet behind the ears here that I’ll have icicles hanging from them when the cold sets in. Here I am, commander of the Free Siberian Air Corps, and more, the visible head of

state of all Siberia now. I was left in the lurch, but at least the perks are well appointed. Yet what in God's name do I do here?

He considered the possibilities, but had no immediate answers. All he could do was stare out the observation windows at that empty sea beneath them, and think of everything he had just lost.

*

Aboard Kirov, the Siberian was thinking of the very same thing. Every time the ship moved he was taking his whole life and pushing it out onto the roulette table, rolling the dice. It was all there, like a stack of red and white chips, his career, his carefully husbanded fleet, the power he had fought and scraped for these long years, all the friends, allies and enemies along the way. He knew what Dobrynin was going to say the moment he got there.

"Chief, what is our status?"

"Reactors are stable, Captain. We're in no danger. It was just a minor flux."

"Did you run a control rod maintenance routine recently?"

That struck Dobrynin as an odd question. "Now that you mention it, I did, sir. Did Mister Fedorov tell you about it?"

"Fedorov? He's not an engineer, Chief. What would he know about it?"

"Well he was in here asking me a lot of questions about the matter a few days ago. Said he wanted to watch and asked if I would message him before the next rod inspection. It's a fairly simple procedure, sir. One rod goes in while the other comes out. I used to run it every two weeks, but I always shave two days off that cycle when we're at sea."

Rod-25... The culprit had now been confirmed. Dobrynin had mindlessly gone about his business, and Karpov kicked himself mentally for not paying closer attention to the presence of that control rod on the ship, especially since he knew what it was capable of. Rod-25 had moved them yet again, and with no help from me this time, he thought. It was like a whisper of fog, just the same way we shifted away from Saint Helena, and then found ourselves in 1942 in the Timor Sea. Sometimes we go with a bang, and other times with a whimper... but where have we gone?

"Chief Dobrynin," he said, realizing he had important business here now.

“Can the reactors function properly if you don’t run these maintenance checks?”

“Well, yes I suppose so. It’s just standard procedure to run these inspections, but I haven’t found anything that raised my concerns for some time.”

“Good. Discontinue the inspections. You used Rod-25 just now, correct?”

Again, Dobrynin was surprised to hear this. “So Fedorov told you about that too?”

“Fedorov? Yes, tell me more about that now Chief.”

“Not much to say sir. He just seemed interested in the reactor maintenance, and wanted to see me run the procedure, but I was so busy this last week that I forgot to message him.”

“I see... You have more than one spare control rod aboard?”

“Yes sir, we’ve got number 26 and 27 stored.”

“And it was number 25 that you used today?”

“Yes sir, we took delivery on that before we left Severomorsk.”

“Remove it from the cycle and mount one of the other rods. Can you do that safely while we’re at sea?”

“I can, but I’ll need some time, and a good crew of engineers.”

“Do it, and also cancel all rod inspection maintenance until I discuss this matter with you again. If that’s a problem, come to me, But otherwise, replace and store Rod-25 and take no further action.”

“Aye sir, I’ll see to it immediately.”

Later that day, Nikolin had some answers that surprised everyone on the Bridge. He had been listening closely to stations to the south, fighting that odd flux that seemed to plague the airways. “It is still 1941,” he said, “but I’m getting a lot of stuff on the airwaves about the fighting. The Germans are much closer to Moscow. I heard the latest from the Kremlin a moment ago. It’s mid-September now!”

“Mid-September?”

“Yes sir. That’s what I’m hearing from Radio Moscow. Something about an Operation Typhoon. I’ll try to pick up BBC and verify.”

Karpov looked at Fedorov now. “Then you were correct, Mister Fedorov. We’ve done the moving. Does your sun and moon data bear this conclusion out?”

“The moon won’t be up for several hours,” said Fedorov, “and that will be the real data I need.”

“Very well, walk with me please.” He gestured to the weather deck, and it was clear that he wanted to step outside for a private chat with Fedorov. “Let’s take one last look at the sea.”

Once out on the deck, Fedorov noted how the Captain made a point to close the hatch, effectively sealing the two of them off. He had his field glasses, raising them in the manner he so often did, scanning the sea and sky around them while Fedorov waited.

“Dobrynin says the reactors are stable,” he said quietly. “He also says you were down there a few days ago asking him a lot of questions...”

“Sir? You mean in engineering? Yes, I was there a few days ago. Just curious as I was passing through that deck.”

“Just curious,” said Karpov. “Yes, you wanted to know the next time the Chief planned to dip his wick in the rod inspection cycle. You were down there to check on our little friend, weren’t you. You were down to check on Rod-25.”

Fedorov had the sinking feeling that Karpov’s guard was up again, and something warned him of danger here. Then the Captain slowly lowered his field glasses, turning to him with a smile.

“Yes, Fedorov, Rod-25 was your business that day, wasn’t it. You know, that was a nice little trick you pulled with that code list. It was very clever, and had I not found this in your quarters, buried in a drawer, I might have just believed you.”

Karpov reached into his jacket pocket and handed Fedorov something. His eyes widened when he saw what it was—the newspaper they had recovered from the Australian coast while cruising in the Timor Sea....

Chapter 9

“Going to play dumb again?” said Karpov. “Really, Fedorov, you should be more careful where you leave things. Going to pretend you know nothing of this, or of Rod-25?”

The newspaper was in English, a language where Fedorov had only a limited comprehension. But he recognized it immediately, and Karpov could not fail to see that on his face when he handed it to him. His shock at the discovery was real and unmistakable, for he had no idea that object existed, and could not think of how it would still be in his desk drawer where he knew he had tucked it away long ago—on the old Kirov, the first ship. It was another strange remnant from their previous journey, a part of the same mystery that possessed Doctor Zolkin when he found that bloodied bandage.

We found that newspaper in that cottage off the Australian coast, he thought, and it told us how the war started—how Key West died in the nexus of all that tension in the Pacific, and set all the dominoes falling. Nine days falling... the beginning of that terrible war Karpov and the ship had been spared by the wrath of the Demon Volcano.

Karpov fixed him with a steady stare now. “You know what this is, Fedorov. No sense in wearing the mask any longer. You know who I am as well, surely not the Captain you left when you went ashore at Severomorsk. And by God, you know everything else along with that, don’t you. You’ve known it all along. Was Volsky in on the act as well? What a masterful little performance you two put on!”

Fedorov realized that it was futile to pretend ignorance any longer. He had been justifiably wary of this man, for Karpov had darkened and aged in the gyre of terror over these long years. He was more sinister now than he had ever seemed, and the obvious danger in that was enough to make any man cautious. And yet, Fedorov was not the same man he once was either. Orlov knew that, and now Karpov must know it as well.

“Alright Captain, you are correct. There isn’t any point in the two of us jousting any further. Yes, I know everything—all of it, everything we both lived through. You’ll ask me how, because by god, no other man on this ship

knows a whisper of it—no, not even Volsky. I was convincing enough with my sun and moon data to persuade him we had actually moved in time, and he was finally believing me. Then you came along...”

“Most inconvenient for the two of you,” said Karpov with a thin smile. “Yes, I came along, to reclaim what was rightfully mine. Then you knew something was amiss the moment you set eyes on me, didn’t you. Tyrenkov couldn’t discern any subterfuge, and your act was so good that you were starting to fool even me. But little threads kept dangling, little breadcrumb trails that led me to increase my suspicion. You were trying too hard in the beginning, and I learned what you said and did from my brother. You know about him too. Yes? Of course you do. When I learned you had used the word Geronimo, I was quite suspicious, but I bought your little story. When I was told Tovey wanted to speak with you directly, well, I just assumed he wanted the man he once knew. By the way, Fedorov, where is that nice young navigator? Did he survive, just like my brother and I survived?”

Fedorov shrugged. “No,” he said sullenly. “And God’s truth, I have no idea how I survived. Am I that man, yet with all the memories of what we experienced come to full bloom in my head? No one else remembers anything. Why only me?”

“A good question,” said Karpov. “So you know everything then—all my dirty business in that first attempt to take the ship. You told Volsky that, didn’t you.”

“I did. What would you have done in my place?”

“Probably the same,” said Karpov. “You were looking for allies, and my little brother was already on to you. In fact, he thought you some kind of spy or double agent, and I suppose he was correct. Well, it’s too late. Volsky is gone, and the ship is finally mine again. He can commiserate with Admiral Golovko, or even hop a train or plane to Moscow to plead his case with Sergei Kirov, but it will do him no good. The ship is mine—ours—as I mustn’t leave my brother out of this. I’m back where I belong, and intend to stay. The only question now is what to do about you?”

“Going to set Grilikov on me now?” said Fedorov. “Your other self tried that with Orlov, but I stood my ground. I won’t be bullied, Karpov. I’m not the little navigator you thought you could cow so easily.”

“No,” said Karpov, “you’re the conniving little shit who couldn’t take no for an answer and decided to come after me in a goddamn submarine!” The

anger flared, but Fedorov remained calm.

“What else was I supposed to do?” he said quietly. “You wouldn’t listen to reason, Captain... Or is it Admiral now?”

“Frankly, it is Admiral now, and well earned,” said Karpov. “Have you looked at a goddamned map since your last little sortie aboard Kirov? Notice anything wrong? We were just discussing the Japanese, and who can we thank now for the fact that they’re sitting on Vladivostok and most of our eastern provinces there? How’s that little crack look in your mirror of history? If you and Volsky had kept your nose out of things, I would have prevented all of that long ago.”

“What? In 1908?” said Fedorov. “You still think you were Russia’s guardian angel? Do you have any idea how dangerous your actions were? Yes, I’ve looked at a goddamned map, and what I see there is as much your handiwork as my own. You attacked the Japanese! Why? Because you could, that’s why. You thought they would make easy prey back then, and why not? You were Captain of Kirov, the mightiest ship in the whole world. You were going to set everything straight, and restore Russia to her rightful place as a Pacific power. Well, you told me it simply wasn’t possible to set things right any longer. Didn’t you?”

“I said you couldn’t set them back to the way they once were,” said Karpov quickly. “No. You can’t make things fall back into line for your precious history, Fedorov. But you can write it anew. You just have to have the guts for that, as you apparently do not.”

“Captain... I won’t call you a megalomaniac if you won’t call me a coward.” He fixed Karpov with the same steady eyes, his resolve building now that the game was finally over.

Karpov laughed. “Fair enough,” he said. “Let’s not make this personal, but you have to understand that I had a long time to think about what you and Volsky did to me.”

Fedorov shook his head. “If you entrusted this ship to Rodenko, having urgent business elsewhere, what would you do if he pulled up anchor and sailed off to rewrite history the way he saw things? I don’t think you’d simply give him your blessing and let that go. What did you expect the Admiral to do? You disobeyed a direct order! Yes, you feel we betrayed you, and I can see that easily enough. But have you ever stopped to think how we felt? He gave you this ship, entrusted you with its power, and the lives of every man

aboard. What happened on the bridge off Oki Island? I wasn't there, but I learned what happened with Rodenko and Zolkin, and then finally the whole bridge crew standing up and saying no to you. But that isn't a word you ever could hear without pain."

Karpov took a deep breath. "I know what I did, and what I was going to do. You see, I remember everything too, Fedorov. I remember the Wasp, and the Mississippi, and the fat lip I gave Captain Tanner's carrier battlegroup after that. I did a few things after that volcano went off they you may not even know about."

"Yes," said Fedorov, "you got the other two ships that shifted back with you blown to hell."

"They died fighting for Russia, as I hope I will if the enemy ever betters me. But that won't happen now."

"Oh? What are you going to do? I asked you earlier, as the naive little historian you were chatting with. Now I ask you man to man. What are you planning here?"

"The same thing I told you earlier. Japan has something that belongs to me, and my presence here on this ship should tell you just how I feel about things like that."

"You're going to attack the Japanese?"

"If I must."

"And then what? You think they'll simply bow and cede back all our occupied territories? Captain, Admiral, or is it Mister General Secretary now, the one thing they all have in common is your tendency to underestimate your enemy. I know something of what happened in 1945. We uncovered things when we were on your trail. You underestimated the American Navy then, and the men on Admiral Golovko and Orlan paid the highest possible price for that. You underestimated the skill and determination of Admiral Tojo, and allowed your ship to come within range of the Japanese guns. And yes, you've underestimated me, and for a good long while."

"Don't be so sanctimonious, Fedorov. Yes, I know you want to stand there and point a finger at me, but remember that map. Guess who sits on a third of old Mother Russia now? Ivan Volkov! How in God's name did he find himself in 1908? How did you ever get back there yourself?"

"Time was pulling us all to that moment," said Fedorov. "You know about Ilanskiy. I discovered it by pure chance, and I suppose Volkov

discovered it by chance as well, only 80 years later! That was when I realized the stairway moved in both directions, both forward and backwards in time.”

“But it was you who insisted on the mission to look for Orlov,” said Karpov. “I was right there when you pitched it to Volsky. So before you get to shoveling shame on me for the state this world is in, take a look in that cracked mirror at yourself. I had to do that a short while ago. You have no idea what it was to face the paradox we were both approaching, but I survived. When I learned the ship had returned, and was right there again in the Norwegian Sea, imagine my surprise. All I could think about was getting here.”

“To set things right again,” said Fedorov, “to get your little pound of flesh? Then you found the whole crew was clueless as to your duplicity and subterfuge.... Except for me.”

“Two can play at that game, as you’ve clearly demonstrated. Come on, Fedorov, what are we quibbling about here? Was I angry when you and Volsky interfered earlier? Of course! But that isn’t going to happen this time. Volsky isn’t going to find another submarine. Which reminds me... Whatever did happen to Gromyko?”

“We don’t know,” said Fedorov, quietly carrying a little guilt for all of that as well. “He was in the thick of that last engagement in May, and I think he fired a special warhead. There’s a lot I must tell you.”

“There... I like the sound of that much better,” said Karpov. “There’s a lot I must tell you as well. Don’t you see, Fedorov? Here we stand, two men who know what they have done, with the world broken at our feet. I know my part in it, as you know yours. God knows, that fool Orlov has a hand in all of this along with us. As for Volsky? That man intended only good, I see that now. He took your council, and did what he could, but things are what they are now, and he’s no longer a factor. Yet you and I still matter here. You and I matter a very great deal.”

“I hear a sales pitch coming,” said Fedorov.

“No, you hear reality talking now, and you goddamn well know it. Do you think your presence here, with all those memories intact, is mere coincidence? I see things otherwise, and my own presence here as destiny. You have a destiny too, Fedorov. We can either be yin and yang, arising mutually, opposing one another, yet also defining one another, or we can be one in this affair, and then really set our minds on making things right.”

"I thought you believed that wasn't possible," said Fedorov.

"Anything is possible. Look... Things are changing, right now, this very moment. Did you hear what Nikolin said about Operation Typhoon? The goddamned Germans are hammering at the gates to the Kremlin! What if they get through this time? You met Sergei Kirov, as did I. You know he's a man worth fighting for. And by God, I gave him men and resources to build five Shock Armies, and my full support."

"Yes, for this ship..." Fedorov could not abate the quiet accusation in his tone.

"True enough," said Karpov. "That much is obvious. But it doesn't change anything about what I said. You want a real villain when you aren't busy worrying about me? Try Ivan Volkov. That man has already mounted two raids on Ilanskiy, and thank god I stopped him both times. He knows, Fedorov. He went down those stairs looking for you, and now he finally knows how he ended up where he did. Now then, imagine Volkov in control of Ilanskiy. Where does he go? The man is hand and glove with Adolf Hitler! What does he do to rewrite history to his liking? You want that?"

"Of course not."

"Well, neither do I! I want the Japanese gone from everything they took from us, and Volkov gone with them. I want all the Caucasus back, and Kazakhstan and all the other turf Volkov is sitting on in his little Orenburg Federation—not for myself, but for our nation! The only difference between me and you is that I'll fight for what I want, and by God, I'll win if you'll help me instead of trying to undercut everything I do. It has to be one way or the other, Fedorov. You were Captain of this ship once, and you know what we can do with it. You had no qualms about attacking the Kriegsmarine. Yes, I sunk the Wasp in a moment of misguided anger. You tried to stop me back then, but I wouldn't listen to you, but I'll listen now. With all you know, we can do what has to be done here, and if it ever would be possible to set things right in this world we've broken together, then we must do that together—as one, as a team. Fight me now, and we'll only break more China."

Fedorov thought back to the time they served and fought together, with Karpov his sworn lieutenant, Starpom under his command, and the Japanese Navy between the ship and any hope they ever had to get home again.

"I was Captain here once," he said.

"And I served under you," said Karpov, "willingly."

“Yet what did we accomplish?” Fedorov gave him a long look.

“We fought,” said Karpov. “Yes, we killed men and ships, and saved our own. And then, when we finally made it back home, I saved Key West. Believe me, that wasn’t easy for me. You said a moment ago that you were not the same man. That I can clearly see. Well, I’m not the same either. This war has a way of squeezing a man dry. It’s the most desperate time we ever faced on this earth, and I’ll admit I’ve left pieces of my soul, the man I was, on many a battlefield over these last few years. This is what I am now... older, more wizened, leaner, more dangerous, more calculating, smarter, able to see and do things my younger self never could, and knowing what restraint is as well. You’re different too, Fedorov. I killed the Wasp, but you killed Graf Zeppelin—or are you going to say that was all Volsky’s fault?”

Fedorov knew what Karpov was saying now, he could feel it as well. “You’re right,” he said at last. “Remember that fight we had with Yamato? You told me it would get easier, but it never has. That still hasn’t stopped me from doing what I had to do. This war put the same question to each and every one of us.”

“Correct,” said Karpov. “You chose sides, just as I did. You chose sides and then you realized what you had done, because guess what—there’s a war on here, and once you take up the sword and banner, you better damn well know how to fight.”

Part IV

The Rising Storm

“It was the noise of ancient trees falling while all was still, Before the storm, in the long interval between the gathering clouds and that light breeze, which Germans call the Wind's Bride.”

— Charles Godfrey Leland

Chapter 10

Yes, there was a war on, and there were men who knew how to fight taking up those banners and swords. Oberst Gruner was one of them, as he spied the location on the map where he wanted to go that morning, a high hill labeled 860 to his northwest. As commander of the recon battalion of Model's 3rd Panzer Division, he had been ordered to look for a way around the heavy resistance encountered at Plavsk, astride the main road and rail line to Tula. The ground was not difficult, and the elevation change was so gradual that he could take his armored car right up the gentle slope, making for the highest point he could see.

When he got there, he stepped out of the vehicle, his boots settling into the mud, and walked up to the top of the hill. From this ground he should get a very good view of what the division was really up against, and he slowly removed his leather gloves, cleaning the light mist from the lens of his field glasses. His adjutant, Leutnant Meyers, followed in his wake, buttoning his overcoat against the morning chill, and squinting into the grey sky.

It was the time they called the Wind's Bride, the calm before the storm. The rain was building on the horizon, a pallid smear of clouds gathering heavily in the low overcast. He could smell it, and knew it would bring nothing but just a little more misery when it came time to move the rest of his division up. From the brow of the hill, he could dimly see the lines of 10th Motorized to his north, which had been jogging right the last several days to make contact with Guderian's main force in 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions. The land flowed off towards Plavsk, which was now due east of his position, a patchwork of muddy brown fields, thin green woodland, and clusters of small farms, all long since abandoned as the tide of war had finally reached them, like the oncoming edge of a great fire.

Lifting his field glasses to his eyes, he peered through the thickening drizzle, seeing the solid line of infantry positions in and around the town to the east, the thin smoke from their morning fires coiling up to be lost in the grey. North of the town he saw more troops along the line of a thin brown river, and he could hear the dull mutter of machine gun fire, knowing

Loeper's 10th Motorized must have run into something there.

So his worst misgiving had come to roost on his shoulder that morning. The mad dash was over. There was no longer an open flank his column could swing around to unhinge the enemy defense, and for a cavalry man, a long time officer in the reconnaissance battalion, finding himself looking at what could now become a front locked battle, was most disheartening. The Russians were here in force, and they were going to hold the line of that river, and fight.

He looked at Meyers, tugging at his gloves to adjust the fit again. "Loeper has a battle on his hands."

"That's what he gets for treading on our turf," said Meyers. "What's gotten into him? He was supposed to take Belev, and set up that depot for supplies."

"He's done that, then he moved east to look for us. Didn't like what he saw building up out west. Word is the Russian 5th Army has moved into defensive positions there, and they may even be pushing our way."

"All the more reason for 10th Motorized to be watching our left flank," said Meyers. "Now look at him, he's well north of our column!"

"We got up infantry support at Belev, so Loeper is here. Don't complain, Lieutenant. We may be glad for that by nightfall. The Russians are here too, and in good numbers. They must have a full Rifle Corps along that river north of Plavsk. Loeper has his work cut out for him—and so do we."

Gruner trudged back to his vehicle to radio KG Munzel, where the panzers were waiting for his report, about six kilometers to the south.

"Bad news this morning," he said coolly. "There is no way around the town to the north. 10th Motorized is already there, and I spotted what looks to be at least two more rifle divisions all along the river north of the town. I think he's engaged."

"How is the ground?" came Munzel's reply.

"A lot of mud here at the base of the hill, but still fair along the secondary road. If you want to move, do it now, because a curtain of rain is moving in. There's a small copse of woodland between my position and the river. I'm going to move forward to scout that area, and see if I can reach hill 804. That will put me in contact with Loeper's division."

"Very well, we're coming. Leave a squad there to signal us as we approach."

Munzel was quick to move, sending Rhun's III battalion over a dry stream bed that might soon be a morass of mud if he did not take Gruner's good advice. By mid day he had reached the woodland Gruner had scouted, and paused to wait for KG Wellmann's infantry. Westhoven would follow, and then Model with the rest of the division support units. He already knew just what the General was going to order, an attack after dusk, right through those woods and across that river where Gruner had spotted the fresh Russian infantry. It was going to be a very long night.

Off to the right, KG Seiden of 4th Panzer Division was advancing up the main road from Gorbachevo where the fighting had been so bitter the previous day. The Soviet Guardsmen there had fallen back on the much larger town of Plavsk, and it was now clear that this was the main enemy line of resistance. Model met with Langermann at mid day to explain his plan.

"If you can put in a decent attack on the town, my division is in a good position to strike across that river to the north—that is if the rain is not too bad this afternoon."

"What about Loeper?"

"He's already engaged—put in a well organized attack further north that seems to be making some progress."

"Good, but we should not wait for daylight. We must attack tonight, and take Ivan while he's settling in for supper!"

"Agreed." There was a glint in Model's eye, for that was already what he had decided to do. "We will eventually get support from the remainder of the Panzergruppe, but it may be several days before they get here, or weeks. 17th and 18th Panzers are still well south of Orel. In the meantime, we cannot sit on our thumbs and let the Russians dig in. We must keep pushing."

Loeper's division had run into two rifle brigades of the 1st Siberian Shock Army. They had come in by rail that very morning, taking a thin spur that ran from the main line up to a copper mine along the river near the small hamlet of Chrikovo. Now they were suddenly hit by six German battalions, the infantry dismounted and storming over the river to force the 9th Brigade back in some disorder. But near sunset, the sound of an infantry charge rolled over the misty fields, and the whole of the 329th Rifle Division, which had been in reserve just behind the river, was thrown at 1/20th Grenadier Battalion.

The attack was well supported with artillery, and the battle was hot and

furious, with the Germans forced back to the river by dusk, where they reorganized to put in a counterattack timed with the surprise attack KG Munzel was planning. All that afternoon, into the gloaming of sunset, the whole of 3rd Panzer Division had moved again, grateful that the enemy was on the run, or so they first believed. By dusk Model was up on the same hill Gruner had surveyed the ground from that morning, listening to the sound of battle in the low, flat valley below.

He waited until Langermann's attack hit Plavst head on, hoping to catch the Russians at dinner, but he found them digging in a row of stone houses at the edge of town, and it was clear this would be no easy fight. For a while, Model watched the stream of tracers from machine guns and tank fire at the edge of the town, and in the fading light, it looked as though the squat houses and barns were chunks of charcoal, as the edge of the town slowly began to burn.

Gruner's report had been very accurate, even his weather forecast. It had begun to rain more heavily in the late afternoon, and in places, pools of dirty brown water were forming on the tracks made by the division's passing, the sodden ground becoming a thick, viscous mud. He saw a truck full of support troops get stuck, the men leaping out and putting their shoulders to the back of the vehicle as they labored to push it forward. He shook his head.

How do the Russians do anything here, go anywhere in this endless country? There are so few good roads, and all the rail lines are useless until our construction battalions convert them to true European gauge. And now comes this damnable rain and mud. I'm a panzer leader. I make my bones with shock and maneuver, and under these conditions, we may soon find ourselves fighting the last war again, digging trenches, sewing mines and wire, and waiting for the artillery. This will not be as easy as OKW might think, yet the troops are still in good spirits, and they fight hard.

With skilled honed in a score of engagements over the long summer, the German Panzergrenadiers put in a persistent, and effective attack. KG Seiden pushed into the town, fighting house to house, where the withering fire of their machineguns proved most helpful in suppressing the Russian infantry while the assault teams rushed forward, sprinting from low stone walls, across the muddy streets. By midnight they had pushed into the town center, with buildings blackened and burning on every side, and a thick pall of heavy smoke overlying the whole scene.

The Russians were stubborn, and they fought hard, but they were not supermen. These were the Guardsmen who had already fought at Mtsensk days earlier, and then made the long grudging retreat up the main road through Chern and Gorbachevo to reach this place, tired, hungry and needing rest. KG Wellmann had his two battalions just north of the town, and in spite of their fatigue, the Guardsmen joined a regiment of the 328th Rifle Division and launched a midnight counterattack against Wellmann's 2nd Battalion.

That night there was intermittent fighting along the whole river line, extending some 20 kilometers north of the town. At dawn the Germans found out what they had run into, not simply the blocking force they had been chasing up the road, thinking to hold one last time at Plavsk, but now an entire new Soviet Army. Von Loeper had sent his grenadiers across the river only to run into the three divisions of the 17th Siberian Rifle Corps. In the town itself, the remnants of 5th and 6th Guards Rifle Divisions were still battling for the main square, and in the south, Kuzma Podlas was suddenly much more than he had seemed the previous day when the Germans had routed his unprepared divisions at the village of Ulyanovka.

Kuzma Podlas had not come alone.

His was the first rifle corps to arrive, tramping up the long road from Yevremov to the southwest, as there were no trains available on the main lines to Tula. He had boldly walked right into the teeth of the German advance earlier, and paid a very high price, but there were two more corps behind him, Morozov's 57th, with a pair of fresh rifle divisions, and Dubkov's 8th Cavalry Corps, with two cavalry divisions and the army artillery. The 1st Red Banner Army from the Far East Command, troops that had been slated to fight on the upper Volga, had finally arrived where the war mattered most, and now it would join the 1st Special Rifle Corps, and the 1st Siberian Shock Army. Sergie Kirov had bet heavily on those numbers, and the three ones were now massing like a brooding storm on Guderian's front.

Model was watching it come from the vantage point of Hill 864, even while Langermann of the 4th Panzer Division studied the situation from his outpost to the south. Little by little, an awareness was building that this was something much more than a temporary check. Things had been stacking up, like bad cards from a greedy dealer, one after another. First there was that unexpected bloody nose for Eberbach at Mtsensk, and for a man with a

rubber nose, that was saying something. Those new Soviet T-34s were going to be a great deal of trouble if they were ever produced in numbers.

Yet it was more than that, more than hubris, or the sudden appearance of new enemy hardware. There was something in the wind, something on the rain, and it was a difference Langermann and Model could both feel. The Russians were fighting now. They knew their backs were up against the wall, and they were fighting with a newfound will, sharpened with the edge of desperation.

When the Siberian Guard Corps arrived the following day, the situation would suddenly turn from difficult to desperate for the Germans as well, prompting Model to make his plaintive call to Guderian...

"We have hit a brick wall south of Tula," he had said. "These are fresh troops, a new army, and they fight like wildcats. My men have been in active defense all morning, and still they come. We are holding out, but many of our positions have been swamped by these incessant attacks."

"Tanks?" asked Guderian.

"Not many," said Model, "but they do not even need them. I must be facing at least five strong rifle divisions, and they have good artillery support. Under the circumstances, any further advance is impossible, and I will need help—the sooner the better."

"Very well," said Guderian. "Hold on. I will see what I can do as soon as possible."

That had always been enough in the past. The Generals had always been able to do something when difficulties were encountered, reach into their haversacks and pull out a new division, and Guderian knew exactly where he would look for one that day. Hoth was supposed to be right behind him, with two fresh Motorized Korps, and plenty of armor, and that was the man Guderian called, kicking the can further down the road.

"I'm told you have all the new tanks, Hoth. Don't be stingy! I need them south of Tula. Can you send me anything?"

The General was very pleased when his appeal was answered without hesitation. "Seventh Panzer has been refitting since early August, and it received some of the newer tanks. I have much less opposition on my front, so you can have the entire division. For that matter, you can have Schwerepanzerbrigaden 101, as well. They are much closer to your operation than my main line of advance. I will cut the orders immediately."

Schwerepanzerbrigaden 101... thought Guderian. That was the new unit Halder had crowed about at the meeting, the Big Cats, as all the officers were now calling the new tanks starting to make their way to the front. That unit has the cream of all the new heavy tanks we have managed to build in the last several months. Well, now we will see how well they hunt. In the meantime, I have a battle on my hands, and I had better get forward to see what Model and Langermann are worried about.

Mtsensk was one thing, but the action now underway would dwarf that engagement, and leave a lasting impression on Guderian for some time. For he could feel it too, feel it with some inner intuition that was an old tanker's sixth sense. Things were changing.

We are reaching the high tide mark, he thought, and the sea behind us is weary. After chasing the Russians for over a thousand miles, winning one engagement after another, the real war is now beginning for the 2nd Panzergruppe, and every man here who survives it will never forget these hours and days, for the rest of his life.

Chapter 11

Generaloberst Herman “Papa” Hoth would come to regret his generosity. A wizened and experienced officer at the age of 56, he nonetheless had a great deal of personal energy, and confidence in the deadly craft of armored warfare in which he specialized. He had led the XV Motorized Korps into Poland, ran on Guderian’s right shoulder in the mad dash across France. Now, as commander of 3rd Panzergruppe, he was moving up behind Guderian’s advance on Orel with seven divisions in two Motorized Korps. The German mobile forces were bypassing the stubborn Soviet defenses around Bryansk, threatening to create a pocket in the Russians did not withdraw, while also posing a growing threat to Moscow itself on this axis.

For this operation, Hoth had grouped three divisions in each Korps, holding one in his Panzergruppe Reserve, the newly outfitted 7th Panzer. He had watched Rommel’s 7th Panzer outpace all others in France, and was elated when the ‘Ghost Division,’ as it was called, had followed him to Russia. It was to be one of the first regular Army Panzer Divisions to be refitted with Germany’s newest tanks. But in a moment of camaraderie, he had given the elite unit away.

Hoth once had them all, the Leopards, Lions, and even a few Panthers added to the mix for early combat trials. Most were grouped together in the new 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade, a dreadful formation that contained all of Germany’s latest tank designs. There were 36 new PzKfw-35, Leopards, a fast, well armored tank with a new 50mm gun that was meant to replace the entire Panzer III series, and become the new recon tank of the Wehrmacht in all divisions. Next came a single medium battalion of 24 prototype PzKfw-V Panthers, all experimental vehicles at this point, yet a design that was to prove particularly effective for Germany’s mainstream medium tank. But the real thunder in the brigade was in the 48 PzKfw-55L Lions, monsters that would rival the legendary Tiger in ferocity in this retelling of events.

7th Panzer was not so lavishly equipped, but it was lucky even to be on the list at this early stage. All the units in the elite SS Korps had been

clamoring for the new tanks, and were getting them sooner than any other divisions. Hermann Goering had curried favor with Hitler, and secured a heavy battalion for his Herman Goering Panzer Division. And when it came time to use the last available tanks in the initial production run, Hitler personally chose Rommel's old outfit, the Ghost Division, which was given 36 Leopards in the light battalion, a full medium battalion of 36 newly designed PzKfw-IVF tanks, with a much better long barreled main gun. And a single heavy company of 18 Lions.

When Guderian ran into the tough 1st Siberian Shock Army south of Tula, his plaintive call to Hoth for support saw him send both of these newly outfitted units over to 2nd Panzergruppe, mostly because all his other divisions were much further west, and not following Guderian as Halder had promised. Now he regretted his generosity, as his advance had been pulled further to the left, and he soon found himself involved in an entirely new operation, with all thoughts of supporting Guderian's headlong drive for Moscow suddenly forgotten.

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As it so often happened in war, events on the ground savaged the carefully laid plans of the General Staff at OKW. The Soviet Smolensk defense group had been encircled, and what looked to become a protracted battle to reduce it was aided by a frantic and desperate attempt by the Russians to break out of the trap.

"They would have been much wiser to sit in their prepared positions and force us to pry them out," said Halder. "As it stands, we have them on the run, and out in the open now."

"They tried to force a breakout along the main road to Moscow," said von Bock, "but we stopped them. The early reduction of that force now allows us to plan an even bigger kesselschlacht centered on the city of Kirov."

All the other Generals around the table knew Hitler would love that city delivered to him before winter set in. The Russians had built a heavily fortified line, the Kirov Line, stretching from Vyazma astride the main road to Smolensk, and south 130 kilometers to the big industrial bastion of Kirov.

From there it stretched another 90 kilometers south to Bryansk, another vital hub of industry and rail communications for the entire Western Front. Both these cities had been the object of German attention in the latter stages of Operation Barbarossa, which was to have concluded with their ultimate capture. But the Russians had poured enormous resources into that defensive belt, while also stubbornly holding out just north of Smolensk.

In the middle south, when Guderian's 2nd Panzergruppe broke out of Kiev, the experienced General took one look at the map and determined he would make no attempt to throw his panzers at Bryansk. The city was bisected by a marshy banked river, and fringed on every side by thickets of woodland.

"That is work for infantry," he muttered to his Chief of Staff when he got the order to drive north on Bryansk. "I'm going to bypass the damn place and take Orel instead. The terrain there is much more open, and suitable ground for fast mobile operations. And Orel is served by a good rail line all the way back to Kiev. Once we convert that, it will become the primary supply conduit for any further operations."

It was his opinion that once enfiladed by his swift moving panzers, the Russians would be forced to give up Bryansk, and losing its heavy southern anchor, this would in turn cause the collapse of the entire Kirov Line, but he was proved wrong. The Russians refused to budge, manning their heavy fortifications until the German 9th Army pushed up to Bryansk. In the center of the line, they held the Roslavl salient for two weeks, until finally falling back to better defensive positions closer to Kirov.

Yet it was in the north that the real thunder would come, when the Smolensk group was finally pocketed, and then routed in its desperate attempt to break out to the east. This allowed Hoepner's 4th Panzergruppe to turn the mop-up over to infantry, and surge northeast up the road to Vyazma. The Soviets stopped him there, and then he did something that no one on either side expected. Instead of massing his two mobile Korps to drive through Vyazma on Moscow, he instead opted to turn east and south, through the woodland country. It was his thought to envelop the entire Kirov line defense with this maneuver, which begged the question of who would be on the other side to form the right pincer.

As Hoepner ground his way through the woodland, fighting through everything the Russians could get there to try and block him, Guderian was

sweeping past Bryansk and pushing on to Orel, and Hermann Hoth was right behind him.

That had been the plan in Halder's mind. Those two Panzergruppen would be the swift moving sword that would sweep up and take Moscow from the south, but the stolid Russian defense of the Kirov Line, particularly in and around the cities that anchored that line, served to change everything.

"I finally convince Hitler that we can take Moscow before winter, and now look!" said Halder. "As Hoth came north, the infantry was too slow on his heels, and he had to use his motorized divisions to hold that left flank."

Von Bock gestured at the table map, a sour expression on his face. "Hoth had to move west," said von Bock. "Otherwise his flank would be completely exposed as he pushed north of Bryansk."

"Yes," said Halder. "But now the two Panzergruppe are operating side by side, and instead of one swift penetration on a concentrated narrow axis, the front of the advance has widened out considerably. I wanted Hoth to follow Guderian, not get into a horse race with him!"

"But see the opportunity Hoepner's 4th Panzergruppe now delivers," said von Bock. "Turn Hoth west to link up with him, and we'll have their entire Kirov Line in the bag. They must have at least 50 divisions there, half a million men!"

The General's estimate was very precise, and even Halder could see that if they could encircle that force, preventing its withdrawal, the situation would be much more favorable than fighting those same troops outside Moscow. For that had been the object of his planning all along—Moscow. Manstein could run wild in the south with his plan to link up with Ivan Volkov. In fact, he had done exactly what he said he could, crossing the Donets at Izyum, then pushing his vaunted SS Korps north to take Valuki, before turning east to Rossosh near the Don. It was there that he ran into growing resistance from new troops that had been grudgingly pulled from the Caucasus.

"The good General Manstein is also stuck for a change," Halder clucked. "The SS have stopped at Rossosh."

"Manstein insists he is merely consolidating," said von Bock.

"Oh? Then why has he moved Kleist? His troops were just about to take Kursk."

"The same problem," said von Bock, "lack of good infantry. If Manstein

continues east now, his left flank is the Don, but he has nothing to hold it.”

“I thought he wanted to move the Rumanians there until his infantry came up from Kharkov.”

“They aren’t ready, and what good would they be in any case? So instead, he called off Kleist’s drive on Kursk, as it has no support from either side, and so now he is moving all of 1st Panzergruppe down to support the SS Korps. Once they get there, he plans to resume his attack.”

“Yes,” said Halder with just the edge of sarcasm in his voice. “So he can shake hands with Ivan Volkov and claim his laurels. Well, that won’t be enough. Sergei Kirov will fight for Volgograd, you’ll see. He’ll fight for that as tenaciously as he would Moscow, which is where we should have the SS now. Only the capture of Moscow in 1941 will bring about conditions that might lead to Soviet capitulation.”

“That may be so, but don’t forget Volkov’s oil fields. Unless we link up with him, how does the Führer get his oil? And not so fast concerning Moscow, Herr General. You want to storm into Red Square before winter? Yes, Napoleon had the same idea, but look what happened to his Grand Armee. If we do take Moscow, I have a mind that says Sergei Kirov will simply relocate his government apparatus to Leningrad. After all, that was the historical capital of the Romanov Dynasty, old Saint Petersburg, and it is just where Czar Nicholas left it, largely untouched by this war. We have no operation threatening that city.”

“That was another mistake,” said Halder. “And it was all Manstein’s doing. He poisoned the Fuhrer’s mind with this talk of a southern strategy. Yes, Volgograd is a worthy objective, but we should have both Moscow and Leningrad under our heels if we are to ever win this war.”

“First things first,” said von Bock flatly. “The situation has changed. This massive cauldron forming around Kirov will likely be the decisive battle of the war. Hitler has seen the reports, and he wants those forces annihilated.”

“Very well,” said Halder with a shrug. “It seems we have little recourse now. Order Hoth to change the axis of his advance and he will now form the right pincer to operate with Hoepner on the left.”

“What about Guderian?” asked von Bock.

“What about him?”

“He’s run into a new army south of Tula—Siberians.”

“Yes... I’ve heard his bellyaching all the way from the front. He took Orel as ordered, and now moves north for a drive on Moscow through Tula. I finally get Hitler’s permission for that, and Guderian is stopped cold by this new army.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Where else?” said Halder. “Intelligence reported that the Siberian airship fleet visited Moscow recently, and then went north to Murmansk. Kolchak was assassinated in the far east, and the situation in the Free Siberian State is very confused. A new figure has stepped forward—this Admiral Karpov with his fleet of obsolete balloons! Yet he has apparently thrown in with the Soviets, and troops have been moving west from Siberia for some weeks now. Guderian must get moving!”

“He has only 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions in his Schwerpunkt,” said von Bock. “The rest of his mobile divisions are strung out all the way back to Orel, and further south. It’s the lack of infantry again. That is hurting us more than anything else now. The Russians have managed to find divisions to put on Guderian’s right flank as he moved north, and every mile he goes is another mile someone has to hold behind him. His advance was losing steam with every gain it made. Now this new Siberian Army is simply too much to brush aside.”

“If Hoth were behind him, as he should be...” Halder gave von Bock a frustrated look.

“Yes, if wishes were horses,” said von Bock. “Hoepner has forced our hand. He’s punched right through the northern segment of the Kirov Defense line. We simply must support his envelopment operation now.”

And this is what the Germans did.

When the Smolensk Group collapsed, the infantry that had been mopping up then became available to hold the northern shoulder of Hoepner’s push east. This in turn allowed him to feed one mobile division after another into his advance, which gathered strength in spite of a tenacious Russian defense.

The Soviet’s stripped the machinegun battalions from the outer fortifications around Kirov and sent them north. They used service troops, bridging units, railroad repair crews, all in a desperate attempt to stop the German drive. Moscow sent Militia units, and then finally ordered its last reserve army, the 33rd to move down and stop the German encirclement operation.

For his part, Hermann Hoth had turned west as ordered, but he found increasing resistance as he did so. The Russians did have 50 divisions in the huge cauldron that was now being formed, the remnants of five separate armies, the 11th, 13th, 24th Siberian, 28th and 32nd. Leaving the Bryansk fortified zone garrisoned by engineers, flak units, AT regiments and service troops, they then pulled five to seven rifle divisions from that sector, and moved them north through the woods to put pressure on Hoth as he drove to link up with Hoepner. On Hoth's right, the Russians were sending anything they could scrape up in Moscow by rail through Kaluga, and these units, anti-tank regiments, small independent brigades, cavalry and NKVD battalions, were all building up on Hoth's right. Soon his two Motorized Korps were all well engaged, and he had given his strategic reserve to Guderian.

"There goes the 101st," he said, watching the units roll out past his army HQ on the road to Orel. "And the Big Cats all go with them."

"You were too generous, Herr General," said his Operations Officer Oberstleutnant von Elverfeldt. "If you want to renege on your offer to Guderian, now is the time. Once those units get engaged, it may not be so easy to call them home."

"True," said Hoth, "but given the fact that Guderian lost his entire 46th Panzer Korps when Manstein revised the invasion plans, he will need these units more than we will. Otherwise, with my Panzergruppe on this new operation, Guderian's entire thrust north will be a wasted effort. And in spite of the jubilant mood at OKW, I think we will have little margin for error or waste in this war."

It was a very prophetic statement, for these events were all in prelude to the one great battle that would truly decide the course of the entire war—the battle for Moscow in 1941.

Chapter 12

The footsteps on the polished tile floor were hard and sharp as Berzin walked quickly down the long hallway. Ahead, two guards stiffened, heels clicking as each extended an arm, quickly opening the tall door. Their movements were precise, mechanical, as though the flesh and bone of men had become a part of the building itself. Beyond those doors lay the outer chamber of the Red Archives. There, standing stolidly by the window, the General Secretary was waiting, his eyes seemingly transfixed on something outside, far off in the wide stone square. He said nothing, did not even turn to greet the man now entering the room, and Berzin waited, saying nothing until the doors closed quietly behind him, standing there like a carved statue.

Something in both men knew that the moment they moved, the moment they broke the frozen stillness of that hour, everything would change. Everything would move with them, slipping, shifting, whirling wildly in the chaos that was all around them, the wild spinning gyre of war. Yet for now, with Sergei Kirov standing at the window, and Berzin by the door, all seemed to be held in breathless suspension, as if events demanding this urgent meeting were also frozen, the whole world motionless, static, unmoving in the stony quiet. There they stood, in the eye of the storm, and as long as neither man moved, as long as they stood there, each might believe that the situation on the front lines still remained as it was just days ago, resolved by decisions made in that long lost hour, still stable, still manageable, still bearable.

“Mister General Secretary...”

Berzin’s voice broke the silence with calm formality, but no matter how gracious and restrained his tone, the words fell like broken glass on the lacquered wood floor.

Slowly, as if he too were some mechanical part of the massive apparatus of government all around them in the Kremlin complex, Sergei Kirov turned. His eyes saw Berzin, hat in hand, a map tucked neatly under his arm, and he knew by the look on his face that he was not the bearer of any good news that morning. And he saw one other thing, something another man might have completely overlooked, though it was immediately apparent to Kirov’s well

studied eye. The well polished sheen on Berzin's high leather boots was marred, a hasty moment of oversight that spoke volumes.

"There's a scuff on your left boot," said Kirov. "So it seems you were in some haste to bring me that map."

Berzin smiled, the last time he would do that for a good many days, and then walked slowly to the conference table. He set his hat quietly on the corner, laid the map there, waiting.

"So now it begins," said Kirov. "Don't keep me in suspense, Grishin. What will I see when you unroll that map?"

"The Kirov Line has been breached along a sixty kilometer front," said Berzin, knowing there was no other way but the truth.

"Where?"

"In the woodland between Vyazma and Spas-Demensk—Hoepner's 4th Panzer Group. The enemy push towards Tula was stopped, but half of that force turned northwest. They broke through and linked up with Hoepner."

Kirov walked slowly to the table. "Show me," he said with the reluctance obvious in his voice, and Berzin unrolled the map, using two of the secret books Kirov had obtained, the material, to hold the new history in place beneath the old. Yet what he was showing the General Secretary now was very much like that older history, where large forces comprising nearly seven armies had been encircled near Bryansk and southwest of Vyazma. This time the pocket was centered on the city that bore the General Secretary's own name—Kirov.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"The entire Western front is now encircled—five armies, including Karpov's 24th Siberian—about 50 divisions."

"Can they get out?"

"Not likely. We've pulled the 24th Siberian off the western edge of the pocket while still maintaining a credible defense there. That army is in very good shape, six good rifle divisions and a tank brigade. We can use them to attempt a breakout if you so order, but the wisdom of this may be in doubt after what just happened to the Smolensk Group."

Now Kirov looked at the map, the positions freshly drawn by staffers and delivered to Berzin less than an hour earlier. "What's happening east of Vyazma on the rail line to Kaluga?"

"A small penetration, mostly by infantry. We do not believe they have

anything that can exploit it.”

“And this segment here?”

“A gap has formed southwest of Kaluga. We’re trying to close it near Babyino on the rail line, but there’s very little we can send. Between that point and Kaluga, there are only two anti tank regiments, and the entire line from Kaluga to Mozhaïsk is manned by militias.”

“So it’s happened again,” said Kirov sullenly.

“It was inevitable,” said Berzin. “If we fight for the cities, the Germans will just go around those defenses, and this is the result.”

“Then we fight where we are,” said Kirov, mustering a measure of resolve.

“The Vyazma pocket lasted only seven days in the material,” Berzin warned.

“This isn’t the Vyazma catastrophe,” said Kirov.

“No sir, it’s a brand new catastrophe, and one of our own making this time.” Berzin would not mince words.

Kirov nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation now. Everything would depend on how long those troops could hold out. A force of that size could take a very long time to reduce. The Germans had used 22 divisions in the old history, all troops that they might have otherwise thrown at Moscow. This time, Kirov hoped things would be different, though the shadow of the old history still lay heavily on this hour.

“Yet we won,” he said, taking heart. “We lost over half a million men and we still won.”

“We had four armies on the Mozhaïsk Line,” said Berzin. “At least according to the material. This time we have only two armies in the vicinity of Moscow. We sent the 33rd to try and stop what just happened, but it could not get there in time. That leaves us only the troops of the Moscow military district to defend the capital.”

“What about Zakharin’s 49th Army?”

“It is still forming east of Ryazan, but should be available soon.”

“Make it available now. Tell him to come directly to Moscow, and without delay.”

“We’ll be a day getting rolling stock up there from the south. We just delivered the 50th Army to the Don sector, and in the nick of time. The Germans have reinforced their SS Korps with Kleist’s 1st Panzer Group, and

they are renewing their offensive south and east.”

Sergei Kirov had finally seen the danger Zhukov had tried to warn him of long ago, the very operation Manstein was now conducting. He had already given Berzin instructions to plan a phased withdrawal from the will 'o the wisp oil wells of Maykop. Now he needed troops to stop the SS, and the only forces available were in the Caucasus. As the drive on Armavir had been called off, he ordered all available forces north, culled into the 4th and 9th Armies building a defense to the south of the SS. There was one more Army he could tap, the 50th, which had been languidly holding the long open country from Abganerovo south of Volgograd, through Kotelnikovo and Zimovinki, following the rail all the way to Salsk on the Manych River.

To hold that ground required a large force, and Petrov's 50th Army was perhaps the largest formation in the entire Soviet State, with all of 11 Rifle Divisions, an old style armored division, and five independent brigades, with three Cavalry divisions. It was easily three times the size of a typical Soviet Army, but somehow, Petrov managed it because the Army merely had to hold in fortified positions all along its front. Now it was ordered to move, abandoning those forts and meeting long lines of trains on that rail between Salsk and Volgograd.

It took three days, and virtually all the rolling stock available, but Zhukov was able to get the army moved, up through the steel cauldron of Volgograd, and back through the Donbass on a rail line that did not exist in Fedorov's history books. It had been built to support the long years of fighting with Ivan Volkov, and now that enmity would prove a saving grace. Without that rail line, Petrov's troops would not have made it north in time, and Manstein's SS would have moved as he planned for the southern bank of the Don.

A total of three armies were pulled from Kirov's Caucasus operation, though he still stubbornly clung to the Kuban District with remaining forces there. Yet now, the Don itself would take the place of the massive armies that had once been mustered south of its waters, intending to drive all the way to Astrakhan and Baku. It was not to be, but instead those same armies would now move north, bringing Georgie Zhukov 30 divisions that would save the hour in more than one desperate situation.

“Will the Germans cross the Don?” Kirov's eyes were heavy on the map as he studied the threat in the south.

“No sir, it appears they will drive along the south bank, and use it to

shield their left as they advance.”

“That won’t be as easy as it sounds,” said Kirov. “It’s a very long way to Volgograd, and that will be a very vulnerable flank.”

“True,” said Berzin, “assuming we have troops to send there to pose a credible threat.”

“What about the Siberians?”

“Three Shock armies are still forming, but remember, those are fresh recruits. It will be some time before those men are fitted out and trained, and Zhukov wants them for the winter offensive.”

“If we survive that long,” said Kirov. “Isn’t there anything else in the Urals?”

“We have Teryokin’s 2nd Red Banner Army there, a reinforced Corps really, and Zhukov has moved it to STAVKA Reserve. As for the Siberians, Karpov hasn’t been heard from for weeks since he sailed out of Murmansk. We’ve tried signaling that ship, but we get no response. That said, there is still one more Siberian Army on the upper Volga, the 17th. Frankly, Volkov poses no offensive threat there. If necessary, we could move that army in a week.”

“Without notifying Karpov?”

“I think the news that Moscow has fallen would be worse than hearing we’ve moved his army. I’ve already made overtures to the army commander, and the situation looks favorable.”

“Good,” said Kirov. “Then if they will come, we will welcome them. Anything else? What about the Leningrad District?”

“They just completed refitting of the 52nd Army under Klykov. It’s available if we can find the trains to move it.”

“Then it is not so desperate as you make it sound,” said Kirov. We have Klykov’s 52nd, the 2nd Red Banner Army from the Urals, Karpov’s 17th Siberian, and our own 49th east of Ryazan—four armies to defend the capital. And we already have some troops on the outer defensive line. Lelyushenko’s 5th has been fighting well there, and we’ve been reforming the 33rd and 16th.”

“True, but we will have nothing else in reserve, unless of course you evacuate the Kuban and Black Sea Coastal District.”

“Not yet,” said Kirov. “If they go, then the Donets Basin goes soon after. No. We’ll hold the ground we now occupy, and by god, we’ll make them fight

for anything they want to take. See that message gets delivered to Zhukov. We fight now, for the life of the nation. There is no other way.”

“I think the General will be more than willing,” said Berzin. “It’s the messages being delivered by the Germans that make him uncomfortable. He all but begged you to pull back in the south.”

“I’ve sent him thirty divisions!” Kirov’s anger flashed.

“True sir, and now they are fighting the SS. As we have seen, those troops are more than a cut above anything they were facing in Volkov’s army. We will have to watch the south very carefully. If the Germans were to break out there, then they might do just what Zhukov warned us about, and bag four more entire fronts.”

“Cutting them off from Moscow is one thing,” said Kirov adamantly. “Beating them is quite another. We still have Rostov, the resources of the Donets Basin, and the factories in Volgograd. They’re building T-34s there even as we speak. So the Germans can come east if they choose, but we can still supply all those southern fronts as long as we hold those cities. For that matter, this new pocket that has just formed can be supplied from Bryansk and Kirov.”

“Yes, we might hold out for some time, unless there is a general collapse as with the Smolensk Group.”

“Then we must see that does not happen. I will fly to Kirov personally if that is what it takes. I will stand in the city they named after me, and those men will stand with me!” Kirov’s voice echoed off the high ceiling, resounding through the chamber.

“If you leave Moscow now...” Berzin left that hanging, knowing the General Secretary would not fail to perceive the danger in that.

Kirov composed himself, realizing the situation in the capital was far from secure now. People had seen one unit after another going off to the front, and the reserves grew ever thinner. Rumors were piled high like kindling, and all it would take is one false move to light the fire.

“You have made the preparations concerning Moscow that we discussed earlier?” Kirov now carefully avoided using the word evacuation.

“I have made quiet arrangements,” said Berzin, “and moved security personnel discretely to key areas of the city. The tension is mounting. We’ve kept the able bodies working on the inner defense ring, but people talk. They see everything leaving, and nothing arriving, and if things progress, they will

soon hear the sound of battle on their doorstep. A general panic is not out of the question.”

“I suppose you are correct about my leaving under these circumstances.” Kirov thought for a moment. “Where are the units of the Moscow Military District?”

“At Elektrostal, just east of the city, and they should be able to move soon.”

“Excellent. Move them into Moscow. I think we will arrange a little parade, right through Red Square. I want every unit of that force to participate. That should buck up morale. And we must do everything possible to rally those encircled troops in the Kirov Pocket...” He grimaced when he finished. “That was once something I put my pencils and small change into. Now this whole calamity is being written into the history books, and with my name on it all. Well, it will be held. When they speak of it in days to come, that cauldron will be synonymous with courage, and ultimate victory. You say you have pulled the 24th Siberian Army off the outer defenses?”

“Yes sir, it is assembling closer to the city of Kirov.”

“Then use it as a fire brigade. Use it to counterattack any significant enemy penetration against that pocket. The Siberians stopped the Germans earlier, just like the 1st Shock Army stopped Guderian.”

“I was on the radio with Rakutin earlier this morning,” said Berzin. “That is exactly the plan.”

“Good then. Those men must fight. They must give us the time we need to organize the defense of Moscow. The longer they hold out, the better. Every day they resist, is one more day we have to get reinforcements from the east. And if they do hold, then we’ll come for them, by God. I want Zhukov to make that a top priority in any plan he may be devising for a counterattack.”

“The general will be informed,” said Berzin, knowing that Zhukov would have a mind of his own on this situation in any case.

“What about 1st Tank Army,” said Kirov, moving quickly to thoughts of any planned counteroffensive.

“Another two weeks,” said Berzin.

A silence fell over the room again, as both men stared at the map, so different from the one they had leaned over just days ago in their last meeting.

“We can stop them,” said Kirov, mustering his resolve. “The Siberians

proved that twice already. If our own troops could fight like those men, then we would be drinking much more vodka than tea today. Alright then, move the first army available to the Mozhaysk Defense line, and tell them to dig in deep. I want those defenses well manned. Then we'll see how much the Germans still have to throw at us. They have to be feeling the effects of all this fighting. They must be nearing exhaustion by now."

Berzin's silence was testimony enough on that matter. They both knew the Germans would keep coming, even beyond the point of utter exhaustion. They were that damn good.

"And now what about Volkov?" Kirov brought the matter up as an afterthought, something of little concern that he nonetheless decided to consider.

"He's good at re-occupying ground we've given back to him," said Berzin. "He's taken Zimovinki, but not Kotelnikovo. And there's no way he'll ever get over the Don in that sector. Moving the 50th Army out of there was the smartest thing we've done. In the south, he's pushed out through Belorchensk, but hasn't the strength to really threaten the Taman region, let alone Krasnodar. We can hold there indefinitely. In the center, he's fighting for Kropotkin on the Kuban, but we think we can hold that line too. He hasn't even been able to seriously threaten Salsk. And up near Volgograd, we're putting the squeeze on his little offensive, and he's barely holding his ground there now."

"Good," said Kirov. "Keep squeezing. If we can reduce that bridgehead soon, then all those troops could be put to much better use elsewhere. God knows, we may need them in Moscow if things get any worse. Tell me they won't, Grishin. Tell me we'll hold."

"We'll hold..." Berzin allowed himself a moment of comradery with the General Secretary now. "We'll stop them, sir Somehow."

"I hope so," said Kirov. "Because this is just the calm before the storm."

Part V

Roads Not Followed

“There are roads which must not be followed, armies which must not be attacked, towns which must not be besieged, positions which must not be contested, commands of the sovereign which must not be obeyed.”

— Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Chapter 13

“Operation Teifun” is developing in a truly classic pattern. Guderian has pushed through Mtsensk beyond Orel, and is now advancing into completely empty space. Hoepner has broken through the enemy positions and has reached Mozhaysk...”

War Diary of General Franz Halder

The jubilant mood expressed by Halder in his notebook in no way reflected the gloom in the numbers he had typed just a few moments before writing that. He had just tabulated the casualties to date in the campaign, 18,235 officers, 532,804 NCOs and enlisted men, figures that represented 16.2% of the entire army in the east. The Germans had lost 122 times the ten year total KIAs for US troops in the Iraq War, and they had sustained these losses in 90 days. Russian losses were perhaps three times worse. This was war as it had never been seen before on this earth, and perhaps would never be seen again...

The Russians had somehow managed to fill that empty space that was once in front of Guderian, compliments of Vladimir Karpov. The fighting for Plavsk was back and forth for the next two days. The Siberian Guards had arrived, strongly reinforcing the remnant of the 1st Special Rifle Corps, and retaking the town. But on the morning of September 7th, Eberbach mustered his two tank battalions and stormed in again, supported by KG Seiden on his right, and KG Wellmann on his left. This coordinated attack by six German battalions was enough to take two thirds of the town back again, though a regiment of 5th Guard Rifle was still holding the eastern third, and the town square they had fought so hard for the previous day.

KG Munzel’s attempt to surge over the thin river had had not produced the results Model was hoping for. The German panzers sloshed through the shallow streambed, the tank treads grinding on the thin gravel, and then climbed slowly up the far bank, as the infantry of KG Westhoven crossed to support them. Beyond the river they came upon the short rail spur that had been used the previous day to rush in elements of the 17th Siberian Rifle

Corps. They pushed across, tearing up the rail line as they went, and were on the verge of breaking through when the... Uraaah... of Fresh Soviet riflemen echoed through the low flat valley.

The 18th Siberian Guards had been rushed to the scene, leaping from their trucks about two kilometers east and forming up to make an immediate attack from march. Further north, Loeper's 10th Motorized Division was now making the acquaintance of the 91st Siberian Guards, which mounted a similar attack to reinforce the 17th Corps, soon under pressure from elements of two German divisions. These timely arrivals were enough to shore up the Russian defense, and even push the Germans back in places, particularly in the area south of Plavsk.

There the arrival of the 8th Cavalry Corps behind Kuzma Podlas troops was a much needed support, and late that afternoon the cavalry mounted a daring charge, surging out from Ulyanovka, sabers held high by the officers as the Cossacks spurred their mounts on. It was more theater than real military operation, for the machine gun made such attacks all but suicidal. Yet that night, with the attack supported by two rifle divisions, KG Dorn of 4th Panzer was very hard pressed. The enemy was attempting to break through to the hamlet of Molochnyy on the main road back to Gorbachevo. Dorn's two battalions had support from a couple Panzerjager companies, and the division artillery pool, which fired now to secure its own fate, as this attack was aimed right at the artillery parks.

Darkness halted the Russian attacks, and a disconsolate lull fell over the line, with both sides too tired to do much of anything that night. Over exposed companies fell back and consolidated, others moved up and took a little ground in places. The Germans had the copper mine at Chirkovo, and most of Plavsk, but little else to crow about. 24th Panzer Korps had been stopped, which was exactly what Sergie Kirov hoped to accomplish by spending this valuable reserve. Yet the situation would soon begin to change again, for Hermann Hoth's promise was arriving with the leading elements of the fresh 7th Panzer Division, and the veteran unit was eager to get into the fight.

"Where do you want me," said von Funck, who had taken the division in hand when Rommel went to Africa, and fought it well in the opening months of Barbarossa, particularly in the crossing of the Neman River. His unit helped close the Minsk pocket on one side before being pulled off the line to

refit with new tanks.

“Langermann and Model have been stopped here along this river by a strong Russian Army,” said Guderian, who drove over to greet the 7th Division commander and welcome him to the field of battle. “This river runs north from Plavsk for about 25 kilometers before it bends west. Right there at that bend, there is a thick orchard that was scouted by the Lehr recon battalion yesterday. They pushed through, but encountered two or three regiments of light infantry, so they pulled back to consolidate, and the sector was quiet yesterday. I think we’ve pulled in most of their reserves to the fight for Plavsk, and the 10th Motorized sector. That area near the orchard is ripe for attack. If you can push on through, swing up through those light woods beyond, and take this hill—830 on my map. That should give you a good view of anything else in the vicinity. If you can turn east and push for Shehekino, or get further north to flank Tula, all the better. That will unhinge their entire defense south of that city, and they will have no choice but to fall back.”

“Consider it done, Herr General. We won’t get there until late this afternoon, but I will attack from march and push on after dusk if necessary.”

As always, Hauptmann Hans von Luck was riding in the vanguard with the division reconnaissance battalion. His unit was the first on the scene, the tip of the spear, and right behind him was Oberst Keller with the newly outfitted panzer regiment. Each of his two leading medium battalions had about 20 of the new Leopard light/medium tanks that were to replace all the Panzer III series, though there were still 40 of the IIINs in the regiment. These were augmented with an up-gunned version of the better armored PzKfw IVF1, with a longer barreled 76mm gun. Reinhardt’s III Battalion had the only Big Cats on the field, with 22 Leopards leading the way for the 36 PzKfw-55L Lions.

Von Luck was going to open the battle for the division, getting his recon battalion quickly into action just west of the thick orchards Guderian had pointed out. His vehicles had no trouble with the narrow river, which was little more than a glorified stream, mostly swelled now by the rain of the previous day. They found the 18th and 19th Ski regiments waiting for them, but when Keller’s panzers sloshed through the stream bed and pushed into the light woodland beyond, the enemy soon realized they were in trouble.

The Russians had only three 47mm AT guns, and they could not make even the slightest impression on the new German armor. The tanks rattled

forward, machineguns spitting out tracer fire that scored and blackened the trees, with main guns blasting away at gun positions and any resistance that seemed determined to try and hold. Keller's lead battalion, and Stumpmeyer's following, did most of the fighting. By the time Reinhardt's Big Cats arrived, the 18th Ski Regiment had broken, and was falling back towards Hill 830. But they would soon find that place no haven from the storm that was now breaking on them.

As the light faded, Von Luck decided to take advantage and pushed his fast moving recon battalion north towards the hill. He got there first, and found that the Russians had reacted quickly, for his flankers soon spotted light tanks approaching from the east. Von Luck was on the radio immediately, notifying Oberst Keller that he was now behind enemy lines, and facing armor, even if it was nothing more than the antiquated T-40 and T-60 Russian tanks that had formed the mainstay of their light battalions in the early stage of the war.

"Now you get your chance to test your new panzers against enemy armor," he finished, and then was out to get his AT defense established in case the Russians had any ideas about taking this high ground. The Soviet armor had spotted the Germans, but were none too keen on making a night attack on that hill. Unlike most other high points in the area, this one had steeper slopes, and von Luck had his battalion in a hedgehog on the southeast flank of the hill. The Russians decided to take up defensive positions as well, and so things settled down to light patrolling.

That night the whole of 7th Panzer Division came up, and the engineers improved the river crossing by laying a light bridge for the vehicles. Now that it was concentrated, the Russians would be facing real trouble in the morning when the Ghost Division moved again. Stumpmeyer's Battalion supported the Panzergrenadiers in a prepared assault on the Russian infantry. Keller and Reinhardt went after that tank unit, shattering it in minutes when the Russians had their own dose of tank shock this time. The light guns on the T-40s bounced harmlessly off the German armor, and for the first time in the war, the Russians heard the low growl of Germany's new steel Lions. 7th Panzer broke through with little difficulty, and engineers scaling the heights of Hill 830 reported that they could see nothing at all to their north and east.

Word passed quickly down the line, and the Russians were moving just as

Guderian predicted. Kuzma Podlas was ordered to move his corps into a blocking position, and the Guards pulled out of Plavsk, retiring smartly as covering forces moved in to hold and give them time to slip away. Konev could see what was happening, and knew his defense at Plavsk had now been fatally compromised. He wanted his best divisions back at once, the riflemen moving to the main road to mount their trucks, as all three of the Siberian Guards units had ample transport. The 17th Siberian Rifle Corps remained in place, but Konev had five divisions moving by mid day, all hastening north to try and block the German advance towards Tula.

Once again, it was the sudden appearance of that single division pulled out of Hoth's Panzergruppe, and its lethal combination of penetrating power, shock, and maneuver, that was to unhinge the entire Soviet defense. What had looked to be a slogging battle of attrition the previous day, with Plavsk changing hands three times, burned and blackened by fire, its streets stained with blood, was now going to transform into a wild, swirling fight that would careen north towards the heavily built up areas of Tula and the large outlying town with the impossible name of Shehekino. And that day, the 9th of September, both Guderian and Schweppenburg left their respective headquarters at Mtsensk and Orel, and came forward to meet at Chern. The 24th Panzer Korps was an armored cavalry outfit again, and the world's most experienced tank men wanted to get forward in the saddle and give their horses the whip.

"That's done it," said von Schweppenburg, a Captain in the Cavalry during the First World War, he had led the 3rd Panzer Division into Poland, and taken the XXIV Korps into France. "A taste of the good old days to see 7th Panzer out in front again."

"Yes," said Guderian, but they will try to hold the line in front of your two divisions. Don't bother trying to punch through. I want you to swing up and follow the 7th Division. They've given us back our battle of maneuver, and that is how we should fight now. Head north. Bypass Tula if we meet strong resistance. They will either have to follow us or sit with their samovars as we take Alexin and Serpukhov. That will ring the bells in Moscow."

But how will we keep the forward units supplied? Tula commands all the good roads and the rail net as well."

"Leave that to me." Guderian seemed confident that he could manage the

problem.

“Then you don’t want Plavsk? Eberbach fought hard for that place, and we finally pushed them out.”

“Of course, we need that town. The rail line passes right through it. Tell Langermann to keep up the pressure there today, but Model will disengage and swing up behind the lines of 10th Motorized this morning. Loeper can extend his front to cover the gap. Model will follow 7th Panzer, and then tonight, Langermann can pull out under cover of darkness and follow Model. I’ll move the 267th Infantry up to hold Plavsk.”

“Very well, Herr General. But let us hope they have no more surprises up north.”

“They got a surprise of their own this morning,” said Guderian with a smile. “Hoepner has taken Mozhaysk, and he’s punched right through their outer defensive ring. The lead elements of 11th Panzer are now threatening Naro-Fominsk. Unfortunately, we have nothing but infantry south of that penetration, so there can be no pincer operation contemplated. That said, Hoepner will have two good roads to Moscow on that axis. This may be over before we even reach the Oka River up north.”

“All the better,” said von Schweppenburg. “These rains are slowly turning the ground into a sea of mud. It remains passable for now, but another two weeks of this weather and we’ll need three good roads to Moscow to have any chance of ever coming near the place. But we will do our part. I’m told the heavy battalion in 7th Panzer is very near Tula now. It is just a question of time.”

The roll of thunder served to underscore Schweppenburg’s remark. An old soldier would have taken it for enemy artillery, but this time it was just another storm threatening. Neither man knew which was worse, the rain of fire from the Russian guns, which seemed to be a constant feature of these battles, or the rain from the sky that was slowly bringing on the Rasputista, the time of no roads. A Panzer Korps needed those roads, for it relied as much on its ability to maneuver as it did on the striking power of its armored vehicles.

Guderian was under no illusion that the battle would be as easy as he intimated to his Korps commander. He shrugged, tightening his overcoat against the cold. This was nothing, he knew. We will learn what cold really is if we fail to get to Moscow before the first snows of winter.

“Leo,” he said, addressing von Schweppenburg with a different tone in his voice now, almost as if the use of the other man’s first name was a sign that what he now said was to be his real mind on the campaign, with all bravado and posturing aside. “Even if we do get Tula,” he said, “then we’ll still need another long drive from there to Moscow, and to do that we’ll have to get over or around the Oka River.”

“There’s no getting around it,” said von Schweppenburg. “It will surely be defended, and every map I’ve consulted shows much heavier woodland the minute we cross.”

“Yes,” said Guderian. “Here we at least had the option to move off road while the ground was still firm. Yet if we do manage to get over that river, something tells me we will be road bound from that point on. The enemy will know that, even as I do. They’ll fight to block every road they can. It’s taken us ten days to get from Mtsensk to Plavsk. I can only imagine what things will be like closer to Moscow. So if you do break through, move quickly. Take ground fast. We might get kilometers under our belt now that could cost us days or weeks of fighting if the enemy gets established again. We must get over that river as soon as we possibly can.”

“Where?” asked Schweppenburg. “Serpukhov?”

“That is the most direct crossing, but yes, it will likely be the place they defend first. East of that Kashira presents another opportunity, and also a good road from there to Moscow. If we don’t get either one, then the only other place to cross is Kolomna. It would mean we move even further east, and Ryazan will be on our flank—another place they’ve been using to muster reinforcements.”

“The problem is this,” said von Schweppenburg. “Getting to that river is one thing, holding the right flank as we move there is another. We’ve very little infantry, barely enough to hold the line from Orel to Tula. It would seem to me that Hoepner’s axis of attack is much more promising. He will have infantry on both sides, and a much shorter route to Moscow—only half the distance we will have to go.”

“And yet,” said Guderian, “Every division they deploy here against us is one less they can put in front of Hoepner.”

Von Schweppenburg pursed his lips, hearing the real truth now in what Guderian was saying. The man knows we’ll never get to Moscow on this road, he thought, but he can’t very well say that now, can he. There are some

roads that should not be taken, he thought. And I think this is one of them.

“Leo,” Guderian said again, his voice hushed now. “Can you get over that river?”

Von Schweppenburg smiled. “I will see that Langermann knows what he is to do come nightfall,” he said. “Now then... I’d better go light a fire under Model. He’s a real thoroughbred, that one. If anyone can get over that river, he’ll lead the way.”

Chapter 14

The 3rd Tank Corps was one of the first to adopt the new structure that the Soviets hoped would eventually win the war. It was a large formation, with two tank brigades, an armored cavalry brigade, but with a full Motor Rifle Division attached. What would have been the third tank brigade had each of its three battalions distributed to the three rifle brigades in that division. So in effect, it had the same material composition as a new tank corps in the old history, only it was two brigades stronger in motorized infantry.

The Corps was arriving piecemeal over the tortuous rail net serving Tula. Coming from the northeast in the depot cities of Ryazan and Kolomna, the rail net provided no direct connection to Tula. Instead the lines snaked through Kashira, then ran north and west before finding the main rail from Moscow to Serpukhov. The line would then turn south, running with the main road for a while before diverting slightly east through the town of Yasnogorsk, some 20 kilometers north of Tula. It was here that the Armored Cavalry Brigade detrained, along with most of the Corps artillery. The two tank brigades were following this same route, but had not yet arrived.

Further east, the motor rifle division had been forced to take another route, down from Kashira to Venev. From there the line ran much further south before branching off to approach Tula from the southeast. Yet the urgency of the hour found the troops detraining at Venev, then mounting their trucks to motor due east where the fighting was already underway.

The Siberian Guards, and the best infantry units of the 1st Special Rifle Corps, had all fallen back the previous day, racing north into the sprawling built up areas of Tula to prevent the Germans from storming in and taking the place in a coup de main. But Funck's 7th Panzer Division had simply bypassed the city to the west, and on his left, Model was also racing north with the aim of securing a vital bridge over the Oka River at Alexin.

The Ghost Division had swept through Fedorovka, and then found the Siberians arriving at Leninskiy, which was a town about the size of Plavsk

some 10 kilometers northwest of Tula. There the infantry of KG Rölm dismounted and engaged the enemy, with their principal intention being to cut the vital rail lines. But what the Germans really wanted was control of the main road that led north from Tula to Serpukhov.

Guderian had determined that, if he threw his Panzers directly at Tula, they would certainly become embroiled in a long urban fight for the city. The lessons of Mtsensk and Plavsk were still fresh in his mind, and the sudden breakthrough by 7th Panzer Division had given him back a mobile battle. Now he wanted to exploit that opportunity by getting as far north as he could.

In so doing, his thrust was also flanking and enveloping the Siberian 4th Cavalry Corps on his immediate left, and the Soviet 5th Army defending at Suvorov further west. Fearing envelopment, both these formations were already disengaging from their defensive positions and falling back to the north towards the Oka River. So the maneuver had certainly shaken things loose in the enemy camp, but, as von Schweppenburg had warned, he also needed a way to supply his spearheads if he sent them for the vital river crossing at Serpukhov. To do that, he needed to control the main road. There would be one segment of the supply line leading south that would remain difficult, west of Tula, but he reasoned that could be managed by establishing a depot in that area.

Von Schweppenburg still had his misgivings about the plan. "Bypassing Tula sounds inviting now," he said. "We are both old horse soldiers at heart, and we like to feel the wind when we move. But mark my words, the Russians will build up strongly in Tula, and it will serve as a launching place for counterattacks against our flank as we move north. So if we do this, we need infantry. It will not be sufficient to simply screen off Tula. We need to get into that city, and take positions that can be strongly held. We are already fending off attacks here." He pointed at the map. "And there are new forces arriving north and east of the main road."

"I will get support on your tail end as soon as possible," said Guderian. "The 29th Motorized has come up. At the moment, they are pushing the Russians back and away from Plavsk, where they have been very stubborn. After that, I can send them north to secure that area you describe. Just get north, as far and as fast as you can. Get control of that main road!"

That was the plan, but at that moment neither man expected a full Soviet Tank Corps to be assembling like a bad storm to their northeast. General

Zhukov was directing the defense now, and though he was more than unhappy with Kirov's order to commit the 1st Siberian Shock Army this early, he was going to do everything possible to stop the Germans south of the Oka River.

3rd Tank Corps was the hammer he reached for, and it was now preparing to strike its first blow, the first time in the war that the Germans would be faced with a fully assembled mobile corps equipped with new T-34s. He wanted as much of an armored fist as he could get, and so orders were also given to Mikhail Katukov to bring what remained of the 4th and 11th Tank Brigades north to augment this corps. They reached the munitions factory district in the eastern segment of Tula on the morning of September 12, fueling up and taking on much needed ammunition.

Further north, it was the Cavalry Brigade that would be the first element of the new Corps to face off against the advancing German columns. It consisted of two motor rifle battalions, a battalion of armored cars, and engineers in half tracks and trucks, with support from a new Katyusha Regiment. Rockets had already darkened the seas with their lethal striking power, and ever since, all sides in the war had been busy with rocket technology. There were 24 BM-8s with 82mm rockets, and 8 larger BM-13s, and the first unit to feel their bite was Reinhardt's new III Battalion of the Panzer Regiment. For all their thunder and bluster, and the shock of the new weapon seen for the first time by the Germans in this sector, the RS-82s did very little damage to the German armor.

That night, Langermann's 4th Panzer came up to relieve the Ghost Division in the fight for northern suburbs of Tula, but Funck's troops were simply too heavily engaged to pull out. So it was decided that Langermann would push on up the road, and attempt to drive off enemy incursions against that vital artery from the east.

As for Model, he saw the opening in the enemy line and went through it like a champion fullback. Now he was racing north, and just after sunset, KG Westhoven's 1st Battalion of the 394th Panzergranadiers reached the bridge over a small watercourse at Leninskiy, a town about five kilometers west of the road. Finding it completely unguarded, they took the bridge, gaining the barest toehold on the other bank of the river, but the alarm was raised and the startled troops in the vicinity rushed to the scene. Men of the 422nd Flak Regiment began to spray fire at the tiny incursion, but the real resistance

would come from a the men of the 156th NKVD Regiment, whose commander was already getting a bawling rebuke for failing to have proper security on that bridge.

Behind that single German battalion was KG Munzel, with two battalions of tanks, and then the rest of Westhoven's column. It represented a significant threat to Alexin, which presented the only crossing point on the Oka the Germans could reach on short order, with two good bridges. From there, the river ran almost due north for over 30 kilometers until it bent east beneath Serpukhov. That town was the real southern gateway to the Moscow inner defensive zone on Guderian's axis of attack, but there was still a very long way to go, even if it was taken.

Further northwest, the grenadiers of Hoepner's 11th Panzer Division fought until well after dark to secure Naro-Fominsk, while his 6th Panzer Division took Kublinka. This was truly the most promising route to Moscow, and Hoepner's spearhead was now no more than 45 Kilometers from the Kremlin itself, while Guderian would have to travel twice that distance, and fight his way over the Oka for the privilege of making the last half of that drive to Moscow.

KG Keller had shrugged off that Katushka attack and pushed on north, still fighting for the main road, but the rocket attack was no more than hail before the storm, which was now about to break. The men of the 7th Motorcycle Recon Battalion would be the first to feel it, when the motor rifle brigades of 3rd Tank Corps had finished assembling and moved west towards the main road. They encountered the Germans in a heavily cultivated area that straddled the main road on two sides near the hamlet of Octobirskiy. For the first time in many days, the warning of enemy tanks rattled the German signals traffic. There were 29 T-34s in the battalion supporting the Russian infantry, and the attack was coming right at the lead elements of Model's 3rd Panzer at Leninskiy.

There were a good many more tanks yet to come, for both tank brigades of the corps had just detrained at Yasnogorsk. About nine kilometers northeast of Tula. Each brigade had three battalions, and a total of 90 T-34s, 33 light T-60s, and another 18 KV-1s. The Russians now had 282 tanks poised to make a daring night attack, something the Germans had not seen since the early frontier battles in Operation Barbarossa. Since that time, there had been very little enemy armor in the field, but now third Tank Corps

was on the scene with the bulk of all the operational tanks available in the entire theater.

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The men of Burda's Battalion, 4th Tank Brigade had been on the road for some time now. After refueling in Tula, they skirted east of the town, hearing the fighting all night as they moved slowly north.

"Where are we going?" said Samohin, adjusting the straps on his ear flaps. It sounds to me like the fighting is over there!" He pointed a gloved hand west, where the glow from exploding artillery fire silhouetted the ragged edge of the town.

Dmitri Lavrinenko shook his head. "That's no place for our tanks," he said. The Siberians are in there, fighting tooth and nail for the city. Word is the entire 7th Panzer Division is there, and the Guards are trying to hold them off. As for us, we go north. There's a new tank corps arriving, but they're one brigade light. Katukov got the word yesterday, and we're now that third brigade."

"Suits me fine," said Samohin. "Where is this new corps?"

"Coming down the road from Serpukhov, and the infantry detrained at Yasnogorsk."

"Infantry?" said Samohin. "All we need now are tanks, and as many as we can find. I've heard rumors, Dmitri."

"What kind of rumors?" Lavrinenko was checking the stowage of his tank's ammo, his head half lowered through the top hatch of the T-34.

"The Germans have a new tank, and it's big! They say it has a much better gun too."

"Who told you this?"

"Just talk I heard when we moved east of Tula. Siberians say the Germans put some new heavy tanks into the fighting at the north end of the town. the anti-tank rifles the infantry have are useless! And the 45mm AT Gun bounces right off—this is what I heard."

"Those rifles always were useless," said Lavrinenko. "Unless you know where to aim. Infantry see a tank and just take a pot shot at it without thinking. I don't blame them, and that tank usually sees them too, and those

machine guns can be very troublesome. I'm surprised the Germans put armor into that town. I would think they would want to push everything they still have up the main road."

"That's what Katukov thinks," said Samohin. "He says the Germans were after the bridge at Alexin, but that will take them nowhere. It's the bridge at Serpukhov they need."

"So now you know where we're going," said Lavrinenko. "Yes, they'll need that bridge, and the long road behind it all the way back to Tula. That's why they are fighting so hard for the town now, but I don't think they expected the Siberians. We gave them a nice little surprise at Mtsensk, eh? I've got eleven kills! That will teach them to be cautious on that road."

"I'm right behind you," said Samohin. "The Major says my last shot was confirmed, so that makes ten for me."

"Good for us both!" Lavrinenko closed the top hatch with a dull clank, and looked around. "Now where is Yuri? He was supposed to look at that right front wheel. It's been squealing like a pig."

Samohin leaned on the tank, still listening to the battle for the city. "Hard to think this is going on for a hundred miles over there. I heard we still have Kaluga, but with the Germans near Alexin who knows how long we'll hold that."

"It's Moscow that matters," said Lavrinenko. "That's what Hitler wants now. I knew it the moment they took Orel. They could have swung around Bryansk, and eventually did, but someone out there wanted to try this road. I intend to make him pay for that mistake. There are some roads you do not try, and this will be one of them."

"Did you hear?" said Samohin. "Someone said the Germans took Mozhaysk, and pushed right up the road towards Moscow. Why are they putting in this new Tank Corps here. That is much closer to the capital than we are."

"Roko is over there. He'll stop them."

"Rokossovsky? I heard he was given a new army!"

"He was given an old army," said Lavrinenko with a grin. "The 16th. They just put new men into it, that's all. And don't worry... We're only a hundred and twenty clicks from Moscow here. If they need us, we can get there very quickly. All the more reason to keep a full belly on fuel, plenty of ammo on hand, and to fix that damn squeaky wheel! Where's Yuri?"

Chapter 15

The forces arrayed on the middle defense line of the capital were indeed the men of the newly reconstituted 16th Army under General Konstantin Rokossovsky, Roko, the 'Rock of the East.' He, too, was an old Cavalry officer, having commanded the 7th Samara Cavalry in the upper Volga district against Volkov's forces, leading a Brigade commander by the name of Georgie Zhukov at that time, whom he described as a disciplined and demanding man, while also being stubborn, painfully proud, and 'broadly inexperienced as a military leader.'

The two men began a long rivalry there in Samara, both serving in the eastern campaigns against the Orenburg Federation, where each gained valuable combat experience that was now serving them very well. Rokossovsky avoided the persecution and torture he would have had to endure during Stalin's purges, and was instead handpicked by Sergei Kirov, who moved him quickly through his historical commands in the 5th Cavalry Corps, and then the 9th Mechanized Corps at the outbreak of Operation Barbarossa. There he had been a rock in the stream, holding up both 13th and 14th Panzer division with his implacable defense, and then counterattacking the 25th Motorized Division left behind to guard that axis while the Germans took another road.

Now he served under the man he had once dismissed as being broadly inexperienced, and the 16th Army, which had been recently destroyed at Smolensk, was raised from its own ashes to mount the last line of defense by a regular Soviet army on the western approaches of Moscow. To flesh out the new units, men from penal battalions were swept up from all over the front rear areas, and hastily organized into new rifle divisions.

In the real history, Stalin had also placed the Rock in command of that same army, seeing a man who had survived the brutality of his own Great Purge as the perfect candidate to lead the tough felons recruited from the penal system. He had once commented that one no longer had to wonder what Rokossovsky might have under his fingernails, for the NKVD had pulled most of them out when he was detained in the Gulags, accused of treason. He

also had steel teeth, for the NKVD had knocked his own out of his head in those same hard days.

But none of that had ever happened. Rokossovsky still had his fingernails, and no steel in his mouth in this telling of events. The question remained as to whether he still had the steel that made up his backbone in that older history. Soon that would be put to the test. He gladly accepted his new command, again a motley collection of misfits, ruffians, mavericks and mad men from the far east, with a sprinkling of new Siberian volunteers to finish it all off.

On the morning of the 14th of September, the tired 6th Panzer Division made its first inroads, throwing three battalions at a single fortified complex held by Russian special forces, and eventually bulling their way in. But the 6th was low on supply, and needing time to rest, with little real offensive punch left after its long drive along that bitterly contested road. They would soon be relieved by a fresh division, the 2nd Panzer, Heinz Guderian's old unit, where he first drilled his armored doctrines in 1938. It was now coming up the road that had been fought for, and cleared, by the blood and fire of the 6th.

And this new German unit was now about to meet the Rock.

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The men of the 810th Machinegun Battalion leapt off the train at Odinsovo, right where Rokossovsky had established his headquarters for 16th Army, just 20 kilometers southwest of the Kremlin. The Germans had attacked the middle defense line of the city the previous day, relying on the fresher 2nd Panzer Division for the main effort. In reprisal, strong reserves in the 2nd Guards Cavalry Corps had come down from the north to try and break through behind them, and cut the road that stretched west to Mozhaysk. It had taken Hoepner's Korps two weeks of hard fighting to push up that road, a distance of a little over 50 kilometers. And now they were breaking through.

The surly, grizzled fighters of the 16th Army threw everything they had at the enemy, using sheer malice when they had no more grenades, or the ammunition ran dry on their inadequate 45mm AT guns. They knew they were the last hard rock in the stream before the river of enemy troops might reach

Moscow, but Hoepner was a hammer, and he kept pounding them, day and night.

Rokossovsky could see that his men were at the limits of their strength to resist. It was only the fact that Hoepner had no infantry to secure his flanks that the danger was not greater. Of the four German Panzer Divisions making this attack, the 1st Panzer was strung out well to the rear facing down elements of the 22nd Army to the north, the 6th Panzer Division was worn out, and now trying to hold back the 2nd Guards Cavalry, 11th Panzer was finally clearing up the last pockets of resistance south of the road, where remnants of the 16th Rifle Corps had retreated all the way from Mozhaysk.

That left only 2nd Panzer, which struck the line of the Soviet defensive positions like an arrow, its steel head being its well established panzer regiment, which had 24 Lions in the spearhead of the attack. They punched through, the German infantry crouching behind them, and then more following in half tracks and armored cars. The Rock was stubborn, rallying his troops while he got on the phone to Moscow and appealed to his old subordinate, and now superior officer, Georgie Zhukov.

"The Germans have a new tank! He declared, his voice surprisingly high and shrill, even though he was a big, barrel-chested man. Zhukov had heard the same plaintive calls from the commander of the 3rd Tank Corps, though he had not yet seen the beasts that were now prowling the battlefields out there. "I'm up against several panzer divisions," said Rokossovsky. "Send me anything you can find!"

"I will get you help," said Zhukov. "But under no circumstances may you withdraw. You must hold that road, hold your position at all costs."

Some hours later the Major commanding the 810th Machinegun Battalion tramped into Rokossovsky's headquarters and saluted. He had just been pulled off the inner defense ring, well north of the city, a sector that was not being threatened, and his men had come through the sullen night to join the fight.

"Good," said Rokossovsky. "How many are you?"

"Twenty-seven squads, sir, but eighteen of those have heavy machineguns."

"Twenty-seven squads? What else is there?"

"It's just me and my men sir," said the Major. "Unless there's another train behind us."

There was no other train. The 810th Machinegun Battalion was all that Zhukov could find to send that day. He had People's Militias on the inner defensive ring, and several other battalions like the 810th. But there were no more Armies to commit to the fight, no more Rifle Corps, no divisions in reserve, and no more tank brigades. The 2nd Siberian Shock Army was still a thousand miles to the east, hastily assembling as it scrounged to outfit its units with any weapons they could find. The 10th Army was closer, but it was coming through Ryazan to try and stop Guderian, and would not arrive until the following day.

Zhukov had already sent the last of the 4th Para Brigade the previous day, and they were fighting south of the main road. Then he had stripped the flak batteries from the airfields around the city, and sent them into the buzz saw of the fight. The only trained, professional troops that remained in the capital were the three battalions of the Kremlin Guard, Sergei Kirov's personal bodyguards, and Beria's internal security troops. He could not touch those. All he could send was that hapless Major and his single battalion of machine gunners. If the line was going to hold, and the city was going to be saved, it was up to Rokossovsky. Implacable as he was, the General could nonetheless see the grim reality of his situation.

If I leave my bandits and brigands where they are now, he thought, the Germans will get through with those damn tanks, and then the city will be defended by nothing more than the old men and boys in the Militias, while my men cling to these bunkers and fox holes.

At least my troops can still fight, and Moscow is a very big place. I've been ordered to hold this damn road, contest every bunker, and every meter of ground, but I would much rather be fighting in the built up areas closer to the city. It would be house to house there, not so comfortable for the people who live in them, but much better for my infantry. Here we deploy on a single hard line. There we could defend in much greater depth. In such a case we will force the Germans to clear every building, every cellar and attic. As it stands, once they get through...

He decided there and then to appeal the order he had received from Zhukov, but to whom could he make such an appeal? Marshal Boris Shaposhnikov was still Chief of the General Staff. Technically that staff served the interests of the Army as a whole, which Zhukov now commanded, but he made his appeal in any case.

“You want the Germans in the city tomorrow night? Who will fight them there, the Babushkas? Let me get my men back to more favorable positions on the outskirts of the city. If we stay here, the Germans will move through and that will be that.”

“Very well, General, you may withdraw to the inner defense ring, but what makes you think you can hold there if you cannot stop the enemy where he stands now?”

“Because Doctorov’s Cavalry are to the north. If I fall back the Germans will have to cover that entire northern flank if they follow me, and that will seriously dilute their striking power.”

Rokossovsky had found a way out of the trap he now believed he was in, and he immediately gave orders for a planned withdrawal that night. But somehow word reached Zhukov, who was furious when he learned that his subordinate had tried to go over his head. He telephoned Rokossovsky, hot with anger, and rescinded that order, telling him he was to stand where he was.

No amount of reasoning would move Zhukov, and Rokossovsky hung up the phone, angry and resentful of the man who thought he knew better, when he was nowhere near the field of battle! He folded his arms, thinking, brooding, and knowing what he had to do. Yes, it might end up costing him his head, or at the very least the fingernails and teeth that he still had because Josef Stalin had not lived to take them from him. But he knew that there were some positions that should not be held, some roads that should not be defended, and some orders that simply could not be obeyed.

That night, he personally went out and rounded up his Division and Brigade Commanders, telling them exactly what they were to do.

*

Off to the south and east, Model reported that he had beaten off the counterattack of the 156th NKVD Regiment, and now had most of Leninskiy under his thumb. *“I’ve punched right through at Leninskiy,”* said Model on the radio. *“Yet the question remains—where do we go from there?”*

Guderian had studied his map carefully, looking for a way forward, but not finding one. “There is a secondary road running up to Alexin from that

town—two good bridges there.”

“Yes, I can probably get to the Oka in a few days, weather permitting, but where with that take me? I would have to push another 30 kilometers north along that river to reach our real objective, Serpukhov. There’s a secondary road along that west bank, but we don’t even know if it can be used until I reconnoiter it.”

“I’ve done that by air,” said Guderian. “It’s a small road, just as you say, and the ground near the river gets a lot of drainage. I’m afraid we will be up to our knees in mud if you take that road. Better leave that to the infantry on your left. Instead, I want you to move east to help me take and clear the main road to Serpukhov.”

“Isn’t that what they’ll expect us to do?”

“This time we’ll have to oblige them. It looks like a whole new Russian tank corps has materialized in front of us. That was what they pulled off the trains to the north. But if we can beat them I doubt they’ll have anything left. I want to hit them hard, then break through for Serpukhov.”

“Very well, Herr General, so we still dance.”

Model wasted no time, ordering KG Munzel and his tanks back across the river and along the good road that linked Leninskiy with the main road to Tula. It would pass through a smaller town called Salkhovo, and there they ran into the Soviet 21st Tank Brigade, engaging them in a sharp duel that was won easily, given the fact that Munzel had all three Panzer battalions at hand, with a hundred medium tanks, though they were all Panzer III variants. But that was more than enough, even though there were 32 T-34s in that brigade. The Germans knocked out 18 of these, and that broke the brigade, sending its disorganized remnants scattering in all directions.

The Soviets retreated west towards Alexin, but maintained a lot of pressure so that Model was forced to follow them with most of his Panzergrenadiers to screen that flank. This meant he would now form the strong right shield to the west of the main road, with Langermann’s 4th Panzer Division screening the eastern approach. The Germans were slowly prying open that corridor north to Serpukhov. The only question now was what they could scrape together to send up that road.

It was Guderian’s gut instinct not to take the road less traveled that would make all the difference that night. Model had a clean shot at the bridge at Alexin, but it was simply too far south to matter. What he really wanted

was Serpukhov, and to get there, the roads less traveled would be inviting even more delays than the mud on the main road had forced upon them. So he decided to stay the course, his eyes fixed on the solid dark line on his map from Tula to Serpukhov. That was where he wanted to go.

Yet just down that road, the Germans were going to meet up with yet another Soviet Tank Brigade, the men and tanks that had first bushwhacked 4th Panzer Division two weeks earlier. It was Mikhail Katukov, who had moved north, swinging east of Tula, and then up to join the armored corps and become its third tank brigade. He had 32 T-34's now, picking up stragglers from the 3rd Corps as he came. He also had 11 KV-1s, and Gusev's battalion had over 30 older BT-7s. And he had something else with those T-34s, men named Samohin and Lavrinenko who knew how to use them, squeaky wheel and all.

That night, another man came on the scene, providing the answer to what the Germans would now push up that road. His unit had arrived from the south, up the rail line from Orel that the Germans had been feverishly converting for a supply corridor. The tanks were fresh off the rail cars at the old copper mine spur that the Russians had once used to rush troops to this sector. The other half of Hoth's generous gift to Guderian had finally arrived with Westernhagen's 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade. If the Russians thought they had more than enough with the Lions roaring with the 7th Panzer Division in Tula, over 100 more had just come on the scene, for the brigade quite literally had 'the Lion's share' of all the heavy tank production Germany had managed in the last two months. And with them was another man who knew how to fight with those tanks—Kurt Knispel.

Part VI

Malakhovo

*“I am sometimes the fox and sometimes the Lion.
The whole secret is knowing when to be the one or the other.”*

— *Napoleon Bonaparte*

Chapter 16

The gritty Sergeant was taking a very long look at the new Russian tank captured in the previous day's fighting, and all around him the other German panzer crews were waiting for his studied appraisal. They had all seen Knispel shooting in the practice drills, and were amazed at his ability to hit distant targets with speed and accuracy that astounded them. The targets would become real enemy tanks soon enough, and the men wanted to see what they would be fighting up close.

The T-34 had begun to appear in small numbers at first, but now the Soviet tank brigades were fielding many battalions that were largely composed of between 24 and 36 of these new tanks. The Germans had been surprised that their 37mm AT guns, and even the 50mm guns on many of their PzKfw IIIs could not hurt the Russian tank, and that they were now receiving enemy fire from the new Russian 76mm main gun at much longer ranges than before. It was only the skill and tactics of the more experienced German tankers that had allowed them to hold their own against the T-34.

But Knispel was not impressed.

He climbed up on the captured vehicle, crept into the turret and sat there, peering out through the view slots and optics. When he emerged, his commanding officer, Lieutenant Hellmann, was there to take his report. He knew Knispel to be a very sharp gunner, and a hands on operator when it came to the panzers.

"Well?"

"Two man turret," said Knispel, "just like all their older models. The tank commander must be aiming the gun, and the optics are terrible—just a single periscope for him, and not even a radio, at least in this one. I've been told the Russians run these about in uncoordinated rushes—no wonder! I think they are still relying on visual cues for maneuvers."

“Maybe so, but what about the gun?”

“Look at it!” Knispel waved his hand dismissively. “I don’t think it can depress more than a few degrees, which means they won’t be able to fight from reverse slope hull down positions like we can. Given what I have seen, I would say this tank will have very poor fire control. Our new panzers are superior in every respect.”

“Yet the armor is fairly good, and sloped at 30 degrees,” said Hellmann. “Our Pak 37’s with the infantry cannot penetrate it. One Panzer Jager company reported a battery hit one of these damn things over twenty times, and they could not kill it.”

“Yes? Of course the 37mm gun will not penetrate this frontal armor, but the guns we have now will do so easily enough. And were they hit even once by the tank? You see what I mean? Lousy fire control and poor optics. If my tank took a hit from an enemy gun, they would be very lucky if they got a second round off before I killed that little bastard. Yet this new tank couldn’t even hit the damn AT gun once! I will make very short work of this T-34, rest assured. You know what this tells me? They don’t have good situational awareness in this tank. So they will not stop me from maneuvering to a position where I can easily kill them. And even if they see me, they could not react quick enough to do anything about it. Maneuver! I could beat this tank in a Panzer III, just like I beat all the others. We should kill at least five or six of these for every one of our tanks they get, and in a Lion, I think I will kill ten or twelve before they even begin to bother me. That gun will not penetrate our frontal armor on the PzKfw-55, so the tables are turned.”

Sergeant Knispel’s sweeping rebuke of the T-34 was enough to bolster the morale of all the crews who had gathered there to see the new enemy tank. With one cursory inspection he had skewered the myth that the T-34 was the finest medium tank ever built.

“But what if they get a lot of these, Kurt?” said Hellmann. “I heard we had trouble at Mtsensk a while back.”

“Then I will get to kill a lot of them.” Knispel smiled. “Frankly, that is all they can do—build so many tanks that they smother us. But where? Don’t we have most of their factories by now?”

The other tank crewmen laughed at that, but no one knew that the Soviets would build merely 50,000 of these tactically inferior tanks, and possibly win the war with them by so doing.

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The following morning Knispel was going to get to test his pronouncements personally when his battalion moved up the main road through the orchards flanking the small farming town of Octabyrskiy. The road ahead was thick with mud, and the heavy Lion's only made the situation much worse as they struggled on through. After three kilometers of toil, taking more than an hour, they reached the town of Malakhovo, nestled against the tree-sewn banks of a river to the west, and fringed by orchards to the east where the main road wound its way around the town. The terrain beyond was farmland, disappearing into yet more woodland ahead.

The Russians could see the Germans were slowly prying open a wedge along this road, and that morning they determined to do everything possible to close it. Model's 3rd Panzer was on the left, now fighting well west of Malakhovo, and Langermann's 4th Panzer was on the far right, engaged with the infantry of 3rd Motorized Division about 5 kilometers east of the main road.

Up that road came Knispel, riding with the vanguard of Schwerepanzer 101, and he was soon to be treated like a most unwelcome guest. The Russian 5th Tank Brigade now came charging out of the grey rain streaked dawn, surging down the road from the north, and threw itself right on Westernhagen's heavy battalions. The Russian unit was known as the ABC Brigade, because of the names of the three battalion commanders: Antonov, Borisov and Cherkin. It did not know what it was about to encounter, and the Lions roared, most opening up at under 700 meters due to limited visibility, except for one tank, commanded by a ragged Sergeant with a very keen eye.

Kurt Knispel was keeping a close eye on the fringes of the town as his platoon column moved up. He was looking at the condition of the streets, their width and layout, the nature of the buildings there, and thinking how he might maneuver to that side if the situation should warrant. He was in 2nd company, and soon heard the crackle of a warning over his headset earphones—enemy tanks ahead! It was like a dinner bell ringing in his mind, and he smiled, tapping his driver on the shoulder.

"Jog left," he said quickly. "I want to get off this damn road and into that

town. The platoon will follow me.”

The growl of the Lion’s engine was reassuring as they pivoted off the muddy road and found better traction when they approached the town, where the locals had laid down a lot of gravel in places to strengthen the road beds. Knispel had seen the grey stones gleaming wet in the morning light, and knew that was where he wanted to be—anywhere but on that muddy road where his heavy tank would labor to move even a few feet.

“We were like a herd of elephants back there,” said Knispel, “snout to tail on that road, and just as slow. Now we’ve better ground under us. Head for that alleyway there.” He had his head out the open top hatch of his Lion, scanning the buildings on either side as they lumbered into the town. The four other Lions in his Pride followed him, grinding on in his wake. It was then that he heard the sharp crack of gunfire, and knew the enemy had finally arrived.

“That was one of our 75’s,” he said, knowing the sound of the new German gun easily enough. Three muffled reports followed, and Knispel listened, hearing two more after that. Five enemy tanks had answered that fire, and he nodded to his gun loader, Willi Brom. “A full battalion,” he said calmly. “Good hunting today boys! Get to the northern edge of this town. That will give us the best angle on the main road.”

Those few minutes of listening had told Knispel where the enemy was, east of the road, and approaching from beyond the high ground designated Hill 896 on his map. There, another small town called Slobodka lay at the base of the hill on its western slopes, and he had no doubt that the Russians would want that high ground if they had any infantry support. A secondary road emerged from the eastern fringe of the woods to the north, then ran along the flank of the hill between the two towns. The enemy would use that road, he knew, and now he was maneuvering to get into the best possible location to cover that approach.

The rest of the battalion had turned right off the main road, heading for Slobodka, and that was where the action had started when the Russians began to mount a T-34 rush with Borisov’s battalion.

Knispel squinted into the dawn, smelling rain on the wind, and deciding he would use Malakhovo as an armored castle to try and break the enemy charge. For the main road led north into that woodland, and he had little doubt that the enemy would have a column there, possibly setting up in those

woods to stop the German advance. Then he saw tanks ahead, moving like grey shadows from the edge of the woods. He descended into the dark interior of the heavy turret, shutting the hatch above with a hard clank.

“That house on the right,” said Knispel. “Take us right through the wall.”

The driver gunned the engine, and the Lion surged forward, smashing easily through the stucco and light brick wall, and clean through the great room to open a hole in the opposite wall.

“All stop,” said Knispel, watching through his periscope, and then opening the upper hatch one more time to peer outside. He was back with a grin a moment later.

“They won’t see us here for a good long while. I’ll traverse left ten degrees,” he said calmly. “Load A.P.”

“Now? They have to be three kilometers away Sergeant.”

“Willi, the fight is on! Don’t make me give an order twice!”

“Sorry Sergeant. Loading A.P. Gun Ready!”

Knispel looked long and hard through the range finder, adjusting his optics slightly, and then fired. The round was hot from the gun, a streak of molten lava as it lanced out at the distant shadows. There came an explosion, and then Knispel saw the enemy tank he had been gunning for burning,

“A kill!” he said. “Traversing right—five degrees.... Willi?”

“Gun ready!”

Another round pulsed towards a distant enemy tank, at least two kilometers off, for Knispel would become famous for these long shots, his keen eye for depth and range excelling in such situations to make him the lethal killer he was. Later in the war he would get a T-34 at just over three kilometers, a shot for the record books, which he was even now inscribing with his name. None of the other tanks in his platoon had fired, as their gun crews had not thought they could hit or hurt the enemy at such range. But Knispel heard Hellmann in his headset, shouting out congratulations. “Two kills, Sergeant Knispel. Keep up that good shooting!”

The Sergeant was only too happy to comply.

The kills were as much a shock to the enemy as they were to the other crews who saw them. The T-34s halted briefly, as if they were trying to sight and find the enemy that had attacked them, and then they began to put on speed, a rush of eighteen to twenty tanks heading for the edge of Malakhovo.

“Fools rush in,” said Knispel as he watch the scene through his range finder. “Traversing right...” Another shot, another kill, the third in the space of five minutes. The T-34s began firing furiously as they charged, and Knispel took out one more tank before he barked out an order to maneuver.

“Reverse engine... Back five meters!” The Lion had plowed right through the wall of an old farm house, and Knispel had been firing from inside the building, through a gaping hole in the far wall where the tank had smashed through as it came to a halt. As they pulled back, the Lion was now completely invisible to the on rushing enemy tanks, its hull and turret littered with broken chunks of mud brick and shattered boards.

“Platoon!” shouted Knispel over his radio. “Open fire!”

The sharp crack of the 75s split the air, and dark smoke singed by red-yellow fire belched from the muzzles of the tanks. Knispel’s long shots had brought the wrath of the whole enemy battalion down on that corner of the village, and the buildings all around them suddenly erupted with hits from the enemy fire. It was Antonov’s battalion, coming down the main road through the woodland, just west of Borisov’s advance on the high ground near Slobodka. Yet they had no idea what they were now closing on, a line of five Lion’s at the edge of the village, four visible, one hidden in the rubble of the broken farm house.

The Sergeant had been silently counting, after watching the enemy close as he ticked off the seconds. He adjusted the barrel of his Lion downward a few degrees, as if he already knew where the Russian tanks would be when he re-engaged.

“Driver, forward again, five meters!”

The growl of the big engine rumbled as the treads ground over the shattered plaster and brick. The long barrel of the main gun emerged from the yawning hole in the far wall, and Knispel was ready with his order to fire. Again the gun blasted away, and this time it was a glancing blow on the target, the round striking the frontal armor of the T-34 at an odd angle and scudding off in a wild ricochet.

“Willie, one more time. I was too hasty.”

Brom was working hard, his breath fast with the exertion and adrenaline of the moment. “Gun ready sir!”

Another round was chambered and Knispel did not miss this second shot, a turret hit that devastated the enemy T-34. Colonel Antonov had lost twelve

tanks in his mad rush, five of them to Knispel's credit alone. The other eager young Corporals, Sergeants and Lieutenants in the brigade, now only just beginning their careers in the panzer force, would all get their turn in the hours ahead. Some had names that would be carved in steel over the next three violent years of war. At that very moment, Michael Whittmann was riding in the number three tank in II Battalion. With him was Balthazar Woll, his gunner, a man who would go on to kill over 100 tanks in the shadow of Whittmann's 138 kills.

Karl Mobius, another centurion who would log over 100 kills, was also in the brigade, along with Helmut Wendorff, who was credited with 95 in Fedorov's history books. One platoon harbored Bobby Warmbrunn, Jurgen Brandt, and Heinz Kling, all fifty plus killers who would earn silver medals to go along with the gold that would be racked up by Knispel and others.

Their sudden arrival on the scene had completely unhinged the Russian attack. Before it was over, the ABC Brigade would lose another fifteen T-34s, five KV-1s and a pair of T-60s. Not a single Lion was killed, though many took hits. Their frontal armor presented an impenetrable wall of steel, with stopping power equivalent to 120mm of armor, almost twice what the best Soviet guns in front of them could penetrate at the ranges fought.

Now it was the Russians who would suffer tank shock. The advantage that had allowed them to bloody the nose of 4th Panzer Division at Mtsensk, picking off Panzer IIIs with their better 76mm guns, was suddenly over. The tables were turned again, and it was the German Lion which stood invincible on the field, capable of facing, and beating, any tank the Soviets had. The Russians fell back, retreating north to try and reorganize everything they had left.

Chapter 17

At Malakhovo, what remained of the ABC Brigade had swept up to the village like a wave on the shore, losing its strength and power on sharp, jagged rocks. One of Knispel's platoon tanks had taken several hits, one damaging a track that left the tank temporarily immobile. Knispel heard the Sergeant call for support on the radio, and in a heartbeat, he ordered his driver to back out of the shattered shell of the old farmhouse and into the graveled alley. The Lion turned, the heavy tracks and 55 ton weight grinding on the gravel as the tanks moved on. When he reached the edge of the village they felt a hard chink on the forward side armor, and Knispel knew they had finally taken a hit. The wounded Lion was just ahead, and the Sergeant could see that three T-34's had been jogging west to try and get around for a side shot. To make matters worse, he saw that white coated infantry were riding on their backs, and knew those men would soon leap from the tanks to begin a supporting attack.

"Get us right behind Kleber's tank!" he shouted, and the engine gunned as they moved forward, arriving just in time. The three T-34's were starting to range on the wounded Lion, a round zipping past with an evil woosh.

"See what I mean!" Knispel laughed. "They can't fire on the move worth shit. Left five degrees. We'll get the tank on that side first."

And he did.

The wounded Lion also traversed to fire, and when the second tank had its turret blown completely off, the Germans cheered and whistled. Both Knispel and Kleber had hit it at nearly the same time.

"There's your lucky number seven!" said Willie, but the Sergeant shook his head.

"That's Kleber's kill. I've got plenty of my own."

The third T-34 was backing away as fast as the driver could go, and Knispel had an easy shot, but he waited, seeing Kleber's main gun traversing to engage. The Russians were firing, but missed again badly, their fire control on the move being abysmal, just as Knispel had predicted.

“Take it out, Helmut!” said Knispel over his radio, and Helmut Kleber did exactly that, getting his second kill of the day, both tanks that Knispel could have easily destroyed himself. The enemy armor defeated, he ordered his driver forward to engage the infantry, emerging from the turret hatch to get on the main machine gun. The coaxial was already spitting fire at the Russian soldiers, who were running fitfully for the edge of the town. Knispel joined in, gunning them down, the shell casings ejecting and clattering over the heavy armored turret.

Malakhovo was secure, at least at that moment, and Antonov’s battalion had been shattered. Knispel heard commands being shouted over his headset, and looked over his shoulder to see German infantry coming up through the rubble of the alleyway. The brigade had a full battalion of Panzergrenadiers in its structure, and each of the three tank battalions operated with a company of infantry mounted in APCs.

The sounds of battle rumbled to the east, where 1st company had been engaged near Slobodka. Now the second battalion tanks were finally plowing through the mud on the main road south of the town, and beginning to enter Malakhovo. The initial enemy attack had been broken, and they would now take the lead and push on up the road while 1st Battalion reorganized.

Knispel saw the lead tanks and knew it was Whittmann, an enterprising young Sergeant who had been plucked from an SS Regiment after getting six kills single handedly with a StuG III assault gun during a hot action earlier in Barbarossa. When the 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade was formed, it saw men from both the regular army and SS collected to receive the honor of driving Germany’s newest tanks. Every man there had to have at least five kills, and Whittmann’s tally just made the grade. It was the same score Knispel had brought with him, though he had just doubled his tally to twelve kills in this single engagement.

Whittmann would learn much from the burly Lion headed Sergeant during his time with the 101st, and walk in his shadow, eventually reaching a total of 50 kills for his silver engagement medal two years from that moment, when Knispel was closing in on a hundred himself. Then, in the desperate fighting of 1944, Michael Whittmann would suddenly earn his reputation as “The Black Baron,” and rack up another fifty kills within a three week period. Now, however, he was still learning his trade, and Knispel gave him thumbs up as his tank lumbered by.

“Don’t be greedy,” he heard Whittmann shout his way. “Leave a few for the rest of us!”

“Plenty more out there,” Knispel shouted back. “They’ll be in that tree line ahead.” He saw Whittmann clench his fist, eager to get after them.

The tanks of the second battalion rumbled by, and Knispel was out through his hatch and down off the Lion to help the crew of Kleber’s wounded tank fix that damaged track. He wanted to get on up that road as much as anyone else, but he would not leave any tank in his platoon behind. As he labored, his hands muddied and raw from the gravel in the alley way, another man waited in the relative silence of the woodland, just where Kurt Knispel said he would be.

Dmitri Lavrinenko was eager for a kill that day as well, and he would not have to wait long.

6th Tank Brigade was on the Russian left, still unaware of the sharp reversal that had been suffered by the ABC Brigade in their mad rush on Malakhovo. The three battalion commanders here, Kamenko, Sorokin and Telenin, would make a strong push to try and cut the main road from the east. To do so they would face off against old Rubber Nose again, KG Eberbach of Langermann’s 4th Panzer Division. The T-34s sloshed through the gravel bed of a small stream, growing ever more swollen with the rain, and the tanks gleamed with wet moonlight as the 6th Brigade pushed on ahead. They ran right into Eberbach’s II/35 Panzer Battalion. Startled by the sudden appearance of so many enemy tanks, the German battalion chose prudence over bravado, and quickly fell back half a kilometer to reach the supporting infantry of KG Dorn’s Panzergrenadier Battalion. There they reorganized a combined arms Kampfgruppe, and launched an immediate counterattack just before dawn.

Even as they did so, thunder rolled, and the skies opened with torrential rain. The Russians had seen the German withdrawal, and came on, heedless of the danger, and for a moment it looked like the weight of three full tank battalions was going to be more than Eberbach could handle. His Kampfgruppe was still mostly comprised of Panzer IIIs, and the 50mm guns

were getting hits that often bounced harmlessly off the frontal armor of the T-34s.

The 1941 model of the Russian T-34 had what was thought to be very solid 81mm frontal armor. The German Panzer IIIs, even with their improved 5cm KwK 39 main gun, could only penetrate 44mm of frontal armor at 1000 meter range. At point blank range of 100 meters, it could only penetrate 67mm of armor, and so the T-34 had been largely invulnerable unless caught from the side or rear with a very good shot. But all that was over, almost before it had started.

With the memory of Mtsensk still fresh in his mind, Eberbach realized he was in water three times deeper here. So he got on the radio and looked for some help, which soon arrived in the heavy Lions of II Battalion, Schwerepanzerbrigaden 101.

Now the Russians tankers of the 6th Brigade were about to make the acquaintance of the Big Cats. Their supporting infantry had been out in front, and as the German reinforcements came up, they paled before the heavy growl of the new German armor.

Lightning flashed at the edge of thunder, soon joined by the sharp crack of the main tank guns. There were 24 Lions in II Battalion, supported by 12 Leopards, and just down the road was the remainder of Westernhagen's Heavy Panzer Brigade, yet another full battalion of Germany's fearsome new armored gladiators. Throwing in KG Munzel on the left, and everything Eberbach had, the Germans would field over 200 panzers to face the Russian attack, and a monumental tank battle would rip through the dawn like a raging tempest.

The Germans would be elated to see just how well their Lions could fight. The new 7.5cm KwK main gun also had new ammo to go with it, designated PzGr 40/42 series, and it could penetrate 149mm of armor at 1000 meters, and 100mm at twice that range, more than enough to pierce the 81mm armor on the T-34, as Kurt Knispel's long shots had already proven at Malakhovo. And that is exactly what the German tank gunners were doing.

Suddenly the Russian tankers, just getting used to the belief that they could face down the best of the German tanks and come off the better, had this illusion soundly shattered. The Lions lined up like the phalanx of steel that they were, and the sharp crack of their guns chased the lightning as the battle opened. To their great delight, they saw the enemy tanks hit at good

range, and stopped cold with a single shot from the new gun.

3rd Battalion of the Soviet 6th Tank Brigade was smashed in ten minutes, and the Lions roared on. In the swirling, wild battle that followed, the Germans lost six Pz III-Ns and three Pz IVs in Eberbach's 1st Battalion, but not a single Lion was put out of action in the heavy battalion, which lost only two of the lighter Leopard tanks. For the loss of these ten tanks, they took down 25 T-34s and another 18 T-60s. The up armored KV-1s fared better, with only one lost, but the Russians had two of three battalions shattered in the Brigade, losing 44 tanks, a loss of 50% of its fighting power in the twenty minute action.

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When they reached the edge of the woodland north of Malakhovo, the men of the ABC Brigade were relieved to see reinforcements had come at this most opportune time. It was Mikhail Katukov's vaunted 4th Tank Brigade, the heroes of Mtsensk that had so bedeviled KG Eberbach some weeks ago. The 4th had come on the scene just in time to witness the carnage of Colonel Antonov's folly. A platoon commander with the 4th Armored Brigade emerged from the tree line and halted, surveying the chaos of the battlefield, seeing T-34s pointed in all directions.

"What are you doing?" an officer shouted. "Can't you see where the fighting is? Get your tanks down there and join the attack!"

"Attack?" Lavrinenko shook his head. "That's a nightmare, not an attack. What were you thinking? The Germans had the town, and you cannot rush a position like that without taking heavy losses. You must flank them!"

"You flank them then, by God. Get moving!"

"Who are you?"

"Antonov's Battalion, 5th Brigade."

"Well, this is 4th Brigade," said the Sergeant. "We stay right where we are. In fact, back us a little deeper into those trees, Yuri. The Germans will be after that mess out there soon enough. Lieutenant—the best thing you can do now is pull back north of Slobodka. Don't even think of mounting another attack here. They'll eventually come after you, and they won't expect us to be in a good flanking position in these woods. Let them come out into that open

field there east of the main road. We'll take them at a kilometer out—side shots—and see how they like it!”

Dmitri Lavrinenko was finally about to come face to face with Germany's very best, and the outcome of Guderian's advance on Serpukhov would ride in the balance.

Chapter 18

Lavrinenko was waiting in the shadows of the trees, the grey light and rolling early morning mist his friend that day. Visibility had fallen to about 700 meters, and the field was still strewn with damaged and destroyed tanks, their fires burning and adding the dark char of black smoke to the scene. He had planned on firing at longer range, but 700 meters suited him fine. All accounts as he listened to the radio chatter with his radio operator, Corporal Borzoi, were frantic exclamations about this new German tank. What was out there? He would soon find out.

His driver, Private Bedenny, was waiting for any order to move, knowing the Lieutenant well enough to realize he would often fire, then move to a new position he had already selected in his mind as he surveyed the ground. His loader Private Fedotin, had a round chambered, and the second at the ready, though he knew the Lieutenant seldom needed more than one shot to get what he was aiming at. The wreckage of so many T-34s gave him a lot to think about that morning. He had become accustomed to feeling relatively invulnerable in this tank, able to withstand most AT guns the Germans had if they did not get in close. So for him the fog was an ominous sign, and he kept looking at the Lieutenant, who had his head up through the top hatch, eyes lost behind his field glasses.

Then he was all business, down through the hatch and hanging the glasses on a hook, his eyes quickly pressed to the optics of his main gun.

“Column on the road, 500 meters. Be ready, Fedotin!” He was sighting, waiting, almost holding his breath. Then he squeezed off the gun trigger, and the round leapt out, hitting the enemy tank right where he wanted it, on that sloped frontal armor to test its strength. If this was a Panzer III, he would blow clean through at this range, and he would have kill number twelve.

But it was not a Panzer III...

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The Germans could see that the enemy attack had been broken, and now it was time to pursue. Kleber had a wounded leg, not his own, but that of his new Pz-55 Lion. So Knispel put his tank in the number five position as the platoon pulled out of Malakhovo, probing north along a narrow side road, into the smoke and mist of the enemy retreat. The thin stands of trees crowded close to the road as they exited the town, many no more than six to eight feet high, and with thin sapling width trunks a few inches wide. Yet they still made visibility into the fields beyond difficult in places. The road also gained elevation, ever so gently, but Knispel was watching the crest of his near horizon very closely, not wanting to be surprised.

The Sergeant was in the number two spot, and they passed a burning T-34 on the right, seeing the body of a dead crewman hanging from the open turret. As much as he would make his fame by killing tanks, he always hated to see one like that, for they died in their own steely agony, and it was often a gruesome site.

The death of the tank, like the man, was a striking, visceral experience. It wasn't just the bruised and buckled armor where the tungsten tipped shell had blasted through. The tank would burn inside, its innards ravaged by fire. Thick acrid smoke from burned rubber would hang in the air for hours after, a choking aura of death. Parts of the engine and other components would melt, leaking from gashes and wounds in the metal, like bright silver mercury that was the blood of this mechanical beast. It would run down the scarred exterior, drooling onto the tracks, and pool in the dull grey mud like the blood of that soldier, a hapless tank commander, running red from the deep gash in his upper chest. He had been the last man to try and get out, but did not make it to safety.

Knispel knew he went forward now by the grace of God, and the skill of his own quick eye and hand, the strength of the steel in that forward armor on his panzer. Yet one look at that tank spoke volumes within, for its commander had once enjoyed a brief summer where he and his vehicle had every chance of meeting and beating the enemy on the road ahead. This was the sad end of that illusion of invulnerability, and he chided himself inwardly

that he, too, would one day meet another tank, another gun, that would be fully capable of destroying his own armored chariot. He shook his mind alert, and peered ahead.

Hans Jurgen was in the lead tank, his head also up through the top hatch, field glasses raised. Then the first round came, like a hot comet of molten fire as it hissed in to strike Jurgen's tank right on the frontal armor. It failed to penetrate, but the resulting explosion sent shrapnel up and back, taking Jurgen in the neck with a bad wound. Knispel saw him hunch over and fall back through the open hatch, and he cursed under his breath as he dove into his own tank and slammed the hatch shut.

"All crews! Hatches tight! Targets left center!"

They had come to a gap in the trees crowding close to the narrow road, and off to the left was a bare brown field, a perfect open field of fire, thought Knispel. The dark, ragged edge of another tree line in the distance held his attention, his heavy brows low on his forehead, hair wild as the mane of a lion as he peered through his periscope, waiting for the second shot that he knew was coming. Lavrinenko did not disappoint.

As Jurgen's tank careened left off the road, it entered a low gully, nose down at a sharp angle for the barest moment, but that was when the second round came in, right on top of the turret, penetrating the thinner armor there and putting an end to Jurgen's gasping struggle for breath where he was slumped inside, his bloodied hand pressed tightly against his neck. The blow jolted the turret left, and Knispel saw that it did not correct, knowing the worst, yet the tank's momentum carried it up the other side of the gully, which was acting as a perfect anti-tank ditch in that one spot in the road where Jurgen had been unlucky enough to turn. Knispel saw the place in the distant tree line where that second enemy round came from, rotated his turret, coming right about five degrees.

"Gun ready!"

He fired, seeing the enemy fire their third shot at Jurgen's tank at almost the exact same moment. It was only then that he knew he was going to be just a little wide to the right with that shot, which had been a good guess from the first. Now he knew where his enemy was, and he would not miss again.

“Back!” Lavrinenko shouted at his driver. “Then come left and sprint to that lower ground at three o’clock!” It was a low depression in the field, almost crater like, and ringed by trees. That was his number two firing spot, and his route would be screened by a clump of thin trees as he went. There would be mud, but he trusted to the good wide tracks of his T-34, and hoped it would not be too deep.

He moved just in time, his eyes widening when he saw a hot round burn right through the spot where his tank had been just moments before. Someone out there was very good, he thought. Yet this only stiffened his resolve. As the T-34 raced ahead, tracks grinding through the wet field grass and dark brown earth, Lavrinenko was watching closely, elated that his third shot had hit the underside of the lead German tank as it climbed out of the gully. This time he had a clean penetration, and he got that twelfth kill, though he knew well enough he had been very lucky. The other four tanks had much better ground off that road, and there they were, all in a line abreast, and one was already tracking his movement as the T-34 raced on behind that thin screen of sapling trees.

“Ready Samohin?” he said through his radio set, one of the units privileged to have radios in every tank in his four unit platoon. The Russians had laid a very careful trap. Lavrinenko opened the engagement, but none of the other tanks in the platoon fired. He got his hits, then backed off and was sprinting to the depression he had spotted earlier, and he knew the Germans could not see it from that road. To them it would look as though he were making for a little stand of trees for cover, and his idea was that he would draw the enemy’s attention long enough for his other three T-34s to get a good bead on the advancing tanks.

The plan worked exactly as he hoped, but with only seconds to spare. The Germans were tracking on him, and the number two tank fired, just as his T-34 jolted into that depression, the round streaking right above the tank, which would have been skewered had it not descended below the rim of that depression. Then Samohin, and the other two tanks in the platoon that had been waiting silently in the tree line opened fire, each one sighting on a separate tank. The sharp crack of the 76s cut through the chill morning air, and an instant later there were three hard thumps, one after another, for all three rounds hit home.

But all three struck that heavy frontal armor on the Lions, and bounced clean off, and at just under 500 meters!

Knispel saw what the Russians had done, momentarily stunned to hear the hard thunk on the armor of his own tank, but knowing it had held against the violence of that attack. Now his blood was up. This was personal. Someone had hurt Jurgen; probably killed him and possibly his loader as well, and put his hands on his own tank at the same time! These were not the Russian tankers he had been killing so easily before. If he and his men had been in Panzer IIIs, they would all be dead now, statistics in the deadly game of counting those confirmed kills. He was determined to even the score.

He saw where the enemy was on that tree line, realizing what that first tank had done in opening the action and bating the German fire. It was a very carefully laid ambush, the same sort he had heard about when the operation opened and 4th Panzer Division had trouble at Mtsensk. The Russians had set up on good, concealed positions, with that lovely open field of fire to the road, and then the lead tank lured the Germans in.

“Oh, you’re a sly one,” he said under his breath, bringing the turret around to engage, “a clever little fox. But you sound like a mouse.” He could clearly hear what he thought was a bad wheel on that tank, squeaking whenever it moved. “I’ll deal with you in a moment. First to get your other friends in the nest.”

He fired at the middle position on the tree line where he knew the enemy must be waiting, his eagle eye remembering exactly where they had been seconds before. The Russian tank had started to back away, just as Lavrinenko had done, but it was not quick enough. There came a loud explosion, and he saw the entire turret blown up to the height of the tree tops, and knew he would not take any more fire from that rascal. He heard that telltale squeak, then he pivoted his gun around to cover that depression again, knowing his enemy had to move or be killed soon as his panzers closed the range.

There he was! The bold little mouse was already running from his hole, but it would be a difficult shot. Both tanks were jolting along, the trees on the

rim of that depression were in the way, and he knew, instinctively, that he would not get the hit he wanted while moving. So instead he looked to see where that tank might be going.

“All stop!” he shouted, hearing the reassuring noise of the main gun loading. By stabilizing his tank, he had just doubled his chances of getting a hit—and he fired.

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Lavrinenko was shocked when he realized what had just happened. His comrades got three clean hits, and yet not one of the enemy tanks was bothered a whit! That first test shot he had taken had also bounced, and now he knew the worst of all he had heard in those frantic radio calls from the men in Antonov’s battalion. The 76mm gun would not penetrate this new monster, not here at 500 meters, and certainly not at the longer ranges where he had so much success hunting the older German tanks. His platoon had done everything right, but they had counted on meeting Panzer IIIs. This was something else, something new, as tough as a KV-2, yet leaner, faster, and with a very good gun that could blow right through the frontal armor on his T-34.

A chill ran up his spine for now he knew the only way to get this new enemy tank would be to either find some thinner armor on the sides or rear, or to simply swarm it with superior numbers. Neither was going to happen today.

“Move right!” he shouted, “Fast! Fast! Run for the neck of that tree line!”

That was going to be his moment of greatest danger, but he hoped the sudden turn would throw off any enemy that was sighting on him. All he needed was a few seconds—but he was wrong.

Knispel saw the one place he would go himself in that segment of the tree line, a small notch in the woods where a fallen tree lay prone by a stack of cut timber. If this Russian tank commander was good, that was where he would also go. From there the enemy would have had an excellent hull down position, and so when Lavrinenko suddenly turned, he only smiled, adjusted his range, and fired.

The round hissed in to strike the T-34 square on the back, blasting through to the engine and exploding. The resulting shrapnel took Lavrinenko's loader, Private Fedotin, in the stomach, and he would not survive, but his body had shielded Lavrinenko.

"Out!" he shouted, unhurt and glad to still be breathing. His driver was out the front hatch, and he followed, as thick smoke began to fill the close quarters of the tank. It was the second time he had lost a tank, and it would not be the last, but at least he was alive.

They made it to the tree line, where he knew the rest of his ambush team waited, three more T-34s from second platoon. "Move!" he shouted. "But aim low for their tracks, that frontal armor is too good!"

His only thought after that was getting to another tank, and he saw one close by, silent and still, a thin stream of smoke coming from the engine, which had seized up at a critical moment and left the tank immobile. But it still had a gun, he thought, and he raced for it, waving for his remaining crew to follow him.

"But Sergeant, we will have no power. The engine is dead. How will you maneuver or rotate the turret fast enough manually?"

"Even a broken clock is right twice a day," said Lavrinenko. "Get in and load that gun! We'll play possum."

Lavrinenko knew that he was climbing into little more than a stationery pill box, but it was better than standing there in the rain. He was going to sit there in that dead cold steel tank, his eye glued to the gun sights, and wait for that clock to strike true. The Germans would be coming, and if he was lucky, one enemy tank or another would run right across his bore sight.

Knispel clenched his fist when he got the hit, seeing the Russian crew bailing out. The lion had taken the bait, catching that mouse by the tail just as it leapt for the safety of its next hiding place. The other four tanks in his platoon had fanned out, and now they were advancing on the tree line in a chevron formation, with Knispel's tank on the angle in the lead. He saw movement, and shouted out an order.

"Platoon halt! Targets ahead!"

Three T-34s appeared so suddenly that he immediately knew the ground must fall off to a lower elevation just beyond that notch. If they could have stayed just below that rise, firing hull down they would have been in a much better position, but his earlier inspection of the captured T-34 told him they had to show themselves. The gun on that tank could simply not depress more than a few degrees. Kleber fired first, scoring a glancing blow on the leftmost tank, and Knispel fired second, taking it flush on the upper frontal plate.

“Another kill Sergeant!” His driver whistled.

“No, we’ll give that one to Kleber. He hit that tank first.” He was already rotating to sight on the middle tank, which was still charging, the range diminishing to 300 meters. They want to see if they can beat my armor at point blank range, he thought. But I won’t let them get the chance. He put one round on the turret, punching through and surely killing that tank commander. The platoon quickly smashed the third T-34, and that looked to be the end of the engagement, until a hot round came right for Kleber’s tank, leaping out of the shadows of those trees.

The hands struck twelve on Lavrinenko’s clock. Kleber had drifted right through his gun sights, and the range was an easy 300 meters. He had a perfect side shot, and he took it, his loader pumping in a second round so he could fire yet again a few seconds later. Sometimes a lion, sometimes a fox, thought Lavrinenko.

He got his hits, then ordered his men to quickly bail out. He would never know if he could claim that tank as a kill, but it hardly mattered. All he could think of was getting back to friendly lines, back in another tank, and getting to Katukov with information he had learned in this sharp little duel. Yes, the Germans had a new tank, but that was not all. They had someone inside it that could read his mind.

The battle of Malakhovo had just ended. The Russian attack was broken, the armor of the 3rd Tank Corps shattered, and the Russians were falling back. Sergeant Kurt Knispel had racked up an amazing nine kills, and was also gracious enough to give two more that he might have claimed to his platoon mate Kleber. As for those last two shots taken by Lavrinenko, he would have been shocked to learn that neither penetrated the 100mm side armor on the Lion. No man there knew it at that moment, but Germany had a war winner in the VK-55, and it was only the first of their new tank designs. The road Guderian had labored to control was finally his. Now all he had to

do was find the fuel he needed to keep his panzers on that road, for every day would bring one final reserve corps the Russians still had on their side ever closer, and it was commanded by General Winter...

Part VII

Black Snow

“Second Panzer Army is forging ahead, slowly but surely. Guderian had someone call up in the afternoon that his troops are on their last legs. It is true, they did have to fight hard, and a very long way, and still they come through victoriously, pushing back the enemy everywhere. So we may hope that they may be able to fight on, even against the repeatedly reinforced enemy, (new Siberian divisions), until a favorable closing line is reached. Hoepner is still clawing his way towards Moscow, so close, and yet each mile is an agony. Just west of the Kremlin, there is an ominously quiet spot where the enemy now, all of the sudden, has intensified his reconnaissance effort across the frozen river. It is not impossible that, after being beaten back elsewhere, he is now trying his luck there under cover of the fogs.”

—War Diary of General Franz Halder

Chapter 19

The road to Serpukhov had been a whirlwind advance. With the Heavy Brigade breaking through, all the Soviet 3rd Tank Corps could do was move aside to the east and try and maintain pressure on the German flank. This forced Guderian to post kampfgруппes built around the Panzergrenadiers in Langermann's 4th Panzer Division. The four battalions of Westhoven and Dorn were strengthened by the Division Panzerjager companies, flak batteries, and backed up by most of the artillery. KG Eberbach operated just east of the road, keeping a wary eye on anything that might be building up at Yasnogorsk, a railhead the Russians had been using to move in reinforcements.

"Where are they getting all these fresh units?" he said on the radio to Guderian. "Don't we have most of their army in the Kirov Pocket?"

"Yes," said Guderian, "but that is our problem as much as theirs. "This time they haven't collapsed like other cauldrons. They're fighting, and we had to commit 24 infantry divisions just to keep them in the bag. That's why infantry is scarce as hen's teeth."

"They're fighting for the city named for their leader," Eberbach suggested. "And now for Moscow. Yet every time we smash a division, two more appear to take its place!"

To keep moving north, Guderian had to call on one of those hard to find infantry divisions, the 31st, fighting further west with 35th Korps. He wanted to move it into the positions north of Tula and relieve Langermann's force. He also gave up his plan for a double envelopment of the city, which then freed up the 17th Panzer Division, and Loeper's 10th Motorized. These units could then swing around the western side of Tula and relieve Funck's 7th Panzer Division in the northern segments of the city, where it had been entangled with the Siberian Guards in costly house to house fighting.

"Infantry," Guderian said aloud as he looked at his map. "Two more good infantry divisions is all I need, but where to find them? At the very least, this realignment of forces should free up 7th Panzer again, and eventually I will get Langermann off flank duty as well. I will move the 7th right behind

Westernhagen's 101st. We drive on Serpukhov tonight!"

On the 19th of September, Gruner's Recon Battalion from Model's 3rd Panzer pushed up the road, finding it completely empty. The Germans had cut clean through the massed armor that had fought so desperately at Malakhovo, and now 7th Panzer was coming up behind them to organize the advance. The Generals met on the muddy road north of Malakhovo, Guderian in the center of the group with his map.

"Where did they get that tank corps?" said Model.

"From the same bag with all these rifle divisions," said Guderian. "But it seems we have solved the problem of this T-34."

"That we have," said Westernhagen, a tall, proud man in a dark SS style uniform. "My Big Cats went right through them!"

"Yet we still have a long way to go, and I'm afraid we will not have the support from 12th Panzer I was hoping for from the west. It pushed into Maloyarslavets as planned, but now they have pulled it out to send north to help Hoepner."

"But he has only twenty kilometers to go," Funck protested. "We needed that division!"

"Certainly, but I have freed up your troops by other means, Herr General, and I'll want them on the road, right behind Westernhagen's tanks. The 101st will be the tip of the spear, and you will follow. Get as far north as you can, and quickly. This rain is going to complicate matters considerably. The more ground we take now, the better."

"We'll get to Serpukhov," said Model. "But then what? That place will surely be well defended."

"The Russian frontier was well defended three months ago," said Guderian, "but here we are. My only real concern at the moment is our mobility. How is the fuel holding up?" He looked at Westernhagen first.

"My 2nd Battalion is at 60 percent, 3rd Battalion is a little worse off at 40%, but 1st Battalion is in good shape. They just refueled and I will move them to the front of the line."

The other Generals reported the condition of their respective divisions, and Guderian laid out the plan. "Langermann, your 4th Panzer is to mop up that enemy armor and cover Yasnogorsk. I would love to take it, but I do not want to dilute our advance just now, or get you into another protracted city fight. Stay loose, and be ready to move north as soon as I can get Loeper's

10th Motorized up there. Model, You get the left flank, but keep Munzel moving north with Westernhagen. The Oka will bend south in your sector, and I want you to push out patrols there and sniff out any good crossing sites you can find. General Funck, it looks like you and Westernhagen will get the job of taking Serpukhov. I'll get you all the bridging battalions I can find."

"And after I take it?" Funck echoed Model's earlier question.

"Then we will have dinner there and discuss the situation." Guderian smiled, wanting to keep up a brave face, though he inwardly knew that it would be very difficult after that. Those last hundred kilometers would be the most grueling of the campaign.

Their marching orders in hand, the Generals returned to their divisions, with Model's eyes aglow as he studied his map. "Gruner was the first to reach the bridge at Serpukhov," he said to a staffer. "And I want to be the first to put men and tanks over the Oka. I will cross here." He fingered a town named Protvino, where the Oka flowing west from Serpukhov then turned sharply south, meandering down towards Alexin.

"Where is Gruner?" asked Model, needing his recon troops.

"He was leading the advance up the main road sir. I think he's still operating with the 101st."

"Very well, then it will be up to KG Munzel. I'm off to find some bridging engineers!"

And he did exactly that, finding the bridging company of Langermann's 4th Panzer Division coming up the main road at a town called Yakolevo.

"Leutnant! I need your company. Turn left off the main road right there. A company of motorcycle infantry will lead you to the river."

"But sir," the Lieutenant protested briefly. "You realize our division will be on the right flank when it gets here."

"It can't be helped," said Model. "The heavy brigade has taken my bridging company, and your division is well to the south. I need you to move west at once. Follow those men."

On the night of the 20th, the bridging company found all of KG Munzel's tanks hidden at the edge of a light wood near the river, and the Lieutenant reported.

"Where is Oberst Munzel? I am to report my bridging company is at his disposal."

"He's already in Protvino!" said a Sergeant. "He crossed just after

midnight on a light raft with a few men from his headquarters platoon. Word is the place is completely empty, but you had better get down to that river bank. He will be expecting you!”

When the bridging troops arrived at the edge of the dark, swollen river, they found the rest of Pape’s Motorcycle recon battalion there, and a the I/394 Battalion of Panzergrenadiers. The engineers went to work immediately, laboring through the night to get the pontoons floated and bridging panels assembled. By dawn their work was complete, and the tanks of KG Munzel would cross the morning of the 21st, the first German troops over the Oka, just as Model had wanted. Elated, the General radioed Guderian with the good news.

“Herr General? I’m standing on the north bank of the Oka at Protvino, and with three battalions of Munzel’s panzers crossing behind me!”

“By God Model! How did you manage that?”

“Where there’s a will...”

“Very well,” said Guderian, breathing a sigh of relief. “Westernhagen is going to try and take the main road bridge into Serpukhov this morning. Scout west and see what you find, but put together a *kampfgruppe* and send them into Serpukhov from that flank. With any luck we can take the place by tomorrow night!”

When Westernhagen’s Big Cats reached the bridge at Serpukhov, they mounted an immediate attack from march, thinking to storm the position. What they found waiting, just as Model had warned, were the men of the 2nd Red Banner Army, freshly arrived from the east. It was more a corps sized formation than an army, with only two rifle divisions, the 3rd and 12th, and several regiments of infantry on motorcycles, with a few battalions of light armored cars and artillery. Arriving at Serpukhov on the 20th, they barely had time to detrain and rush to man the defensive fortifications all along the river. Without enough troops to cover the river line all the way to Protvino, at least the two vital bridges would be well defended. But the eager troops, just come from the training camps and off that long train ride, did not know what was about to hit them.

Westernhagen lined up his heavy tanks, and began blasting away at the enemy pill boxes and improved fortifications. The engineers rushed forward, ready with bridging pontoons deploying to both sides of the road. The bridge was still intact, but the Germans assumed it would be blown the minute they

put tanks on it, and planned accordingly. With no organic artillery, he would rely on the guns of his panzers to support any infantry he could find to make the cross river assault. The 101st Panzergrenadier Battalion, Gruner's Recon Battalion from the 5th Panzer, and I/3 Panzergrenadier Battalion from that same division made up the *kampfgruppe*, with three heavy panzer battalions waiting to pounce right behind them.

The infantry clawed out a bridgehead, the tanks blasting at the enemy machinegun and mortar positions from across the river. The Russians tried answering with their 45mm AT guns, but were dismayed to see the rounds just bouncing harmlessly off the heavy frontal armor plate on the Lions. By noon, III Battalion had all 36 of his heavy tanks across the main road bridge, which the Russians had foolishly failed to destroy.

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News that the Germans were over the Oka and fighting in Serpukhov jolted Zhukov at his headquarters in Moscow. He had been scraping up every reserve battalion he could find, even stripping machinegun battalions from the innermost ring of fortifications around the city. 7th Guards Rifles had been counterattacking towards Naro-Fominsk, and he called off the attack, yanking that unit back to get it on trains and up to Moscow. One look at the map summed up his dilemma. The troops he needed were on the long front line extending south. There, the 43rd Army was still holding on to Maloyaroslavets, and Yevremov's 33rd Army was holding the line all the way down to Kaluga, where Zakharin's 49th held that city, his lines reaching down to the lower Oka where 5th Army took over at Alexin. All those troops could be put to much better use elsewhere, and he decided to get them moving at once.

"Guderian's drive on Serpukhov has compromised that entire segment of our line," he said to a staff officer. "Order Zakharin and Yevremov to begin an immediate withdrawal to the northern Oka river line. After that we pull out Kurochkin's 43rd. Otherwise all those troops will be trapped if the Germans turn west."

He knew the Germans were not going to do that. They had already pulled the 12th Panzer Division out of the fight for Maloyaroslavets and sent it north to Hoepner. Now it was hitting the southern fringes of Rokossovsky's battered 16th Army, which was still grudgingly holding back the tide of steel

pushing towards Moscow. His reserves in the city were so thin now that any breakthrough could see those fast moving German panzer divisions rushing up on the inner defense ring.

What he needed now was infantry closer in to Moscow, which he knew was the final objective of both Hoepner's and Guderian's effort. They want this city badly, he thought, but they won't set one foot on these streets. The men who will stop them are in those armies, and I still have the Siberians out east... soon... but not yet. When they get here, then we hit them.

"Get those orders out immediately," he said, then turned, his boots hard on the stone tiled courtyard as he went.

The night of the 20th, even as Model was pushing KG Munzel over the Oka, the whole front was to move from a condition of relative stability to frenetic motion. It was no small matter to move several armies thirty or forty kilometers to the rear. Zhukov knew many of those rifle divisions would have little transport, and that it would be days or even weeks before he had safely reshaped his defenses.

Yet the Germans were stretching, he knew. He could sense that they were also trying to do everything possible to keep the advance going. He would have another surprise for Guderian in short order, the 10th Army coming in on the trains from Ryazan. Those troops, five fresh rifle divisions and a cavalry division, would be thrown at that long flank stretching from the Oka at Serpukhov all the way back to Tula. The Germans had some god awful new tanks now, and it was neutralizing the temporary advantage his armored brigades had been enjoying with their T-34s. So it would come back to the stolid rifle divisions in the end, and more kept coming from the east, particularly the Siberians, who were now the godsend of this entire defensive operation.

Time for a good spoiling attack with that 10th Army, thought Zhukov. Rokossovsky has been bawling and crying for anything I can send him, and some of his units even tried pulling off the line to fight in the suburbs of Moscow, but I put an end to that, at gunpoint, which is one thing those ruffians understand. Now I will remind Guderian just how far he is from Orel. We hit the flank of that road to Serpukhov tomorrow morning.

Chapter 20

Moscow had not yet seen its first snow of the winter, but the cold was slowly setting in, the rains sometimes turning to sleet, and windows frosting over at night. On the 22nd of September, the Big Cats of Guderian's 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade growled into the heart of Serpukhov. The same news that had so shaken General Zhukov also fled to the capitol, but like, on the dark cold winds of the night.

Sergei Kirov was awake when it came, well after midnight when Berzin tramped in, his hard face red with the cold, hat in hand. The news of the fall of Serpukhov was the least of his worries. That was still a hundred kilometers from the city.

"The Germans have broken through out west," he said. "We' can't stop them."

"What are you saying?" said Kirov. "What about 16th Army? What about the Rock?"

"They moved up yet another panzer Division from the south. It was just enough to tip the balance. They hit the southern edge of Rokossovsky's defenses, and found a hole."

Kirov gritted his teeth, his jaw tightening as he listened, eyes dark with foreboding. "Where?" he said slowly.

"On the road to Naro-Fominsk."

"Didn't Zhukov just send the 7th Guards in?"

"That was on the Road to Mozhaysk and Smolensk. Under the circumstances, Zhukov suggests that we activate Black Snow."

Kirov rubbed his forehead, for that was the secret evacuation plan for Moscow that Berzin had been quietly organizing behind the scenes.

"It will be much colder in Leningrad," said Kirov, and even as he did so, the haunting warning from Fedorov echoed in his mind... "Do not go to Leningrad in December..."

It wasn't December, and this was 1941, not the year he was to have been killed there, but yet something about the thought of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet being evacuated to the old Tsarist Capitol bothered him.

“What is the plan?” he said heavily.

Berzin allowed a brief pause, letting the news settle a moment before he continued. “Better Leningrad than Kubyshev,” he said, which had been the historical location in the original plan to evacuate the top levels of government east. That was not possible now, because there was no safe haven on the Volga at Kubyshev. Ivan Volkov had seen to that.

“Beria and his men arrived last night on the special train reserved for you and high government ministers,” Berzin continued.

“Stalin’s old dog,” said Kirov uncomfortably.

“Our dog now,” said Berzin. “He’ll be growling in the factory district first if we activate the plan. All warehouses, factory sites and major business centers will be cleared. Buildings which cannot be evacuated in five days time will be destroyed. The subway system in the city underground will be shut down in three days. We’ll use it to move the most important people out first, business class, doctors, it’s a very long list. After that we destroy the electrical equipment. Can’t have German infantry riding about on the dam subways.”

There came the muffled sound of distant artillery fire. “Our guns?” asked Kirov.

“Does it matter?” Berzin was the hard realist now. “The sound of those guns will start things moving soon. There are already rumors flying all over the city. The Germans are here, the Germans are there, and now they are coming up from the south too. You know how it goes. On the way to the Kremlin I saw an old woman with a bread cart near Red Square giving her loaves away for free. Another was passing out roasted potatoes to any man in a uniform. In their minds, they would rather see our own people take these things than the Germans. I even saw several shopkeepers passing out warm clothing, free of charge.”

“Good people here,” said Kirov. “They have dug all those anti-tank ditches with the labor of their backs, sacrificed their sons and even daughters in the work crews now.”

“Yes, and the best of them are all that we have left,” said Berzin. “The Moscow Militia Division is now posted on the road to Naro-Fominsk. Many have little more than their shovels and picks. We found rifles for most. Unfortunately, when the locals saw us arming the trench diggers, it started a quiet panic. The streets have been so empty these last several days, as there

have been no regular army units in the city. Now they are starting to get busy again. People are packing up their belongings on anything that will move them. They are already starting to flee to the north on the main roads. No one can use the rails except the army, but soon the army will not be able to use those roads. They will be choked with refugees.”

“Damn,” said Kirov. “Where are the rest of those Siberian Shock Armies Karpov promised me?”

“Third Shock Army was pulled off the trains yesterday by General Zhukov. He wants to use it to replace the armies we pilfered from his strategic reserve.”

“He’s still thinking about his damn counterattack? That was not planned until December!”

“The Germans might be sitting here by then,” said Berzin.

“Not if I have anything to say about it. Tell General Zhukov that he is to put the Siberians back on those trains and bring them here!” Kirov’s finger came down hard on the table. “Right here, to Moscow where the real battle for the life of this nation is being fought!”

“He won’t want to hear that.”

“I don’t give a damn what he wants. This is an order! The Siberians will come to Moscow immediately. I will pull them off the trains here, then march them right through the city—ten times if I have to, round and round Red Square until the sound of their boots drowns out these whispers and rumors of panic. Tell Beria that the first building he demolishes without my direct order will be the last thing he sees as it comes down. Then give orders that none of my personal baggage is to be loaded on that train. I’m staying right here. We will not evacuate the government either. I will not go to Leningrad...”

“But sir... Some of the ministers are very important men, wealthy men, in spite of the humble roots of our revolution. Power and wealth still beget power. They won’t want to sit here if the Germans do get into the city, and we risk losing a great deal more than buildings if that happens—we risk losing control...”

“I will go to the Politburo this morning and speak to the assembly,” said Kirov. “I will ask them to stay and fight on.”

“Just like Stalin did,” said Berzin, only there was cold murder in his eyes when he asked them each that question. You read the material.”

“Yes, but Stalin would not abandon the capital, nor will I. The Kremlin Guard will fight for Red Square if we must, and if the Germans do come here, they we’ll paint that square red again with their blood.”

“Sir, we’ve seen this twenty times over. You saw what happened at Minsk, and at Kiev and Orel. Once the panic starts, it will be hard to stop. Stalin had to order the NKVD to literally gun down any person in the city who refused a direct order—right there on the spot. To hold Moscow, he had to put more fear into the population here than the Germans could, and sir... you are not that man. This says nothing of your courage or determination to fight on, but I do not think you will set our dog loose on this city. You told me to keep Beria and his men under a very tight leash. It doesn’t take much before a panic becomes a riot.”

“We’ll use the NKVD if we must,” said Kirov, “but I want no wanton killing. The Siberians are the key. Don’t you see? When the people here see them, men coming from over a thousand miles away, and from another free sovereign state, to defend their city, there will not be a man among them who will turn his back and run. I will address the city on radio tonight. We stay, and we fight. Now get those orders off to Zhukov, and get that Siberian Shock Army here immediately.”

*

Lavrentiy ‘Nobi’ Beria did not take the news lightly. Altered states or not, he was the same ruthless and determined man he had been when Josef Stalin held his leash. A short, round-faced bespeckled man, he did not appear in any wise to be the monster that lurked within. He became Kirov’s adjutant in 1920 when the Red Army took Baku where he was studying. A member of the Cheka at that time, he was swept up in the chaos of the city and imprisoned in spite of his pleas that he was a loyal Bolshevik. It took the direct intervention of Sergei Kirov to save his head, and he soon pledged himself to the security services of the state, which he found a most beneficial environment for the advancement of his own ambitions.

Beria soon distinguished himself as a ruthless and capable man, active in Georgia and the Caucasus until those states were lost to the Whites. Yet it was during that tumultuous time that he met another man, a Lieutenant in

Denikin's organization, and one who seemed most interested in him. The Lieutenant encountered him in Armavir, moving north in a small column, towards the safety of then Red occupied Rostov. This time it was the White Army that was planning to do away with Beria, but this Lieutenant seemed to have a good deal of pull with Denikin's troops, and Beria's life was spared again.

Yet he spent a good long while with the Lieutenant, the two men often seen after that in the dark corners of a roadside inn drinking together, and talking long into the night. Lavrentiy Beria was never the same after meeting that man. If anything he was colder, more heartless, a man who saw himself as well above and beyond those around him, and viewing others as mere chattel to be used for his own dark purposes.

Slowly, and with surefire certainty. Those purposes saw him rise in the internal security apparatus until he was head of the NKVD. There, in Moscow as his headquarters, Beria had sound proof offices built where he would bring women he had rounded up earlier that day, and brutally rape them, delighting to the sound of their screams, which could not be heard beyond the doors and walls of his lair. The bones of young girls were later to be dug up in the gardens of his Moscow Villa, all victims of his rapacious appetite for depravity.

Sergei Kirov tolerated him simply because of his strong armed efficiency, though he had little real love for the man. And over time, the inverse was also true. Beria came to regard Kirov as a kind of imposter at the head of the Bolshevik Party, and once, he was seen shaking a finger at a poster bearing Kirov's image and saying to an associate NKVD Colonel: "He doesn't belong there—not at all—and one day I will tell you why!"

How he came to know what he claimed to know was a mystery, but Beria had an uncanny knack of sniffing out counterrevolutionary plots and schemes, breaking up fledgling cadres of conspirators, and slowly filling up the state prisons that Kirov permitted for those enemies that could not embrace his style of Soviet Communism. So as long as Beria was useful, his brutality and depravity were tolerated, though Berzin personally loathed the man, and often lobbied Kirov to have him removed as head of the NKVD.

"The man is grown too big for his britches," he would say to Kirov in their quiet meetings alone. "He'll be a problem one day."

And that day had finally come.

The rains fell cold and hard that morning, and a harsh wind swept in from the grey skies, chilling down the city as dusk approached. Beria had three battalions of NKVD in Moscow as the muscle end of Berzin's Black Snow plan, now hanging in suspended animation due to Kirov's stand fast order. Beria got the news as he was preparing to deploy his first battalion into the underground subway system, where thousands of people had taken refuge when the German bombers came, and many simply stayed, being refugees that had been swept into Moscow by the advancing tides of war, and with no place else to go.

Occasionally, Beria would haunt the dimly lit underground, moving like a shadow with his contingent of big, well armed brutes, the Grilikovs of his handpicked security guards. If he found a particularly pretty woman, and sometimes a lovely boy or two, they might soon disappear, never to be seen again. But mostly he was all business, deciding where the key subway junctions and intersection points were, and plotting how he would flush out the system when the time came, thinking of the people there as no more than sewage.

The order to deploy for stage one of Black Snow finally came, and Beria had all his best men moving to their assigned posts when Berzin found his armored Mercedes limousine on a quiet street, and gave him the news. The evacuation order would not be given. Kirov would address the city that evening via radio, and the Siberians would be moved in as soon as they arrived.

"The Siberians?" he said, with wide eyed disapproval. "That scum Karpov has been sending us?"

"Don't be so ungrateful," said Berzin. "Those men are the only reason the Germans haven't broken through to the capital sooner. They fought well at Tula."

"Not well enough," said Beria. "Hiring them on as mercenaries was always risky, but here? In the city? In Moscow itself? This is inviting disaster!"

"It may be our only hope of salvation," said Berzin. "In the meantime, take no further action in the business district unless you hear from me directly. As to the subways, leave them as they are for the moment."

"What about my men?"

"Kirov wants them on the city's inner defense ring."

“What? Like common militias? This is outrageous! The Germans just broke through the 16th Army! Rokossovsky couldn’t stop them, and those militias won’t stop them either. I’ll kill far more of our own good citizens than the Germans do when they start to run. That’s the only way to keep them in the trenches.”

“There will be none of that,” said Berzin. “Deserters and shirkers, yes, they must be disciplined, but Kirov does not want summary executions.”

“Then what am I to do when they turn tail and run, use harsh language? Don’t be a fool, Berzin. You know as well as I do that the Germans are going to take this city. What do we have left? Nothing! They will come here and round up the whole government, all our top industrialists and business leaders if they stay here.”

“You and I know they won’t stay if things get any worse.”

“Yes,” said Beria. “The Fat Cats know when to pack up and move. They’ll be long gone for Leningrad, and without my men here in the city, you have no chance to stop the panic that will ensue when the rank and file see their shiny limousines lined up in the streets and heading north. This city is finished. The shops are empty, food stocks are running out, even for simple things like coffee or tea. They are grinding up acorns and just throwing in a few coffee beans for flavor! There is no soap, and even running water goes off and on. People stink like the animals they are! The power is barely on, and most of the city is going without heat. The bombing has shattered all the windows, and at night the cold gets ever worse. People have started burning old books and furniture, and winter hasn’t even started yet! They are cooking on old burzhuika stoves, and the fumes kill someone every night.”

“Like you do?” said Berzin, letting his dislike for the man slip.

“I am no angel,” said Beria, “Not when the devil’s work is what the world most needs. Take a good look around you! We used to make furniture in the small city factories; typewriters, bicycles, fine lamps! Now we make land mines, pistols, ammunition, and flamethrowers instead of samovars. The apartments on the Moscow river were all emptied out three days ago so they could turn them in to fortified bunkers. Yet it won’t matter. No one will stay here to defend them.”

“If Kirov stays, then the ministers stay with him, and the people. That’s the order.” Berzin was adamant. “All you have to do is hold things together until the Siberians get here.”

Beria shook his head, for his moment of ascendancy, the time he loved most when his hand was on the nightstick, and his brutally effective NKVD men were holding sway, was suddenly put on hold. He laughed, and to Berzin it seemed a mocking laugh, disdainful and dismissive.

“Karpov’s troops are going to save us from the Germans? Ha! They have yet to take back Omsk from Ivan Volkov. There’s a man worth fighting for. One day you will know it!”

Berzin gave him an odd look, but said nothing more, opening the limousine door and disappearing into the rush of the streets of Moscow.

Chapter 21

On the 23rd of September the German 61st Recon company of 11th Panzer Division reached the outskirts of Solntsevo, just 12 miles from the Kremlin. They had found a small hole in the Russian line, and motored right through. Rokossovsky cursed that his men could be there now, fighting house to house if they were not tied down holding the line ten kilometers to the west. For the moment, however, the citizen soldiers of the Moscow Militia, three regiments, two railroad battalions and two other irregular militias were holding the inner defense ring there that they had labored to build for the last 30 days.

Yet the sight of German helmets on the road sent the rumors flying all the way to the center of Moscow, and it would be another three agonizing days before the Siberians would arrive. Zhukov protested that he already started an attack against Guderian's fragile right flank north of Tula, and that he needed that army to carry out his planned counteroffensive.

That attack was mounted by the 10th Army from Ryazan, and it was falling on Langermann's 4th Panzer Division just as they made ready to move north. Once again, it was the tanks of Mikhail Katukov's 4th Tank Brigade that made the breakthrough. Dmitri Lavrinenko was in the thick of that attack again, in a new tank, and now his nemesis and the whole 101 Heavy Tank Brigade was far to the north fighting at Serpukhov.

Meanwhile, three Soviet armies that had been holding in the Kaluga Bulge dissolved and began flowing out of their bunkers and fortifications and heading for the Oka River line. To their great surprise they would find German troops from Model's 3rd Panzer Division holding the very same positions they had been ordered to move to! Model was equally surprised.

"I have identified troops from 33rd and 43rd Armies!" he said in a radio call to Guderian.

"Where are they now?"

"Eight to ten kilometers west of Kremenki."

"You have units that far west?"

“Another push and we’ll have both those armies in a nice big pocket,” said Model.

“There’s no point in that. We have no pincer on the other side! Pull back to Protvino. We have trouble south on the main road. Langermann can’t come up until we restore the situation, and if he fails to do so, then we are in a nice little pocket. Understand?”

*

***The** sudden dynamism of the whole sector was a contagious energy that rippled all the way to Moscow. It was said that the entire front was collapsing, and armies that had been ordered to redeploy by Kirov earlier were thought to be forces routed by the unstoppable German Army. Morale plummeted with the news that Kaluga and Serpukhov had both fallen, and then came that single company of Motorcycle recon troops to the outskirts of the city. Beria’s grim predictions to Berzin were soon made real.*

The Big Cats were in Serpukhov, and the Fat Cats in Moscow were not going to stay and wait for them to get there. Well off families of factory directors, managers, doctors, university professors, and businessmen were all on the move. Politburo ministers were nervously emptying their files and throwing them into fireplaces, then having the ashes thrown out the windows of the tall brick buildings as a freezing rain set in on the beleaguered city.

The following morning that rain had frozen to a hard frost on the streets, soiled by the dark char and soot of everything that had burned the previous night—black snow—not the code word, but the reality now. Then in the midst of all this turmoil, with thousands on the streets streaming out of every hovel and home in the southern districts, a fire started. It swept out of Kutuzova, leapt over the tortuous bends of the Moscow River, burned through the famous Monastery of the Sacred Virgin, the underground railway station, the Telegraph Central Relay Station, Academy of Arts, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Smolenskaja Street.

Chaos reigned, and though there was no more than that single German motorcycle company anywhere near the sector, the people saw the fire as the burning edge of the invading army, if not the work of the German soldiers themselves. But they had nothing to do with it. All the while, the men of the

61st Company, realizing that they were not going to push through that inner defense ring alone, simply rounded up a stray pig and were holed up in a few outlying houses having the best meal they had in several days.

It was fear that now swept through the city like the flames and smoke of that fire, and Beria knew that the only thing that would stop it was greater fear. He resolved to go to the Kremlin himself, and make a direct appeal to Kirov under the guise of delivering an important report on the status of the outlying defenses. It was now or never, he thought.

The long black armored limousine rolled through Red Square, the red flag pennants marking it as Beria's personal car flapping stiffly in the cold wind. Beria was out in a huff, pulling the collar of his greatcoat high around his neck, with four tough looking security men at his side. He tramped off through the gates, gaining easy entry, as he was the head of the NKVD itself, the man responsible for all internal security.

In through the labyrinthine outer offices of the Kremlin he went, climbing one staircase after another, up and up, to the guarded alcoves of Sergei Kirov's inner sanctum near the secret Red Archives. He made his boisterous presence known as he passed through one security checkpoint after another, and though his guards had to leave their submachine guns behind, no one dared to search Beria himself. One look of those beady eyes behind cold round eyeglasses was enough to freeze the blood of any man.

Kirov was at his map table, reading over the radio address he intended to deliver that night to try and bolster the morale of the defense. A visit from Beria at that hour was the farthest thing from his mind, but when the aid appeared at the door, saying the security man had come with an urgent report, he set down his speech and told the man to show him in. Moments later the short man entered alone, still bundled in that thick trench coat, his face grim and features seemingly frozen in a sneer.

"The city is burning," he said to Kirov. "The fire is burning through the museum district."

"I've seen it from the window," said Kirov.

"A pity," said Beria. "At least the Russian State Library is on that side of the Kremlin. Those books will take a good long while to burn through, all the seedy history of our republic, the revolution, and all that came before it. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Pushkin and all the rest—up in smoke."

"Those books cannot be destroyed by fire," said Kirov. "Nor can this

republic be destroyed that way, or by the fire from that German artillery.”

“Something from your speech?” said Beria, a mocking grin on his face. “Going to play like Churchill now and rally the peasants? Believe me, they won’t be out there huddled around their radio sets listening to you when you give your little speech—even if the electricity does manage to stay on tonight. The people you really need to convince are already on the roads leading north, off to their winter villas. Yes, the rich have fled, and the poor will now follow them. Panic has started and it will soon become a riot. Unless you allow me and my men to restore order, the city will collapse into utter chaos!”

“I will address the people within the hour,” said Kirov.

“And say what?” Beria had a strange look on his face, his eyes glazed and distant. “You think you can pull this city together with a radio speech? It will take my men three days to restore order west of the river, and by that time the Germans will be there.”

“And by that time we will have the Siberians,” said Kirov.

“Karpov’s men? That conniving bastard. You think those troops will remain loyal to anyone else but him?”

Kirov gave Beria a strange look. “Compose yourself,” he said calmly. “You are chief of the NKVD, and the last man I would think to be spouting defeatist talk at a time like this.”

“I know who I am,” said Beria, “but do you? Berzin told me the government was all set to move to Leningrad. I made all the arrangements, organized the security, commandeered all the necessary trains. It was going to be a very long train ride from here to Leningrad, with plenty of time for any dirty business that needed doing. And it would look as if the Germans were to blame. Then, all of a sudden, you get a hankering to make speeches and you want to turn the defense of the capital over to foreign troops! You should have allowed me to carry out Black Snow three days ago. This is what you get for that hesitation, and these foolish thoughts of fighting it out here to the bitter end... Well, I’m sorry to say it will be the bitter end, Mister General Secretary, at least for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Kirov was suddenly angry.

“Yes,” said Beria. “You should have gone to Leningrad, but I heard you were warned to stay away from that place. It twists your guts a bit to know that was where you were supposed to die...”

Beria's words struck Kirov like a hammer. How could he know that? What was this man saying now? What was going on here? "Explain yourself," he said in a low voice, "before I call in the guards and have your sorry ass hauled out of here to a firing squad."

"Not likely," said Beria with a thin smile. "No, not likely. I've brought all three of my NKVD Battalions back from the front with me. No use leaving them there. I'll need every man I can get to manage the evacuation when this is finally over."

"There isn't going to be an evacuation!" Kirov raised his voice. "This is what you came here to report to me tonight, your vacillation and fear, this insulting defeatist nonsense? You are relieved of your post! I'll hand the job over to Berzin if you can't learn to follow orders."

"Oh, there will be an evacuation," said Beria, "but not a speech. No. You are mistaken Mister General Secretary. I have not failed to follow my orders at all—just not your orders. And now, I have a present to deliver to you, from Ivan Volkov."

His hand had been in his greatcoat pocket all along, and now he pulled out a dull black pistol, aiming it right at the General Secretary's heart. For Lavrentiy Beria was never quite the man he seemed to be, not since he had met that Lieutenant in Armavir when Denikin's Whites caught him there. He learned a great deal from that young man, fantastic things that he was amazed to see happening before his own eyes over the years. He soon knew why they called that young Lieutenant the Prophet, and why he was able to outmaneuver Denikin so easily. For the Lieutenant was, of course, none other than Ivan Volkov, and Lavrentiy Beria was one of his men, deeply infiltrated into the Soviet security apparatus over the decades, and now finally ready to deliver the master stroke that Volkov hoped would win the war.

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At that moment Sergei Kirov realized all of this in a single heartbeat. Volkov! He must have gotten to Beria somehow, who knows when? My God, to think that man has been in his camp all these years as head of the NKVD!

His eyes were riveted on that pistol, and for the briefest moment all he could think of was that dark, awful moment in the prison cell at Baku when

he called on young Josef Stalin, and held a pistol very much like that one in his trembling hand. Then it had been his finger on the trigger, his hand on the throat of fate and time itself. And when he clenched his fist, all history died, the decades collapsed, along with everything Stalin built in his sad Red Socialist State. All the terror and misery and fear he brought into the world vanished in that single moment—the Gulags, the Great Purge, and all the rest. In its place there now yawned an enormous vacuum, seemingly endless, interminable, a well of uncertainty so deep that Kirov despaired to think that it was now incumbent upon him alone to fill that void.

And this had been his life's work, laboring through the revolution, finally seizing control of the Bolshevik movement, toppling Denikin and his Whites, holding the remnant of those forces back in Orenburg, and dueling endlessly with the very man who sent this demon here tonight to pull that pistol from his coat pocket. Now it would be Beria's finger on the trigger, and by extension, the hand of Ivan Volkov on the throat of fate. What terrible chasm might open here in the next instant, should that bullet ever find his heart?

Beria's eyes were dark, lifeless, unfeeling and cold. His hand was firm and steady, with not the slightest tremor of fear or hesitation. The smile faded from his face, which was now dull and slack, no passion, no feeling, simply fate.

Outside the room, the two guards by the high wooden doors were jolted by the sharp sound of three pistol shots coming from within. They moved with urgent quickness, quickly unsoldering their submachine guns and bursting in through the doors, eyes wide and every muscle taught with the tension of that moment.

Part VIII

The Devil's Adjutant

“Those who play with the devil's toys will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.”

— *Buckminster Fuller*

Chapter 22

Ivan Volkov had been a very busy man of late. After nervous hours and days, restlessly marking the progress of his cross Volga offensive, he relented, in utter frustration, and left the matter to his Generals. He knew the war was now reaching at critical point, where the success or failure of the German offensive was now hanging in the balance. With this in mind, he took it upon himself to take a very long airship ride to Germany, to meet with the one man he knew who would decide the fate of the war, Adolf Hitler.

Now the broad grey shape of the airship *Baku* gleamed in the sun above the stony ramparts of *Wolfsschanze*, the Wolf's Lair, high in the Bavarian Alps. It was so named for the nickname adopted by Hitler himself, used only by his closest associates and confidants, for he called himself the "Wolf." The name was, in fact, an old German form for Adolf, and so it suited him well.

Like the object of his Army's efforts near Moscow at that moment, his lair was defended by three concentric circles of defense, but Volkov had floated effortlessly above them all, much to the chagrin of the chief security officer, who frowned when he saw the guns bristling from the gondolas overhead. Even though Hitler was well protected behind nearly 7 feet of steel reinforced concrete, nothing the small recoilless rifles on the airship could have bothered, he was still compelled to order three 88mm flak guns to keep the ship under close observation, their barrels not directly aimed at it out of diplomatic courtesy, but rounds chambered and crews at the ready nonetheless.

It was here that the men who built and ran the Third Reich would meet to plan and plot their ongoing campaigns. Key officers like Hermann Goering, Wilhelm Keitel, Alfred Jodl, and other vital ministers like Speer, Todt, and Ribbentrop all took the measure of one another, the apostles of doom seated at the long wooden table where the Wolf himself presided over long strategy sessions, and often dull rambling over the machinations of industry and the wartime economy.

Now, however, Volkov would be granted a rare private conference with

the Führer, only the second time he had actually met the man face to face since the Orenburg Federation declared its support for the Reich. Unlike the other adjutants who called, men like Mussolini, and ministers from prostrate republics in Germany's sphere of influence, Ivan Volkov was determined to make a real difference with this valuable session. He was not called "the Prophet" without good reason, and he had been watching the rapid onslaught of German forces with increasing anxiety as this critical campaign developed like a darkening winter storm.

The two men shook hands warmly, seated at the large map table beneath a massive banner adorned with the German Swastika, and two golden eagles to either side, the symbols of power and prestige that now cast their long shadows over Europe.

"Herr Hitler," said Volkov, avoiding the more common salute that used his name, and not wishing to call the man 'my Führer' just yet. Volkov was a head of state, and saw himself as an equal in every respect. The two men smiled as they seated themselves, Hitler in his plain brown suit, Volkov in grey.

"I suppose you are here to ask how soon you can expect a visit from General Manstein," said Hitler.

"He is just east of Boguchar," said Volkov, knowing exactly where the German SS Korps was now operating, for he had poured over daily reports on their progress for many weeks. They were speaking in German, a language Volkov had studied as a young man, and one he had deliberately cultivated after that, knowing it would serve him well given the future course of events, of which he was well aware.

"And your own offensive?" Hitler's dark eyes glittered as he spoke, soulless eyes that seemed endless pits when he stared at a man; eyes that could kindle and burn with utter rage that might border on insanity when he was disturbed, though those moments had not been frequent at this point in the war.

"Our troops are nearing Serafimovich, a vital crossing point on the Don bend." It was Volkov's first lie, for his divisions had only recently suffered a considerable setback near that place, thrown back seven kilometers by a sudden counterattack mounted by fresh Soviet troops. But Hitler would not know that yet, and so the little white lie would serve to get him through these inevitable opening rounds in their discussion.

They talked of divisions, and generals, and objectives and timetables, agreeing that it seemed possible, even likely, that the SS would continue moving east and reach a point where the two sides could join hands and cut the Soviet Union in two by so doing.

“You will see,” said Hitler. “By winter we will have isolated the entire southern region, and by then we should also have Moscow. That should make an end of this Sergei Kirov, and the collapse of his Soviet Republic should follow in short order.”

“I would hope so,” said Volkov, “but that may be much more difficult than you think, Herr Hitler.”

“The Soviets can be stubborn,” said Hitler dismissively. “Yet when my Generals are planning our next moves from the stateroom in the Kremlin, all that will count for little.”

“Your operation Typhoon is making good progress?” Volkov asked, finally getting round to the heart of the matter at hand.”

“Good progress? My 4th Panzergruppe is twenty kilometers from the Kremlin as we speak, and it has just been reinforced with a fresh division transferred from France, our 2nd Panzer Division. I would have sent Hoepner another, but it was necessary to pay lip service to Rommel in North Africa. That little theater has produced dismal results, but we are finally getting him some of the new tanks he has been needing. We shall see if they make any difference. The British have stolen a march on us with this new heavy tank they deployed there.”

“Indeed,” said Volkov, for he had raked through all the intelligence he could find on that question, and found the matter very unsettling.

“They do not have these tanks in any great numbers,” said Hitler, “but from all accounts, they were too much for our older panzers to handle. But we have taken a lesson, and now have several new medium and heavy tank designs, most already in production, a few others still in the design phase.” He gestured to a sheaf of papers and diagrams that had been laid out for review, and Volkov nodded as he took his appraisal.

“This one looks very interesting,” he said, singling out a design that he knew would be among Germany’s very best, if not the best medium tank ever designed in the war once it got past its early teething troubles. What do you call it?”

“Ah, that is our Panzerkampfwagen V, the Panther, one of the Big Cats. At

45 tons, it will be nearly twice as heavy as our PzKfw IV models, but still considered a medium tank given the plans we have. Look here,” Hitler shoved another diagram towards his guest. “This is our new Lion, but he is only a cub at this point at 55 tons. This tank is only now starting to reach selected front line units, but we are ramping up production with the full weight of our industrial base now. Soon the real Lion will appear, our 70 ton model, though considering our progress to date, we may not even need many to conclude this matter.”

Somehow reducing the greatest conflagration the world would ever see to the status of a simple ‘matter’ seemed to unnerve Volkov. He knew he needed to impress upon Hitler the gravity of this moment, and the decisions he would need to take in the months ahead.

“They look wonderful,” he said. “Perhaps I might even persuade you to sell me a few. We are still struggling with older designs, though I have something new in the works. I trust that your missile programs are also receiving considerable resources?”

“Of course. That was another surprise the British had for us, though it appears they only managed to mount their early prototypes on a few ships. Their new anti aircraft rocket has been somewhat troublesome, and we are attempting to discover how they are managing to guide and direct these missiles—most likely by using a new type of radar. Well, have no worries, we were not given an invitation to the ball, but we will soon crash the party in any wise. I have several new designs testing now, and we have found the information you have shared with us most useful. I suppose a battalion of new Lions would be the least we could do to thank you for your assistance.”

“Much appreciated,” said Volkov. “Yet now I must discuss something of great importance concerning the likely future course of this war. And I have intelligence that may surprise you. To begin with, I can tell you that it was not the British who developed these new rockets, but the Russians.”

“The Russians? Nonsense. Ah, then you mean the nebelwerfer of sorts, which they now deploy in small numbers? We captured several and they are not all that impressive, merely rockets mounted on trucks for rapid fire barrage. We are working on the same. Yet the real threat has been at sea with these damnable new naval rockets the British employ. The Russians have nothing to do with that.”

“Oh, but they do. In fact, they have everything to do with it. None of those

weapons were ever mounted on a British man-o-war. They were all deployed and fired from a Russian cruiser, named for our current nemesis, Sergei Kirov himself.”

“A Russian battlecruiser? That ship is penned up in Leningrad, and I believe it is merely a heavy cruiser.”

“That is not the ship I refer to. No. This is another vessel that was recently operating with the British fleet in the Mediterranean, and has since moved to the Atlantic. It caused all that mayhem with the Italians, and then got the better of your own navy recently, if my intelligence officers serve me well, and they do. The loss of your Graf Zeppelin was most unfortunate.”

“I was told that ship was struck by two torpedoes,” said Hitler, “most likely from a British submarine. That is the problem with our navy that I will have Admiral Raeder address. I’ll admit that I was partly to blame, and I instructed him to build big gunned ships to match and beat the British battleships, but a few more destroyers might have saved the Graf Zeppelin that day, and I will address the matter.”

Volkov shook his head. “You have not been well informed. That ship was not sunk by torpedoes. Your battlecruiser Gneisenau succumbed to such an attack, but not the aircraft carrier. It was destroyed by a missile, a technology developed not by the British but by the Russians. It is in limited deployment, confined to this single ship, but as your Admirals will tell you, it is very effective, even capable of seriously harming your heavy battleships, as it did in the Mediterranean Sea and again in the Atlantic.”

The silence from Hitler seemed like the prelude to a storm of inner rage, though Volkov could see how he restrained his emotions. “A Russian ship? You are saying they have a battlecruiser at sea that our own intelligence services knew nothing about?”

“Correct. I can verify that information, provide photographs, and even tell you the present location of that ship. It was recently in their northern port of Murmansk.”

“That will be our northern port soon,” Hitler scoffed, but then took a more serious tone. “You are certain of this? The ship involved in these engagements with our fleet was Russian? Do you realize that these rocket attacks began well before the onset of formal hostilities between our two nations? Are you telling me the Russian navy was attacking our ships, cooperating with the British, as early as June of 1940? Because that was the

time when we first received these reports of a new enemy naval rocket being deployed by the British.”

“It was never deployed by the British,” said Volkov, “and they do not presently have such technology. If they did, do you think they would have allowed your Luftwaffe to bomb London without using these new anti-aircraft rockets in defense?”

“That was somewhat of a mystery,” said Hitler. “But our people on the ground over there have produced some evidence that the British are now developing rocket batteries for aerial defense. It was our conclusion that their first prototypes were designed for the navy, and that they are only now developing a land based version.”

“Both conclusions are completely wrong,” said Volkov. “They have no viable missile program that could in any way match the performance of the weapons used against your ships. Oh, they do have some small rocket batteries they are testing for aerial defense. They call them ‘Z batteries,’ and they are being produced by G. A. Harbey in Greenwich, but they are nothing like the weapons you have encountered at sea. Later they will develop a weapon known as the ‘Stooge,’ radio controlled like the plans I have sent you for your Fritz-X program, but we have no reliable intelligence that they are behind the weapons that put so much damage on your battleships, and prompted you to cancel all future Plan Z ships in excess of 30,000 tons.”

The hard edge of truth now stung the Führer, piercing the optimistic bravado, and the braggery that so often dressed out these discussions.

“A Russian ship...” his eyes smoldered. “These rockets were designed by the Soviets?”

“Correct. Yet the technology is confined to only one ship, very secret, and it is now north of Siberia in the Arctic Seas, and presently on a course that will take it to the Pacific.”

“The Pacific? Why would it be sailing there?”

“We believe they intend to attack the Japanese Navy.”

Again, a moment where Hitler seemed to have been struck by a stiff jab, frowning to regain his composure. “You are saying the Russians will declare war on Japan?”

“Most likely, because if they do not, the Japanese will soon declare war on them. You realize they will soon become an active belligerent, and join the Axis powers. In this case, they will be at war with the Soviets, and so Sergei

Kirov may have simply bowed to the inevitable.”

Hitler shook his head. “He is sending this single battlecruiser to challenge the Japanese Navy? That is preposterous!”

“Perhaps, but it is very likely the case, and if you are in doubt about the capabilities of this single ship, you need only speak again with your Admiral Raeder on the matter, and that failing, with the Italians. Most all of the damage inflicted on your navy and the Italians, was the work of this single ship. Now it sails east to the Pacific, and it will likely challenge the Japanese as they deploy their fleet to begin hostilities in December.”

“We have no word from the Japanese Foreign Minister as to their timetable,” said Hitler quickly.

“They will attack the first week of December, at the American base in the Hawaiian Islands, Pearl Harbor. They have been planning this attack for some time, designed to strike and cripple their real enemy in the Pacific, the American fleet.”

Hitler seemed very surprised. “They are going to sail their entire battlefleet that far east?”

“Some battleships will accompany their fleet, but no, the attack will be made by their aircraft carriers. Naval strategy is changing, Herr Hitler. It will no longer rely on the big gunned ships, though navies will still deploy and use them effectively in the years ahead. Now the seas belong to the carriers.”

“We will have more soon,” said Hitler. “Graf Zeppelin was only the first, a prototype design. Yes, I have curtailed the Plan Z battleship program as you have said, but our development of these aircraft carriers will continue. That was another area where we lagged behind the British.”

“Yes,” said Volkov, “in the Pacific, the real damage will be done by aircraft carriers, planes striking and sinking battleships before they ever get within range to use those big guns. This is the same basic strategy behind the new missile technology the Russians have developed. Most of your ships never laid eyes on the vessel that was attacking them, am I correct? They were hit from well over the horizon by a radar guided missile, and seriously damaged before they could even find or engage their enemy. And may I point out that in that most recent engagement, last May in the Atlantic, the primary target of these naval rockets was your own Graf Zeppelin. Believe it or not, that ship was far more dangerous than your battleship Hindenburg, and the

enemy knew as much. I applaud your effort to build more of these ships, because if your nation is to survive and prevail in this war, you will need them. But be clever. Use them to provide air cover over your U-boat wolfpacks as much as your battleships. Yes, you will need carriers, along with all these Big Cats you speak of today. Tanks, aircraft carriers, bombers, submarines, and eventually missiles. Those are the weapons that will win this war. I mean no disrespect, but it is now time you learned the lesson the men on Graf Zeppelin learned when it went down in a flaming wreck last May. The day of the big battleship is already over. These naval rockets have changed everything.”

Chapter 23

Hitler's lip quivered as Volkov finished, his jaw eventually tightening as he restrained his anger. "I was told you like to make predictions," he said darkly. "Well I can predict things as well. We will build these new tanks by the thousands, by the tens of thousands if need be. But all of that may not even be necessary. I will have Moscow within 30 days, and then we will see what good this new Russian missile technology is on the battlefield. If they have such weapons, why don't they use them to defend their capital?"

"Because most are of little use in a land combat scenario. They are more accurate, but the blast effect is no greater than your own very heavy artillery. No. Their virtue is in an anti shipping role, and as a defense against aircraft, which will be the most destructive weapon deployed in this war. That is why putting planes on ships to project air power over the seas is the primary naval strategy now, and the Japanese know this, even if your Admiral Raeder and others do not. If the Japanese win in the Pacific, they will do so because of their aircraft carriers. If you win in the Atlantic, it will be your U-boats that carry the day, not your battleships. That said, keep the ones you already have. Use them to harry the British convoys and stand as a defense against enemy invasion fleets that will surely come after America enters this war."

"America?" Hitler nearly laughed. "Yes, they have a strong navy, but no real army to speak of. Why should I fear them?"

"Because they can out build any nation on this earth. Their industrial capacity is safely behind two oceans, while yours will soon be visited day and night by enemy bombers."

"Nonsense, our fighters will sweep them from the skies!" Hitler waved his hand, dismissing the threat as if it were no more than a bothersome fly.

"Not in the numbers that will soon come. Very well... You say I am fond of making predictions, and I will not disagree. But I base my pronouncements on sound intelligence. So here is what I predict, Herr Hitler. Japan will attack the Americans in December of this year. They will also seize the Philippines, invade the Dutch East Indies, occupy Singapore and push as far as the Solomon Islands. They may even attack Australia. The Americans will

be outraged after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and enter the war with a vengeance. They will build ships by the hundreds, planes by the tens of thousands, and yes, tanks as well. How many of these new Lions have you built?"

"The first production run delivered 250," said Hitler, " and that is just the beginning."

"The Americans will build 50,000 tanks, perhaps not as good as yours, but more than enough to do the job. Their army will build up to great strength, though it will take them some time, and they will field over ninety divisions before this conflict ends. In the meantime, their bombers will base out of England and help the British launch a massive strategic bombing campaign that will completely overwhelm your Luftwaffe."

"Ridiculous!" Hitler could not contain his anger this time. "50,000 tanks? Aerial bombardment? Such campaigns are completely ineffective! Our own Blitz proved that much to me. Goering threw most of the Luftwaffe at the British last year, and it got us nowhere. I bombed London day and night, and the British still fight on as if nothing had even happened. We could not even establish air superiority over the English Channel! Their RAF were just enough to hold us off, and we will do the same to them should they dare to mount such a campaign. Yes, their bombers come. They attack us in France and also here in Germany, but they do little real harm."

"You say you could not establish air superiority over the Channel," said Volkov. "What makes you think you will have it over Berlin?"

"The British fighters cannot reach Berlin, don't be foolish."

"That will change. The planes will get better, and they will come in much greater numbers, and the Americans will develop long range fighters that can accompany them all the way to Berlin and back again. They will match your own fighters, which will be spread too thin all over Europe to be an effective defense. The bombers will come, and unrestricted bombing will take a terrible toll. Your cities will suffer horribly, as will your people. Hamburg, Dresden, they will be utterly devastated by intense aerial bombardment, which your fighters will simply be unable to stop, unless you build another 10,000, and very quickly. Japan will suffer the same, once the American carriers defeat the Japanese Navy. They will occupy islands close enough to Japan to build air bases for new long range bombers, and then carry terrible fire bombs and weapons of unimaginable power to devastate Japan. I know

this to be a fact, as our intelligence has already uncovered their plans in this regard. I speak now of the secret project we discussed earlier... I trust the information I provided you was also helpful in that regard? Well, the Americans will have the same idea, and they will get their weapon before anyone else, unless you heed my warnings and take further action. This is imperative."

Hitler steamed, his face a mix of anger and disbelief, but something in what Volkov now said had the sting of truth in it.

"Herr Hitler," said Volkov. "Your optimism is laudable, necessary in any true leader. You must be the torch that lights the way for your nation, but even the fiercest fire can be quenched. That is the strategy our enemies will pursue in this war, which is only now beginning. The combined production capacity of Russia and America will simply swamp your defense. I know this sounds preposterous to you, because at this moment your Operation Typhoon looks promising. But the Soviets will not capitulate, even if you do take Moscow. The Soviets will simply move the government to Leningrad, and then you will have to mount yet another Winter Storm to drive on that city, as you should have done already. I realize the troops and divisions for that were transferred south, and that was necessary if we are to link up as we plan soon, but that will not end this war either. This war will only end in fire and the terrible destruction of virtually every city within the defeated nations."

"What you say is complete idiocy!" Hitler's voice carried a sharp rebuke. "I have overrun and occupied most of the Soviet state in just 90 days, and we will finish the job there soon enough. Sergei Kirov may be a stubborn fool and fight on from Leningrad, but after I take Moscow, and our forces link up to take Volgograd, then Leningrad is all they have left of any consequence. I will have 90 percent of their coal mines. I have destroyed their factories, and I will also have your oil. Yes? How will they carry on their war effort when they cannot build the weapons needed to fight?"

"Do not think me a fool," said Volkov sharply. "You have overrun their factory sites, Herr Hitler, but they have salvaged most of the heavy equipment and moved it east to the Urals. They are already establishing vast industrial complexes there, and the resources of Siberia will give them all the coal, fuel, and raw materials they will ever need. I can show you photographs. So they will continue to fight, and continue to build—in fact, the Soviets will out produce Germany in this war, and by a wide measure. You

are fond of these new tank designs? The Russians have them too, and they will built ten tanks for every one you do. This T-34 that has started to appear? It will get better armor, a much stronger gun, and they will build them by the tens of thousands, and many more advanced designs to challenge those you have shown me here. As for your Luftwaffe, do you presently have air superiority over Moscow?"

The question was, in fact, a harsh statement, for the Germans did not control the skies there, and Hitler knew this. Now Volkov leaned in, the seriousness on his face evident as he lowered his voice.

"Unless you heed this warning, you will lose this war. We will both lose it together. You have hurt the Soviets badly, but mostly just destroyed all their old, obsolete equipment, and the calcified regular army they once had. But they will build a completely new army, with all new equipment, and they will field two new rifle divisions for every one you destroy. The key to their accomplishing all of this can be summed up in one word—Siberia."

"Siberia?" Hitler frowned. "That is nothing but an endless wasteland, full of pine forest and swamps populated by backward mongrels."

"Yes, that may be so, but it has all the strategic war resources the Soviets will ever need, and one thing more, those mongrels are tough, hardy men to flesh out new divisions that are already beginning to arrive in your battle for Moscow."

"A pity Kolchak would not listen to reason," said Hitler. "I promised him my support on the issue of Japanese occupation of his territory, but he refused an accommodation."

"Kolchak is not the problem. In fact, he is no longer even numbered among the living."

"What is this you say? Kolchak is dead?"

"He was assassinated last week... a hunting accident. You will hear the news soon."

"I see... Then who will take his place? Might he see reason and reconsider the position of Siberia in this war?"

"Vladimir Karpov, the present Admiral of the Siberian Air Fleet. He will most likely assume command, and he is a very dangerous man."

Hitler smiled, shaking his head. "Now I will say that I mean you no disrespect. I can see why you hang on to those obsolete Zeppelins, considering the distance they can travel. A dangerous man you say? Yes, he

had the temerity to overfly Berlin, and actually left a calling card by dropping a few bombs. I haven't forgotten that, but that is the extent of his capabilities. What does he command, ten Zeppelins? Twenty?"

"Seven, to be precise, but the Soviets are leasing him all five of their airships, so he will soon have twelve. That becomes a problem for me, because many of his ships will be bigger, and more heavily armed than the units in my fleet."

"Then build more, Mister General Secretary. You have factories in Orenburg?"

"Of course, but up until now, I have not thought it necessary to expand my airship fleet. That will change, but this brings to mind the reason why I raise this topic. Siberia... It has all that endless space for the Soviets to fall back upon, and endless resources. It is providing a safe haven for Sergei Kirov's factory relocation program, and this man Karpov has recently struck a very dangerous bargain with the Soviets. He has agreed to send the bulk of his land forces in the west to aid the Soviet cause, and is actively recruiting volunteers to serve in new divisions. Some of these troops are already at war with you, fighting your Panzergruppe 2 near Tula. More are on their way. Make no mistake, the Soviets will fight tooth and nail for Moscow, and the Siberians are sending them another large Shock Army to make certain your generals will never sit in the stateroom of the Kremlin as you boasted earlier. They are already assembling at Perm and other eastern cities."

"Well a lot of good you have done me, Volkov." Hitler wagged a finger at his guest now, as if dressing the man down. "Your ridiculous squabbles with the Siberians have pushed them into the enemy camp. Why did you break the Omsk accord? You promised me you would deliver Siberia, and look what you have done. Now you fly about in these absurd Zeppelins, launching fruitless raids on the Siberians, and for what reason? You merely antagonize them further!"

"That was regrettable, but it became a personal matter..."

"A personal matter? What? Between you and Kolchak?"

"Kolchak is dead. He was never going to be a factor in the outcome of this war in any case, but this other man, this Vladimir Karpov, he is dangerous. I tried to reach an accord with him at Omsk, but he threatened me—my very existence. It became necessary for me to act, because he is working on a project, a very secret project, of which you know nothing

whatsoever. And one other thing. He took something else in trade from Sergei Kirov besides those five Zeppelins. The Soviets have also delivered that ship we spoke of earlier—directly to his personal control.”

“The battlecruiser? The ship with these new naval rockets?”

“Correct. You saw what they did to the Italian Navy, and your own ships as well. Now he is sailing east to confront the Japanese.”

“Preposterous, just as I said earlier. You were ranting on and on about the futility of building battleships. Well, the Japanese have a good number of these aircraft carriers. They will make short work of this Soviet battlecruiser, and hopefully put an end to these rocket prototypes it carries. For they can be nothing more than that, Volkov, just prototypes. If the Soviets developed this technology as you assert, and if they had these weapons in numbers, they would have already given them to the British. But there has not been a single instance of their use for months.”

“Oh? My intelligence indicates rockets defended the British in North Africa against your Stukas.”

“What? I was never told that!”

“There are many things you were never told, but listen now and I will tell you a few more. The Soviets have weapons programs just like the secret project we are working on, and they may be getting very close to a working prototype. We believe this ship may be used for trials of that weapon, just as it was used to test their new naval rocket designs, and their new radar sets. In fact, they may even be closer to deployment than anyone believes. Do you begin to see more in the movement of this ship to the Pacific?”

Volkov knew he had the Führer’s attention now, and it was time for the big lie. He knew he could never just come out and reveal the whole truth about that ship, or even his own origins and identity. But the Germans had already felt the bite of these advanced modern weapons, so he was playing on a very real fear in Hitler’s mind. His line was baited, and now it was time to try and catch his fish.

“You believe the Soviets have a working prototype of this weapon?”

“Possibly.”

“On that battlecruiser? Why would they deploy it in that manner? Wouldn’t it be far more useful to put it on a bomber and visit Berlin?”

“That, too, remains a real possibility, but at the moment, your Luftwaffe is still very strong, and the airspace over Berlin is well defended—against

traditional aircraft.” There was the bait, twitching and curling on the line. “It was interesting how Karpov was able to bomb your city with utter impunity. He simply flew higher in his obsolete airship than any plane in your inventory. Suppose he drops something else the next time he tries that little trick? In fact, this raid on Berlin may have been designed to simply test that possibility.”

“I see...” Hitler was listening very closely now. “But this ship... You say you believe it may have a prototype weapon?”

“That is a real possibility. They deploy it there, and why not? All of their other advanced rocket technology is on that ship, which is why it can defend itself so well. It can see and shoot down planes before they even get within range. In fact, given that advantage, and with the weapons we fear they may already have, that ship could single handedly destroy an entire navy. And now this Vladimir Karpov has it under his thumb, and he is sailing east to the Pacific, most likely to see about the matter of all that Siberian territory the Japanese are sitting on. He will have a ship that can sink the Japanese aircraft carriers as easily as your own Graf Zeppelin was dealt with, and he will have these terrible, accurate rockets that can deliver a warhead to land based targets as well. Any major city in Japan could be hit by a missile, and if my fears are borne out, that city would be utterly destroyed, with one blow, if they do have a working prototype.”

Volkov already knew it was not a question of if here. Kirov certainly carried nuclear weapons, this he knew for a fact, given that he was a naval intelligence officer. Yet he had to speak of the threat in this manner with Hitler now, as he could not simply come out and tell him the full story.

Hitler’s silence was testimony to the fact that Volkov’s own missile had struck home. The Führer was finally beginning to see the real threat implied by these advanced wonder weapons, a subject that would be dear to his heart for many years to come, should he survive to live them.

“We are racing to catch up,” Volkov pressed. “Yet now everything is on the razor’s edge. If they do have a prototype, that ship is where it will be harbored. And if they do ever get a mind to overfly Berlin again with one of these obsolete Zeppelins...” He gestured to his own ship now, hovering silently in the skies above the Wolf’s Lair, clearly visible out the wide windows of the conference room.”

“I begin to understand why you have come here today,” said Hitler. “You

believe they mean to test this prototype against the Japanese.”

“Precisely. They will use it as a threat, possibly to force the Japanese to concede their lost territories.”

“Tojo will never comply with such a threat.”

“Perhaps not... until he sees what these new weapons can do.”

“And if this is all true,” said Hitler, “and this test is successful?”

“Karpov could knock the Japanese out of the war before they even get started. Yes, Herr Hitler, the backward Siberians are now a major strategic threat. I hope I’ve impressed at least that much upon you in this discussion. However, I know how this can be avoided, and the threat completely neutralized. I know where the new weapons development facilities were relocated, in Siberia, as I have told you earlier. Yes, I know exactly where they are, and I have a plan...”

“Tell me,” said Hitler, a captive audience now.

Volkov smiled. “That is exactly the reason I came here, because to realize this plan, Herr Hitler, I will need your help, and the able assistance of the German military.”

Chapter 24

“Where is this facility?” Asked Hitler, his eyes widening, now those awful dark empty portals that would devour the entire world with their hunger.

“In Siberia. Near Kansk, to be specific.”

“Kansk? Isn’t that the location of that little raid you mounted recently?”

“Now you begin to see why I have already tried to attack this place. The first was a mere reconnaissance, the second a raid in force, but I was surprised by the sudden appearance of this Vladimir Karpov, a man I thought had perished in that Zeppelin crash over the English Channel. Well, as it turns out, that was merely a cover story.”

“Obviously,” said Hitler. “Though I gave the matter no concern, nor the man himself, until this moment. Go on...”

“Karpov flew to meet with Kirov in Moscow,” said Volkov, “Following that, he had the temerity to overfly Berlin and test his prospects for a successful attack on your city. Yes? He then flies to London, his presence there covered up by that story about the storm over the English Channel. That even fooled my people, and they are very good! Well he was probably there to consult and coordinate plans with the British. And then what happens? The next thing we know, Karpov is rubbing cheeks with Sergei Kirov again, inviting him to relocate all his munitions and arms plants in Siberia, offering him raw materials and well trained rifle divisions, men who are opposing your drive on Moscow at this very moment. In return, what does he get? Five Zeppelins, and the most advance ship in the world comes into his greedy hands, along with all the weapons that ship now carries! Sergei Kirov paid a much higher price for Siberian support than you realize.”

“Indeed,” said Hitler, finally seeing how all the pieces of the puzzle came together.

“So now Karpov commands the ship that has bedeviled your navy,” said Volkov, “challenging and besting the fruit of your entire Plan Z naval building program. My intelligence service was always suspicious of the sudden uptick in activity around Kansk. It was a backwaters region, far from the front lines, but now we see why. It was located there for reasons of

security. Few planes can reach it, certainly none that I possess have the range. Only my obsolete airships can pose a threat to it, and this solves the riddle of why I would bother mounting that raid that went so badly. It was ill planned, but next time, I will get things right, because I never make the same mistake twice, rest assured.”

“So you intended to attack and destroy that facility?”

“Of course, but both operations were foiled. The first reconnaissance mission involved only two airships, but it was stopped by the unexpected presence of a Soviet airship on the scene, and ground troops which used a new weapon to take down the Oskemen, that was one of the ships I sent on that mission.”

“A rocket weapon?”

“Something very much like one. My intelligence services have obtained the plans, and I will make a little gift to you soon. Well then, Soviet involvement in that incident did not escape my notice. I subsequently learned that the naval arsenal for these new rocket weapons was located in that very same area, and so my recent raid was, in part, meant to destroy that facility, or better yet, to gain control of it long enough to get away with a prototype.”

“I see...” Hitler nodded, following all of this with great interest now. In spinning out this web of deceit, Volkov was drawing on half truths, for in his day, Kansk was indeed the site of a Russian naval weapons armory, and many modern missiles and other warheads were stored there, though they were all some 80 years beyond his grasp, or so he believed... Until he learned the full truth about Ilanskiy. That was something he could never tell Hitler about, but the picture he was painting for him now would hopefully be very compelling, and gain the support he was needing to carry out a plan he had hatched in his devious mind long ago.

“To make a long story short, that is where the weapons development plants were relocated, priceless technology, prototype rockets, all just sitting there for the taking. My attempt to do so was foiled by Karpov. Yes, I will give him one thing, he is a very skilled Fleet Admiral, and I lost some very good men in that ill fated raid.”

“You said you have a plan,” said Hitler, eager to learn more.

“Karpov thinks he’s beaten me now. He plopped a few divisions down at Kansk and the nearby hamlet of Ilanskiy, where he has established his new fleet headquarters. Why choose such an isolated place, I wondered? Now we

both know. Well, it is said that while the cat is away, the mice will play. I plan on revisiting Kansk and Ilanskiy, only this time I will take my entire airship fleet. My last raid involved only a small portion of that fleet, only eight ships in the beginning, and my reinforcements arrived too late. This time I will take everything I have, all sixteen airships in one massive mailed fist. Each ship can lift a full company, and my men are drilling for the mission even now, eager to avenge their fallen comrades, who were dealt with very badly after that last mission.”

“Sixteen companies?” Hitler shook his head.

“More like twenty, as I will rig out my biggest ships to carry as many men as possible.”

“That is still hardly enough to oppose those rifle divisions on the ground there. You may be a fine leader and statesman, Mister Volkov, but you are not a military man. Any of my Generals would advise you that you would again be simply wasting these resources and throwing those men away in such an operation.”

“Which is why I come here to you,” said Volkov deftly. “ I need your expertise, your support for planning and logistics, and above all, your finely trained troops.”

“My troops? I’m afraid that is a little far for my panzer divisions to go.”

“But not for your Falschirmjaegers...” There it was, the request, the close, and the next man who said a word would lose, as Volkov knew very well. So he waited, saying nothing, simply looking Hitler in those empty black eyes.

“You want my airborne troops?” said Hitler.

“What else? You are correct about the panzers.”

“And you want them for another attack on these facilities—against three Siberian rifle divisions? Madness!”

“Against one Siberian Rifle Division, the 78th. The others were both moved to the Ob river line as a defensive garrison, as most of the troops that were posted there have been shipped east to fight Guderian. Such an insult... The Soviets conspire with the Siberians, they attack your ships at sea with their new wonder weapons, and all before there was even a declaration of war. They conspire with the British, and may have even assisted with the development of this new heavy tank they have deployed in North Africa. Then Karpov actually bombs Berlin, before marching off his best trained divisions

to kill Germans in front of Moscow. Such an insult, and you do nothing..."

The darkness in Hitler's eyes began to smolder now, a fire kindling there that seemed a ravenous hunger, driven by his growing anger. Volkov knew just how to stoke that flame, and the lure he had used, the mystery of these new wonder weapons dangling at the end of his hook, was all he really needed.

"You do nothing! Well I propose that we end that miserable situation, and show this Vladimir Karpov exactly who he is dealing with now. Here is my plan. I can lift sixteen to twenty companies."

"That is no more than a few regiments," said Hitler.

"Yes, but my airships are quite fast. They can deliver those troops, and then race back to our airfields to take on additional forces. And your Luftwaffe can lift a good deal more."

"What? We have no more Zeppelins. Planes we have in abundance, but, if I am not mistaken, that location is well beyond their range, even if we were to use captured airfields in Russia."

"But not if your planes flew from my territory," said Volkov. "I have airfields at Oskemen, and several new fields we built near Novosibirsk to support our Ob River campaign."

"Which got you nowhere," said Hitler, unconvinced.

"True, because I needed those troops elsewhere, but I still have several divisions in that sector. I stood down that attack merely to put my enemy off his guard. By opening my Volga offensive, I convinced Karpov that my main effort would now be in the west, against the Soviets. This was, in part, a good reason why he could afford to send all those divisions to Sergei Kirov. He now has only four divisions in Western Siberia, one at Kansk, and the other three have moved to the Ob River line defenses."

"What about all his troops in the far east?"

"Yes, he has another twelve divisions there, mostly around Irkutsk and Lake Baikal. He needs to maintain that force level against the Japanese Kwantung Army, which has fourteen divisions at my last count. You see, the Siberians, with Karpov sailing east, are just about to initiate open hostilities with the Japanese, and Tojo will not like that one bit. They will surely act against the Soviet defenses at Irkutsk, and so all those troops in the far east will be well occupied."

"That is a reasonable assumption," said Hitler, warming to the strategic

questions around this strange proposal.

“Now then,” said Volkov. “Here is the plan. You have an excellent, proven airborne strike force in your 7th Flieger Division.”

“Most of those troops are still in northern Syria,” said Hitler.

“And you also have the 22nd Air Landing Division in reserve in the Russian theater. Thankfully, you took my good advice and avoided a debacle at Crete. Malta was a much better catch, as Crete can be pounded and hounded from both the sea and from airfields in Italy. Rest assured, you will not regret your decision to cancel Operation Merkur. Yet the objective here is far more enticing, perhaps the greatest intelligence cache of the entire war, advanced missile designs, just sitting there waiting for us to pounce and take them.” That was, of course, the big lie, but Volkov told it with a very straight face.

“And your plan?”

“Strike like lightning, come like a winter storm, seize those facilities, and reap the harvest.”

Hitler did not seem very enthusiastic. “You want German troops to support such an operation? I’m afraid that will be out of the question. I cannot commit such a valuable asset so far from our supporting lines. Besides, I have other operations planned for our Fallschirmjaegers. I can offer you air support, but not troops.”

“Perfectly fine. I do not need your troops, just the transport planes from your 11th Fliegerkorps. I have a full airborne division, though I can only lift one or two regiments at any one time, as you just pointed out. But Germany has a substantial airlift capability. Your transport planes can reach my territory easily enough. Simply muster them at Constanta on the Black Sea, then fly across that sea to reach my airfields in the Caucasus. The Soviets will see this as part of your operations against that vital sector, and that will serve as a good cover story. We will leak the information that a German supply operation is underway to the Caucasus. Once there, they can transfer by night to Astrakhan, and then on to our forward air bases.”

“Yes, but a very long way to go,” said Hitler, considering the matter.

“I will prepare several designated locations along the way for the planes to land and refuel. The RAF does this all the time. They leap frog across Africa to fly in planes to Egypt, and we will show them we have the same capability.”

“Are your forward airfields within range?” asked Hitler. “Our JU-52s can make no more than a thousand kilometers on one mission, sometimes even less.”

“Yes, old Auntie Ju hasn’t got the legs for a long haul. But her big sister does...” Volkov smiled.

“You know about...”

“About the JU-252 project? I have the plans, Herr Hitler. As I have said, my people are very good. Rest assured, your secret is safe with me. I understand production has been underway for some time now?”

“Something tells me you more than understand,” said Hitler, his eyes narrowed, uncomfortable with the thought that this man knew such a thing. The JU-252 was Germany’s replacement for the Ju-52 transport, and it was a plane that had much better range and carrying capacity. Hitler had a mind to use it both for long range air supply missions in Russia, and to augment his growing airborne capability. He had no doubt that Volkov might also know of these plans. Hitler wanted a plane that could transport these troops over much longer distances, and he entertained many ideas about how he could use such a force. Now Volkov’s daring plan began to capture his imagination, and he wanted to know more.

“And after our planes reach your forward bases? Then what?” Hitler folded his arms, waiting.

“Then my sixteen airships lead the way. We spearhead the attack by seizing the airfields at Kansk. That will be our first objective, so that your planes can fly directly there from our forward bases. I will not even need the full Fliegerkorps. Two regiments will do—perhaps 300 planes. The JU-52’s can do the job. I have mapped it all out, and with this plan, we could build up our forces very quickly. That would give me a full division on the ground in those crucial early hours. That was the real reason I failed last time—insufficient airlift capacity.”

“What kind of air defenses do they have?”

“The usual flak guns, which we can avoid. Because my men can either jump from high altitude, or I can deposit them directly on the ground out of range of enemy guns. You see, my obsolete airships are very useful, from a military standpoint. I think the latter strategy serves best here, and I have selected the most suitable landing sites. I have trained my men hard for this mission, and all the mistakes made in the last one will be corrected. This time

I will have adequate force, air cover, fire support for the troops on the ground, all provided by my fleet, and what fighters I can muster in my regular Air Corps. Any contribution you might make would be very welcome, fighters, bombers, anything you can spare. My elite 1st Guard Air Mobile Division, can get the job done this time. All I need is those planes.”

“And once on the ground?”

“We control the airfields, and I will quickly destroy the three enemy Zeppelins on garrison duty there.”

“That was not the case last time,” said Hitler with a wry smile. “I am told you lost your fleet flagship.”

“Yet not without inflicting great pain on the enemy. See how they have had to lease all the Soviet airships? This time our intelligence will be ironclad. With their flagship in the Arctic, it will be too far for Karpov to intervene. So we seize those airfields, take Kansk, and then my men will lead the attack to locate and secure that naval armory. Within a day or two at most, we will have our hands on the greatest prize of the war, while at the same time denying its use to the enemy. It will go down in history as a master stroke!” Now Volkov smiled, and knew it was time for the icing on the cake, addressing the German leader differently to flatter the man. “And you, my Führer, will be the master!”

“Ah,” said Hitler. “I was wondering when you would stir the honey into my tea. Very well... How long would you need those transports?”

“A week, no more. Just long enough to get my men in, and perhaps assist us with one additional supply run. That will free up my airships for ground fire support. I will have the equivalent of a full mobile artillery regiment in the skies, and I can move it to any threatened sector and pour down a withering fire on the enemy. Once your planes complete that supply run, my airships can handle the rest. After that, your transports can retire, just as they came.”

“Your troops will be well behind enemy lines,” said Hitler. “Eventually the Siberians will send reinforcements. What then? How will you get them out?”

Volkov allowed a pause here, then fixed Hitler with a steady eye. “Some missions demand great sacrifice,” he said. “My men are willing to die to achieve my purpose.”

Hitler looked at him, realizing what he was saying, and this, more than

anything, persuaded him of the necessity of supporting this plan. "I will need the details," he said.

Now Volkov reached into his briefcase and produced a bound manuscript. "Here is the plan, worked out in exacting detail for your generals to review. All it needs is your approval, and the order to begin. My men will be ready and waiting, and the wonder weapons that might take years to develop, will all be yours in the twinkling of an eye."

Again, the big lie, for there was no naval armory at Kansk in 1941, and there would not be for many decades. There were no wonder weapons there at all, save at an insignificant rail side inn in the tiny village of Ilanskiy...

That was Volkov's real objective, though Hitler would never know about it. His promises had merely been the bait on his line, and he already knew how he would compensate the Führer after the mission concluded. All he had to do was say that the weapons had been moved at the last minute, but that he was able to capture the plans. Then he would fetch them from his archive, and Hitler would get his share of the prize in payment for his services. The success of the mission, at least insofar as Hitler would see it, was guaranteed. In fact, he could have easily handed the plans to Hitler at that moment... but he needed those transports.

Part IX

Seed of Perdition

“A mountain is composed of tiny grains of earth. The ocean is made up of tiny drops of water. Even so, life is but an endless series of little details, actions, speeches, and thoughts. And the consequences whether good or bad of even the least of them are far-reaching.

— Swami Sivananda

Chapter 25

Admiral Raeder stood on the long pier, his eyes dark and serious as he stared at the massive battleship. There sat the pride of the German Fleet, and the apex of all his efforts to realize the dreams of the Führer in his Plan Z naval building program. Look at it now, he thought, noting the fresh paint that had covered over cinder black scars on the cold metal of the ship, where damage from many small caliber hits pot marked the superstructure.

The news of the death of Admiral Lütjens had shaken him, and worse than that was the shattering of his battlefleet when Graf Zeppelin went down. Gneisenau was also lost, skewered by torpedoes in the heat of a running attack on HMS Rodney, and the sinking of that British battleship had been his only consolation.

The Kapitan of the Hindenburg, Adler, was now at his side, ready to escort the Admiral aboard to survey the repairs that had been made to the damage. It was a most humbling moment, and Adler felt like a schoolboy being called to account for his misdeeds, a very uncomfortable feeling.

“It was those damnable naval rockets again,” he said. “That was what killed Loki and Graf Zeppelin. As for the battleships, the British must have had a large wolfpack right there screening the Rodney, and we ran right over it. The torpedoes took down Gneisenau—two hits”

“Just two?” Raeder shook his head. “We build them better than that, Adler. Gneisenau should have been able to absorb a pair of torpedoes and stay afloat. You say you were running at 30 knots?”

“Yes sir. That was in Hoffmann’s report from Scharnhorst.”

“Yet a British submarine scored two direct hits? Astounding.”

“Sir,” Adler took a long breath. “I believe the British have developed some new method of guiding these rockets, and now the torpedoes as well. It’s the only explanation. And this was a new torpedo—very powerful. Hoffmann says he saw Gneisenau literally lifted out of the water. It must have run right under the ship and exploded beneath the hull. It simply broke the ship’s back, sir. After these hits, both Thor and Prince Eugen were left behind to aid the stricken ships.”

“Yet they found no British Submarines,” said Raeder, the edge of suspicion in his voice. “Well, at least Topp took Tirpitz and Scharnhorst in to finish off that British battleship. That was our only laurels,” said Raeder. “And then I am told there was a large explosion?”

“I did not see it at first, Admiral, but it soon dominated the horizon, impossible to miss. I thought it was possibly an explosion aboard Rodney, but it was terrible to behold.”

“I spoke with Topp on the Tirpitz,” said Raeder. “It was not the Rodney exploding. He says he was still engaged when he saw that upwelling from the sea. Hoffmann says it was easily a mile high, the explosion so large that it moved his ship in the sea. It was then that the rockets came for Tirpitz.”

Adler was silent, a sullen expression on his face. “How can we fight against weapons like this?” he said at last. “We have never once seen the ship that was firing these rockets.”

“And what about your ship, Kapitan? What about the fleet flagship? From the look of the damage, you were in a close quarters gunfight.”

Adler swallowed hard.” That is the mystery, sir. Yes, we were being hit by small caliber gun fire, five or six inch guns. Yet we never saw the ship firing those guns either!”

“Preposterous. What are you saying, Adler? You know damn well that any ship that could put those rounds on you would be visible, well inside your horizon.”

“There was nothing sir, I swear—no visual sightings and nothing on our radar either. The entry was made in the ship’s battle logs. Struck by small caliber rounds. No enemy ship in sight.”

“Then it must have been a submarine on the surface using it’s deck gun.”

“No sir. I can see us taking perhaps one hit from such an attack, but then we would surely see that sub firing at us. But there was nothing. The sea was clear on every heading. Bismarck was sustaining hits as well. Their log will confirm this. It was very frustrating.”

“I see you lost a secondary battery, and a gun director, not to mention the lifeboats. Thankfully we had an extra turret for that.”

“An a round hit one of the Arado seaplanes, sir. We had a bad fire there for a while. Yet none of these hits compromised the ship in any real way. We were fit for action.”

“Until that British battleship appeared,” said Raeder, “the Invincible.

And this time it was the torpedoes again. No Rockets?”

“No sir. The British engaged with their main batteries. There were no further rocket attacks.”

“Yes, I read your report, Adler. You allowed that ship to close inside 15,000 meters?”

“I believed our armor protection was best suited to a range inside 20,000 meters,” said Adler. “And our guns do their best work there.”

“Yes, but inside 15,000 meters? You had the speed to maintain your ideal range. What happened?”

“We took a bad hit forward, and one of the guns in Anton turret was canted up by the explosion. Faust says the elevation gears were badly damaged and—”

“Yes, yes, I read all of this. I am asking you why you continued to close inside 20,000 meters.”

“The conning tower was hit,” said Adler. “That was what killed Admiral Lütjens. He was out on the weather deck, and after that there was considerable confusion. It was some time before I realized the Admiral was dead.”

“Then you believed Lütjens was still in command?”

“Yes sir... until I finally realized what had happened. In that interval the range closed considerably. And then those torpedoes came. Who could expect such an attack?”

“Yes,” said Raeder. “Who expected naval rockets, torpedoes that can break a ship’s back, small caliber guns that range out beyond our largest batteries and strike us from well over the horizon. That is the only explanation for that damage. The logs show that Eisenberg warned you the range was approaching 17,000 meters.”

“It was then that I ordered the formation to turn,” said Adler.

“The log shows you turned to starboard.”

“I corrected that when we got the torpedo warning.”

“You turned right into that attack.”

“Who could have expected that, admiral?” Adler had a pleading look on his face.

“Lütjens,” said Raeder flatly. “He would have seen what the British were doing in a heartbeat, but unfortunately his heart had stopped by then. You must remember, the HMS Invincible was built in the 1920s. All ship designs

from that era still had forward torpedo tubes. We had them on Hindenburg at one point, before they were removed. Know your enemy, Adler. That is the first rule of naval combat.” Raeder took a long breath, deciding to ease up on this young Kapitan. “Very well, you sustained two torpedo hits, and yes, this was most unexpected. Luckily they did not break the back of Hindenburg.”

“They were not the same, sir. Not like the weapons which struck Gneisenau.”

“At that point both formations were then steaming in opposite directions, and you elected to disengage.”

“I decided to rendezvous with Topp on the Tirpitz, recall Prinz Eugen and Thor from their rescue mission near Graff Zeppelin, and then proceed to the Bay of Biscay. The loss of the carrier meant we no longer had adequate air cover. There were only a few fighters up off the Goeben, and I still had no idea where those rockets were coming from, or how many enemy U-boats were out there.”

“I agree with this decision, Kapitan. In this you were thinking like a fleet commander, and not simply the Kapitan of your battleship. Now you see what combat at sea is really all about. Ships are lost, men die. It is a hard, cruel business. You were wise to consolidate the fleet and bring it here. Only the British did not give us much of a welcome. The RAF visited us again last night.”

“That was a minor hit, sir,” said Adler. “It struck aft, and did not even penetrate the deck armor. We’ll have it repaired by noon.”

“Good for that, but the British will be back whenever the weather permits. The fleet must leave here as soon as possible, and move to Gibraltar. And for that move, I will get you all the air cover I can find.”

“We move south, sir? The fleet is in a perfect position here to cut the convoy routes to Egypt.”

“And it is also in a perfect position to be attacked by the RAF, as I have just said. At Gibraltar we can sortie to the Atlantic easily enough. And with good ships there, the British will not be able to slip through like they did in this incident. Those straits must be permanently closed to all ship traffic but our own. We are seeing about better shore batteries. Some of the turrets that were built for Oldenburg may end up there, if you can promise me we will not need them for Hindenburg... I am also opening negotiations with the French

to permit us to use Casablanca. That port sits right on the jugular of those very same convoy routes. We will be moving heaven and earth to improve those port facilities.”

“I see... Then we will not take the fleet home?”

“Not all of it, if I get my will in the matter. Yes, there will be those who argue that the sea lanes to Murmansk must be closed, to cut off any allied support for the Soviets. Hitler may take this view, and I will have to accommodate him. But in my mind the fleet would be much better positioned in Gibraltar and Casablanca. If it is convoys the Führer wants us to kill, then they are in the Atlantic. If we take the fleet home, then we just have to fight our way out again. From Gibraltar and Casablanca, we do not have that problem, and the British cannot cover both those ports easily. They are consolidating in the Azores, and they will also try to post destroyers operating out of Funchal Island and the Canaries, but those are small ports, and cannot sustain any large fleet presence for long. In fact, the Canaries and Funchal Island become prime targets for us now.”

“One thing, sir,” said Adler. “I have learned the importance of air cover at sea. The British knew this well before the war, which is why they built so many aircraft carriers. Their planes are obsolete, but yet very bothersome. If we had not lost the Graf Zeppelin as we did, I think that engagement would have played out quite differently, rockets or no rockets.”

“Now you begin to see the heart of it,” said Raeder. “Unfortunately, the news of this little fiasco was not well received in Berlin, and Hitler is in a very foul mood. He has already canceled the Brandenburg, and now the Oldenburg project is kaput, so you are looking at the last battleship Germany will build in this war. But the carriers... yes, I have managed to keep up work on those. Peter Strasser is ready to replace Graf Zeppelin, though it is in the north. Considering that, I think I will have to send Scharnhorst and Tirpitz home. As for Bismarck, and Hindenburg, your Schweregruppe will head south. You can also keep Prince Eugen, Thor, and the Goeben.”

“What about the Kaiser Wilhelm?” said Adler.

“It was already moved to Gibraltar, fit as a fiddle after that torpedo damage was cured.”

“Is it wise to split the fleet like this? It will not be easy to get those ships up north again.”

“No, but we will have to try. We need capital ships in the Norwegian Sea

now, as Hitler will certainly demand we close the convoy route to Murmansk. The Army tells me they will settle the matter, but I am not so sure. In any case, Tirpitz and Scharnhorst should be enough, with the support of our older cruisers and destroyers. As for your group, you will head for Gibraltar as soon as possible. Then we will see if we can persuade the French to move their center of gravity from Toulon to Casablanca. With that fleet, we pose a real threat to the Atlantic. They can add the battleships Normandie, Richelieu, and Dunkerque to your southern group. And they are still working on Jean Bart. Those ships, and the many fine cruisers and destroyers they have, will be more than enough to support our operations in the Atlantic. That is where we focus our entire effort now—the Atlantic.”

“What about the Italian fleet?” said Adler.

“The Italians are useless, but they still have enough good ships to guard the sea routes to North Africa. I wish I had trained crews to take them all off their hands. There are still three or four very good battleships there. If they can keep Cunningham preoccupied in the Med, that is all they need do.”

“Yet we are pulling more troops out of Africa than we send there,” said Adler.

“That will change. Hitler has been focused on Moscow, but I am told that 10th Panzer was refitted with new tanks for Rommel, and 5th Panzer already has desert Camo scheme painted on the tanks. Our desert loving General will finally get something to try and match those new British tanks. A pity, our strategy in the Mediterranean was shattered by all these recent setbacks, both for Rommel, and now for us. We’re on the defensive there now. The war in Russia is all Hitler can think about.”

“We’ll change that sir,” said Adler optimistically. “Once I close the British convoy routes to Africa, Rommel will be in a much better position.”

“Precisely,” said Raeder. “And to aid that cause, I have a few tricks up my sleeve. We captured a French carrier in the docks, and nearly complete, the Joffre. In another month or so, we will christen it the Prince Heinrich. And the captured French cruiser DeGrasse is being converted to a carrier, and renamed the Hanover. It won’t be much, but together with the Goeben, those ships will allow you to put 76 aircraft at sea! Up north, we are also converting the Seydlitz to a light carrier to join Peter Strasser. That will put 62 planes at sea to operate with Topp’s squadron.”

“Excellent,” said Adler. “When will we have them ready?”

“Soon enough. First we must see to the battleships. Get the fleet ready to move.”

“We will work day and night,” said Adler.

“Good. Get the job done, and then wait for my orders to move south to Gibraltar. We will fight a new kind of naval war now. Necessity forces us to resume a raiding strategy. No more massive fleet actions where we risk everything at once, unless the situation dictates that would be best. There is also a question of fuel here. Stocks are not as plentiful as you might think. The Italians have been begging us for oil, and taking out the entire fleet is very costly in that regard.”

“Then how will we fight, sir?”

“A new strategy,” said Raeder. “The one arm of the navy that has been given a loose budget is the U-boat construction program. Doenitz is getting anything he wants. So our strategy now is to augment and support the effort of his wolfpacks. As much as I had hoped otherwise, I realize now that they will sink far more enemy ships than our battleships. Things have changed, Adler, and we must change with them. Even so, once you move to Casablanca and join the French fleet, the British will have a great deal of trouble matching us pound for pound. Our mission there is twofold. We pose a dangerous threat to the British convoys to Egypt, and we also defend the French colonies in West Africa from allied invasion. You will learn more later, but for now... Let us hope Hitler doesn’t order us to stand down the whole goddamned fleet, and use the steel to build more U-Boats for Doenitz.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“Very well,” said Raeder. “I will get you all the support I can. Now let us go and have a close look at the repairs. I’m told Axel Faust insisted on getting that gun in Anton turret back into proper position before you made port.”

“He did, sir. He said he would not sail home with his middle finger in the air.” Adler smiled. “A good man, that one.”

All this sounded very exciting to Adler, whose youth and inexperience only saw him eager to redress the failures of the fleet thus far in the war. Raeder, however, was a realist, in spite of his evolving strategy in placing more importance on taking air power to sea. Yet there were considerations involved in that which might never enter Adler’s mind, he thought.

How do we keep those carriers operational at sea over any length of time? Yes, we have been running exercises in underway replenishment, but the movement of aviation fuel in any quantities is something we have never done before. We do not have a ready fleet of merchant ships and enough tankers for the job, and so I will have to turn to the French for that. Coordinating these operations could also be very difficult.

And what about trained carrier pilots for all these grand little projects I have secreted on the docks in France? We just lost most of the air wing on Graf Zeppelin. It will be months before I can replace those pilots, and, when we do start operations, we will take even more losses. Inexperienced men will crash on takeoff or landing. Some may even get lost at sea, as we have no real experience in carrier operations out in the Atlantic. We could easily expect to turn over the entire air wing on a carrier in six months time, and certainly in any given year, assuming the ship survives even that long. Then there are those naval rockets that go after planes as well!

Losses will be inevitable, he knew. So building the ships is only half the problem. Supporting them at sea with fuel, fresh planes, and trained pilots is the rest of the work. We have a great deal to learn, and something tells me I will put all this effort into our naval air program, and find it good for only one throw of the dice when it comes to real operations.

There was one other ship that he failed to mention to Adler, Hindenburg's brother ship, the Brandenburg, cancelled by Hitler many months ago. The hull was intact, and a good portion of the superstructure. One of the forward turrets was ready, and the guns had been machined. All of her engines and most underdeck work was complete, except for large segments of the aft section, as the crews had been working bow to stern. That gave Raeder an idea, fueled by intelligence the Japanese were converting one of their super battleship projects into a massive heavy carrier.

He went to the drawing board with the engineers in secret, thinking how he might convert Brandenburg into a hybrid battle carrier. If they used those empty underdeck sections aft for a maintenance deck, and then simply cleared everything aft of the conning tower... There is my fleet replenishment ship, he thought with some excitement!

Hindenburg has an at sea duration of 20,000 miles. That's room for a lot of fuel. If we convert some of those fuel bunkers for aviation fuel, and store it below the water line with a good armored deck above it, than all we need is

pumps to fuel the planes on that maintenance deck. That ship could replenish all the other smaller carriers, and still have plenty of fuel left over for its own operations. It was a daring idea, and he ordered plans drawn up, saying nothing to anyone about it until they were complete. Crews were already working day and night, for it was his hope that he could surprise Hitler by April with a very nice birthday present.

He sighed. Perhaps I am chasing shadows with these carrier projects. It may be that all we can do is get one or two operational and use them as a scouting and small air support asset for raiding sorties. The Goeben performed very well in that role. That may be a much more useful ship than a bigger carrier like Graf Zeppelin. When one of those damn rockets can wipe out years of work in a few seconds, it gives me pause... All the more reason to put that armor that is already on the Brandenburg to good use. Losing Graf Zeppelin was a very hard blow, but Brandenburg would be a much tougher nut to crack. Now I must set my mind on putting what is left of the fleet to some good use... Before I lose those ships too.

Chapter 26

Admiral Volsky was walking quietly along the shoreline, watching the moon that had so confounded him earlier, his hand in his pocket, thinking of all that had happened. What was this thing Fedorov had given him? It was a very strange key, but where did he get it? Why was it so important that he deliver it to the British Admiral? None of this made any sense to him, and Fedorov had no time to explain in detail, but he was wise enough to do whatever he could in any case.

His first decision had been to get to a radio and send a coded message to the British. He knew exactly what he could do, using the very same protocol that Fedorov had given him, and he was much gratified when the response came back. After an awkward moment, arranging a translator, he managed to convey his wishes, and make a request for British support.

Thankfully, if Karpov still had any suspicions about him, he did not seem overly concerned. Once the Captain got his hands on Kirov, he left Kola Bay soon after, and that was that. And that was quite enough. The Admiral spent hours and hours, walking along the familiar shore that now seemed so desolate and foreign to him. Home was not what it once was, and now he fought with the sadness of knowing he might never see the world he grew up in again. Everyone he knew there, his family, his dear wife, was gone... not even born yet!

He realized that he was lost, marooned, adrift here in another time, and now bereft of his command. All of his authority, the long career that stretched back over 40 years behind him, now counted for nothing. He was a stranger in this strange new world, and did not quite know what to make of himself. His mind was even considering what might happen on the day he was born, less than twenty years from now. Fedorov had filled his mind with so many things, that he spent long hours thinking about them, trying to sort everything through and come to grips with it all.

So there he was, a beached whale, and left to his own devices. He commiserated with Admiral Golovko, assisting him with fleet planning to support the land battle, still amazed to realized just where and when he was

—1941! It was all he could do to keep himself busy for a few days, while he set his mind on the mission he needed to perform.

Fedorov's hunch soon proved accurate when he was approached by a sailor, a man dressed in British uniform, and speaking Russian. "Admiral, sir, would you be so kind as to follow me? Commander Bone wishes to speak with you."

That was a name Fedorov had also given him, and so Volsky followed, the fallow light fading with the day stretched out to late evening. The man found a truck, and they soon trundled off in a direction Volsky knew well enough, further up the bay to a place called Polyarny. There, at Catherine's Harbor, there would one day be a big naval base for his Northern Fleet. It was much less developed now, but he was not surprised to find a pair of British submarines waiting for them, and he was soon ushered aboard one such boat, the Tigris, a new T-Class sub laid down just before the war in 1938. A very powerful boat, she had eight tubes forward, and three more aft, giving her quite a sting when lined up on a potential target. The boat would come to be much feared by the enemy, getting eleven kills in her many patrols, for 38,500 tons, and a DSO for Bone along the way

"Greetings Admiral," Lt. Commander Howard Bone was a short, round faced man, and he had already completed nine war patrols, with a number of successful merchant ship sinkings to his credit. Now, his tenth patrol was to be a special delivery. He was to ferry this Admiral safely to a British cruiser in the Norwegian Sea. It was just another gift from the Russians, he thought, who had proudly presented a reindeer doe to the British during the welcoming ceremony when the two subs arrived. His sister boat, Trident, got the reindeer, and he got the Admiral, he thought with a wry grin. Though this one looks like he eats a good deal more than that doe.

The sailor translated, and Volsky had a quiet chat with the man, grateful to find support here, and yet feeling very strange as he boarded the submarine. It seemed to stir up an old memory, though he could not quite put his finger on the time and place. While the Admiral had spent many days on the sea over the years, he never much liked the idea of riding beneath it in a submarine. Somehow, he saw himself on one in his mind's eye, and with Fedorov, though he knew that it must have been a dream.

Yet the time he spent on that sub seemed like a chisel, slowly chipping away at something in his mind, and giving it shape and form, though he could

not quite discern what it was. He had the strangest feeling that he knew much more about all the things Fedorov had told him, all the things he had supposedly lived out himself, though he could not see any way that could be possible.

The journey was quiet, as Commander Bone had been instructed by Tovey to sail with the utmost stealth and caution, and in no way endanger the Admiral. So combat was strictly forbidden until the rendezvous was made, and Volsky safely transferred to the light cruiser *Nigeria*, the flagship of Rear Admiral Vian's Force K cruiser squadron operating off the Norwegian coast. In taking on this special passenger, Vian would miss his chance to get the German gunnery training ship *Bremse*, and a pair of transports carrying 1500 troops of the German 6th Mountain Division, for he was also ordered to proceed to Scapa Flow with the utmost speed.

It was there that Volsky would meet the British Admiral Tovey for the very first time, though Fedorov would tell him otherwise. Yet Volsky also knew that he was supposed to be well acquainted with this man, sailing and fighting by his side, both in the Mediterranean Sea and the North Atlantic. When he finally set eyes on him in Tovey's headquarters at Scapa Flow, Volsky passed yet another moment of *Déjà vu*, thinking that Fedorov had been correct all along, and that he surely knew this man. Tovey's tall, trim form, thin nose, narrow eyes, and ready smile seemed very familiar to him, and yet he remained clueless of all their supposed prior conspiracy.

The two men spoke through a translator, a man well vetted by Tovey, and sworn to complete secrecy in all matters, at forfeit of his own life should he ever reveal a word of what he heard in these meetings.

"Admiral Volsky," said Tovey, shaking the other man's hand warmly. "I'm very glad to see you again, and I trust the journey was not too uncomfortable. Submarines can be very claustrophobic, and Vian's cruisers a bit drafty, even though the real cold has yet to set in up here."

"I'm no stranger to the cold," said Volsky amiably, "though I must confess that I remain a stranger to you, at least in my own mind. You tell me it is good to see me again, though for the life of me, I cannot remember ever seeing you."

That puzzled Tovey for a moment, but he remembered all that Professor Dorland had told him, and warned him of—that this man might not be the one he knew and sailed with, which left him feeling a little sad, for he had

come to know and like the Russian Admiral very much.

“Don’t feel awkward about that,” said Tovey. “I was once told, by you and your Mister Fedorov, that I had met you both before, and I was much in the same place with that as you are now. I couldn’t recall a wink of that, yet took it on faith, and always did have a kind of inner hunch about it, some half formed recollection. I’m told it was on a small island near Gibraltar, but here we meet again, and whether or not it is the first time, I certainly hope it will not be the last. And I shall have the distinct pleasure of getting to know you all over again, for which I will always be truly grateful.”

A most gracious and accommodating man, thought Volsky, smiling. And now he came to the thought of why he was here. “As to our Mister Fedorov,” he said. “His own memory was not blighted as mine seems to be. In fact, he spoke very highly of you, though the fact you requested to speak with him did put him into some jeopardy at the outset. You see, the ship and crew I led here is somewhat ... different from the one you may remember.”

“I understand,” said Tovey. “At least I think I do. I’ve had it explained to me several times by a very smart man, and then again by our Mister Turing, who took a whack at it all himself when I briefed him. Yet all I can grasp of it is that this is a kind of second coming for you and your ship, Admiral. Welcome back.”

“I’m afraid it’s just me this time,” said Volsky, and he told Tovey all that had happened concerning Karpov, his strange transformation, the letter from Moscow, and the transfer of command of his ship.

“This is most unfortunate,” said Tovey with a shake of his head. “I’m sure you must feel the loss keenly, and the thought that Sergei Kirov authorized this whole affair is most unseemly. Yet I can perhaps understand why he did so, given the Germans are at his throat now. Then your Captain Karpov has command?”

“He does, though he was not the man he should have been... I know this sounds insane, but he was different.”

“I’ve had that explained to me as well,” said Tovey. “The word used was *Doppelganger*, double walker. I must say, from all I’ve heard of the first man, to think a second is at large in the world gives me a shudder. You say he planned to sail to the Pacific? I wonder why?”

“I can answer that in one word,” said Volsky, “Japan.”

“I suppose that fruit is ripening and ready to fall from the tree,” said

Tovey. *"The Siberians and Japanese have been facing off for some time in the Trans-Baikal region. Do you have any idea what this Captain of yours might be planning?"*

"Several," said Volsky, "and I'm afraid none of them are pleasant to contemplate. Admiral, what you say of the Japanese is very true. They will surely enter the war soon, most certainly by December of this year. I'm told that the Japanese control territory that was once Siberian?"

"Yes, and that goes back a good long way, and was laid at the feet of the very same man—this Captain Karpov. It's strange to think you were also involved in all of that, and yet you say you have no recollection of anything. Welcome to the club, Admiral. We're two peas in the same pod now, as I've read reports by my own hand that I had no recollection of whatsoever... except in these strange fits that come and go. I was even told that I was also involved in that incident, and this I do recall, as a very young man."

Tovey told Volsky of his service aboard King Alfred in the Pacific China Station, and of that strange incident when a rogue ship re-ignited hostilities between Imperial Russia and the Japanese Empire.

"I took it upon myself to side with the Japanese in that event," said Tovey. "In fact, I believe I saw the very ship we've been discussing, under command of this same man—Karpov. So now he sails east again, and that bodes no good."

Now Volsky lowered his voice, casting a look at the interpreter. "May I speak freely?"

"This man is completely reliable," said Tovey.

"Very well... Japan has a plan to strike the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in early December of this year. They will also strike at all your Pacific bases, Hong Kong, Singapore, all of them. So I read a great deal in Karpov's interest in sailing east, particularly given his position in this Free Siberian State."

"Which is even more elevated now," said Tovey. "Their former General Secretary, Kolchak, was apparently assassinated last week. Karpov is top dog over there now. Do you think he plans to intervene in this business the Japanese have planned?"

"That is very possible, perhaps inevitable given all I know of Karpov."

"Yes," said Tovey, "and given all I have seen of the fighting power of your ship, I'd say the Japanese are in for a most unhappy time. It's quite

possible that we will get war breaking out in the far east the instant Karpov appears there, which could be quite soon. If he's taken the Arctic Sea route, it can be a bit tricky with the ice, though the real cold has yet to set in."

"He'll get through," said Volsky. "Yes, and when he does get out east, there will certainly be trouble. While I cannot say what he will do, it is likely he will make threats, and then back them up with firepower, which you tell me you are well acquainted with. This could pre-empt the Japanese attack, and possibly even upset their entire war plan, which in turn affects the timing of the American entry into this conflict."

"Our Mister Churchill won't be happy to hear that," said Tovey. "In fact, he's planning to meet with Mister Roosevelt in Argentia Bay. We were to ferry him there, but I've convinced him we need every available ship to set a watch on the Germans. You may have helped me lick them once or twice, Admiral, but the German Navy is still a very serious threat. So that meeting was postponed, though it will take place soon, and the Prime Minister has been convinced that he might more easily fly to the meeting on one of our bombers."

"A wise choice," said Volsky.

"Yes. We can get him to Iceland in a Wellington easily enough, and from there down to Halifax. In fact, if he takes off from Western Ireland he might make the flight in one hop, but our preference is to have him take the journey in short steps, so we can post fighter escorts along the way. This means I'll have to assign a few carriers along the Iceland Halifax route, and I'll miss them. We need every ship we can get, particularly since we no longer have your able ship and crew at our side. And that said, we need the Americans. They've been cooperating with us out west, and have just relieved our garrison on Iceland. But we'll need a little more from them than Lend Lease destroyers, and as soon as we can get it."

"I understand," said Volsky. "Well, Admiral. I may no longer have command of my ship to offer you consolation, but I did not come here entirely empty handed. Our Mister Fedorov has given me a mission, and I am happy to say I will now fulfill it. He entrusted this to me, and I was told to deliver it to you at all cost. Here it is."

Volsky reached into the secret pocket, fumbling about for a moment to get hold of the strange key, and then he proudly handed it to Admiral Tovey. "I'm told you would be most gratified to receive this, though I have no idea

what this is all about.”

Tovey looked at the key in his hand, realizing what it might be, yet not understanding how Fedorov could have found it. “My Lord,” he said. “If this is what I think it is, then I am a very rich man with this gift. I shall have to get back in touch with Miss Fairchild and spread the good news.”

“May I ask what that is?” said Volsky.

“I suppose we both might ask that,” Tovey answered. “It’s not what this is that stumps the mind, but what it might open, or lock away. Your Mister Fedorov gave you this? How in the world did he come by it? Did he tell you as much?”

“Not a word. He simply pressed it upon me to deliver it safely here.”

That alone spoke volumes to Tovey. If Fedorov knew of the importance of this key, then he had to be the same young, enterprising man he had already met. Yet Volsky was different, unknowing, a man made new. How was this possible?

“Admiral, I have a very great deal to share with you now, so please make yourself comfortable, and we’ll have a long chat over tea. One thing I do know—this key is very important, and having it in hand could make a world of difference in the days ahead. Now then, let me tell you everything I have come to know...”

Tovey spoke for a very long time, relating all that had happened under his watch, their time in the Atlantic dueling with the Germans, the sortie in the Med, the strange events in the North African desert, the arrival of Brigadier Kinlan and his troops, and then the events of the previous May, and the appearance of that little fleet of modern day auxiliaries.

“I’ve sent those ships on to Alexandria, as much to get them far away from England as anything else, and far from any questions they might raise.”

Volsky was astounded to hear it all, just as he was when Fedorov had tried to fill his head with stories it might have taken someone a score of books to write. When the long briefing was finally over, Volsky looked at the translator, a wry smile on his lips.

“Enough there to keep you awake a good many nights,” he said with a wink.

“Indeed,” said Tovey, “but as I’ve said, this man is completely reliable. He’s my latest recruit—a little clan I’ve started called the Watch. That makes him a member of a very select group.”

That was very true, for only a handful of people knew the entirety of all these events, and how the dots connected. And as for Tovey, the baton now passed, he was also a member of a very select group. The Admiral was now a Keyholder.

At that moment there came a knock on the door, and a messenger came in with a signal, handing it to Tovey with a salute. He read it with concern obvious in his eyes, but the light of battle kindling there at the same time.

“Well Admiral,” he said, “it seems the Germans have grown tired of wallowing in French ports. This is news from our Captain Patterson on King George V. The Hindenburg has just sortied with a large battlegroup and is running out into the Bay of Biscay. I shall have to catch a fast plane for a long bumpy ride out to Ark Royal. Care to join me? I can certainly use an old naval hand like yours at the tiller.”

Volsky smiled.

Chapter 27

Churchill had had quite enough of Wavell's sloth since the decisive victory at Tobruk the previous May. Coming as it did at the height of the action in the North Atlantic that drove the German fleet back to French ports, he was elated at first, and eager to exploit the opportunity to make significant gains in North Africa. Yet Wavell continued to argue that he needed more and better armor, which frustrated Churchill to no end, for what more could the man want beyond the awesome power of Brigadier Kinlan's Heavy Brigade.

He kept reading the latest communiqué from Wavell, shaking his head. "Reserve Force deemed too valuable for regular use in front line operations... Reserve Force?" Churchill looked at Alexander, a man he was considering for a new post in the Middle East to possibly replace the recalcitrant and calcified thinking of Wavell, or so Churchill put it to himself in his own mind. Alexander was one of a very select few who had been brought under the umbrella, and knew the real nature and identity of Kinlan's Brigade.

"What good are these tanks if we can't use them?" said Churchill, his frustration evident. "We stopped Rommel at Tobruk, and then let him gracefully sit on his Gazala line and fan himself the whole summer through! Word is the Germans have been pulling one unit after another from his force and sending them to Russia. Now he's down to only three or four German divisions there. I see no reason why we cannot kick him out of his defensive laagers, and then summarily chase him all the way to Tripoli. That would flank the German base at Malta, and give us every opportunity to take the place back."

"Without question, sir," said Alexander, "but the general thinking is that to use the Reserve Force in an offensive role would risk expending it before our own army has sufficient strength to stand on its own. This is why Wavell has waited for the convoys to strengthen his armored force, and quite frankly, both Montgomery and I concur with this strategy."

"Yet the Brigade is virtually unstoppable," Churchill complained. "Why

not use it as a hammer to simply break down the door, and then withdraw it as our boys shoulder their way into Rommel's kitchen? Once we break that position, then he's no other choice but to withdraw to El Agheila, and then we simply repeat that performance and send him packing for Tripoli."

"Yes sir, that is all sound thinking, but consider our own situation. Suppose he does pull back to El Agheila. What do we pursue him with? Such a move requires us to cross the entire base of Cyrenaica again, and that needs tanks in the vanguard, trucks with infantry behind them, and lots of petrol to keep them moving. It's taken these last several months for the Army to lay in those stores. You realize the deliveries have been slow in coming all the way around the Cape of Good Hope, but now that I say that, don't lose heart, Mister Prime Minister. Wavell indicates that he's very nearly ready to tee off with his Operation Crusader."

"He's been saying as much for weeks," said Churchill.

"Yes, but we've finally built up 1st and 32nd Armored Brigades to full strength, and the 22nd has been added to 7th Armored Division to bring that unit up to full strength. We've all of a thousand tanks available now, and things are ready to go."

"Excellent," said Churchill, "I'd fly over there again to see to the matter, but now I have urgent business with Mister Roosevelt. So I'm leaving things to you, General Alexander, and I'll be very blunt about it. I want Benghazi before the end of October, and El Agheila by mid-November. No equivocation and hand wringing. I understand it will be O'Conner and Montgomery leading this attack?"

"Correct, sir. Montgomery proved his worth at Tobruk. He was very stubborn there, and should make a fine field commander. He'll take three infantry divisions and break in through Gazala to sweep them out of Cyrenaica. That's XIII Corps, and O'Conner will command XXX Corps with the two armored divisions and one motorized infantry division in support. Wavell will coordinate the whole party from Alexandria."

"Well then," said Churchill, somewhat satisfied. "You're to do everything necessary, everything possible to light a fire under our Generals in the field over there, and do it as quickly as you possibly can."

"I leave tomorrow morning, sir, and I will do all you request, and more. The plan in question was originally designed to relieve Tobruk, but that was accomplished when we stopped Rommel last May. He's had no keen desire to

sit outside the wire and invite our attack, but he hasn't gone far. Now that plan has been dusted off, revised and extended to deliver the very same objectives you mention, and with sufficient forces of our own making in hand to do so without having to expend the Reserve Force. Oh, it will be there as before, just in case anyone should trip on his own boot straps, but the idea is to beat the Germans ourselves, as far as possible. And I think we can bloody well do so."

"I like your spirit, General. Just make sure Wavell catches it too."

The plan, like all plans, had been laboriously drawn up over the long hot summer, and meticulously prepared by both Wavell and Montgomery. After his setback at Tobruk, Rommel fell back to prepared defensive positions that stretched from Gazala on the coast, through Alem Hamza and down to Bir Hacheim. By stubbornly refusing to cede control of Cyrenaica, Rommel had salvaged some measure of his damaged pride, and satisfied Hitler that his enterprise in North Africa still had some merit. He was holding many valuable airfields, and a concerted effort had been made to strengthen and develop the port capacity of Benghazi in the west. This allowed Rommel to use the good coastal road to bring up supplies through Derna to Gazala, and he had also established a heavily fortified depot at Mechili, with good land links down through Tengeder to Bir Hacheim.

Yet all through the summer, he watched his army shrink as Hitler pulled one unit after another from his ill fated operations in the Middle East. The Grossdeutschland Regiment was the first to go, built up to a full division much earlier than it had been in Fedorov's history, and then sent to the southern wing of Operation Barbarossa. Steiner's 5th SS was pulled from Syria, and then Goering's tough infantry had also been reclaimed, again to be built up to a full division before being shipped off to the Eastern Front.

Now Rommel was left with no more than his original force, with 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions, the 90th Light Motorized Infantry Division, and the Italians. Though he pleaded for fresh troops to replace his losses, none had come, though that was soon about to change.

The Germans had been refitting several Panzer Divisions in France, restructuring them with the newest tank designs that were now rolling off the production lines in increasing numbers. The coming of Brigadier Kinlan's force had far more impact than either Volsky or Fedorov had first believed, and the early development of the Löew-55, and the new Leopard medium tank

had already been field tested in the fighting in Russia. Hitler was determined to have his cake and eat it too. So he ordered the existing Panzer IIIs in the 2nd, 5th, and 10th divisions to be quickly sent east to reinforce the sagging tank numbers in his front line divisions. Then the 2nd Panzer Division was entirely refitted, along with one division from Hoepner's force, and one from Hoth's. All three were already in the thick of Operation Typhoon, as that winter storm now broke upon the Russian defenses before Moscow.

The last two divisions, 5th and 10th Panzer, had been initially slated for Rommel, though Hitler never informed his desert warrior of this. He waited to see if Rommel could hold, and so the British need to reorganize and rebuild their own armored force in North Africa played in Rommel's favor. Seeing that Rommel still held all of Cyrenaica, Hitler eventually ordered that the new tanks assigned to the 10th Panzer Division be painted in the desert camouflage scheme. The Führer had it in his mind to see how his new tanks would fare against this British heavy tank, mistakenly believing that his own design was the equal of anything the British could have come up with. So he would finally answer Rommel's plaintive calls for support, and even had a mind to further augment his force with the 5th Panzer Division should events warrant.

10th Panzer Division arrived at Benghazi just before the British were moving their armored forces up to the start line for Operation Crusader. But there was one other thing in the holds of the cargo ships unloading at Benghazi, crates of ammunition, or so the soldiers believed as they were loading them onto the trucks.... But they were something more.

*

The column pulled up to the main company HQ billet, with 21st Panzer Division, and the Sergeant stepped out, stretching his back after the long ride from Benghazi through Derna, looking for fresh water. He strode off, a clipboard under his arm, intending to first report his cargo to the company commander.

"Delivery," he said, saluting to the man, a sallow faced Oberleutnant in the 104th Panzergrenadier Regiment.

"What is it this time? More biscuits? Tin cans of fish and beef? More of

that god awful hard tack?”

“No sir, I have 48 crates of munitions of some sort.” He extended the clipboard, and the lieutenant eyed it briefly. “Where do you want them?”

“The Sergeant here will show you the way.”

And that was that.

Neither man discussed it further, and the crates were offloaded that afternoon, stacked in trenches under thick netting, and left there until that evening when the Lieutenant decided to go and see what he actually had. He was more than surprised when he had a Corporal open the first crate, his eyes alight with curiosity when he saw the strange looking weapons it contained.

“What in the world is this?” he said aloud as the Corporal spied a folded paper and handed it to his officer. Lieutenant Beyer was the first man in the field to lay eyes on Germany’s latest innovation, a weapon that was helped along greatly in its development by one small oversight, a careless moment in the haste of their withdrawal when Fedorov and Troyak took off from the high fortress tower at Palmyra.

“Look sir,” said the Corporal, pointing at the letters stenciled on the inner lid of the wooden crate. It is called a Panzerfaust. What is it, Lieutenant? Some kind of new mortar?”

It was the brainchild of one Doctor Heinrich Langweiler who had been dreaming up new theories of propulsion for weapons munitions as early as 1939, something he called the “Impulse Propulsion Principle.” He was experimenting with hyper-velocity for small arms munitions, and his research was suddenly given a most welcome shove in the right direction when a man delivered a strange looking object to his factory site the previous March. Now, some 6 months later, he had studied it with utmost care to discover its secrets, information that was instrumental in bringing his latest dream to life.

Langweiler worked with a company called HASSAG in Leipzig, and one of his ideas involved the development of “rocket bullets” fired from a smoothbore weapon. But an enterprising Colonel Wolff from the 7th Flieger Division in Syria knew he had something very unusual when he discovered

the strange weapon in Palmyra, apparently left behind by British Special Forces in their raid. The colonel had it crated up and immediately sent to division headquarters, with a letter explaining his find. "Appears to be a new British hand-held anti tank weapon," he wrote. "DO NOT FIRE! Contents and design of round must be examined by qualified personnel. Recommend immediate transport to Germany."

His instructions were followed, and the RPG would soon come to the attention of Langweiler himself, having a dramatic impact on his thinking and design for the weapon that would soon threaten to rewrite history yet again. The Faustpatrone 42 was well into its development, but now its bigger brother would arrive a whole year early, the Panzerfaust. Langweiler used the RPG-7 as a model for his own ideas to coalesce around, and soon had a prototype, which tested with very good results. It was going to be something no one on the Allied side expected, a grain of sand that would soon start an avalanche.

The Lieutenant studied the diagrams, indicating how the weapons were to be deployed and fired, by a single man. How very odd, he thought. How could something so simple in design do anything at all against its intended target, the premier weapons of the desert war, the panzers? He soon learned that a special liaison officer had been assigned to his company, and the same for every company in both battalions of his regiment.

The next day he learned what this new weapon was all about, when the training officers led his men to a special site. He saw three captured British Matildas sitting in a dry wadi, as though the lumbering beasts had become stuck there in the silt and sand. There was a slit trench some 30 meters from the three tanks, and on the officer's command, a helmeted soldier popped up, one of the strange new weapons on his shoulder. He quickly took aim and fired. What happened next stunned every man who witnessed it. The thick frontal armor of the Matilda, some 78mm that was very difficult for the Panzer IIIs to penetrate or harm, was completely blown through!

"Take a good look," said the officer with a grin. "Our Panzers cannot do as much as this little wonder can. It will penetrate 200mm of frontal armor! More than our 88 flak gun! Yes, the range is very short, but it makes each and every one of you a Panzerfaust, an armored fist against the enemy. With these we no longer retreat in the face of enemy armor, even if they manage to knock out all our AT guns. With these we hold our ground, just like that man

there in the slit trench. Let them come, then leap up from your defensive positions and kill them! Now each and every infantry company will have the killing power of a Panzerabwehr Battalion. We are all hunters now, Panzer Jaegers, and let the British beware!”

At that moment, all the history of the see-saw fighting in North Africa was about to change again, for behind those crates the whole of the 10th Panzer Division was soon assembling in Benghazi, and its Panzer Regiment was now comprised entirely of the newest German tanks off the assembly lines. In a single stroke, Rommel’s fortune had suddenly risen higher than he even knew at that moment. He had just been handed a weapon that made his infantry a sturdy, implacable shield. And he had just been given a sharp new sword in 10th Panzer Division to go with it, arriving 9 months earlier than it had in Fedorov’s history. Unfortunately, he had also been given a new general to take over operational level control of the Panzer Korps, General Ludwig Crüwell, whose thinking was quite different from Rommel’s.

Operation Crusader was going to be the proving ground for these new weapons in the desert, only this time, it was the British who were in for a surprise. The seed of perdition had fallen on good ground at Palmyra, and now it would bloom with deadly thorns.

Part X

Crusader

“...Men unsheathe their swords and kill one another. They have invented gods and challenge each other: ‘Discard your gods and worship mine, or I will destroy both your gods and you!’”

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Chapter 28

Unlike the Germans, the British were slow to learn the lessons they already had in hand with the marvels possessed by Brigadier Kinlan's Brigade. The General had spent long hours with Wavell, explaining that it would simply not be possible for the industries of that time to produce a tank anything remotely like his Challenger IIs. The lighter Scimitars might provide useful models to aid British arms designers, but the Challenger's exotic Chobam armor could never be replicated at that time. Nor could the precious main tank rounds be duplicated, as they also contained alloys and materials that British industry in 1941 simply could not create.

They looked hungrily at the Rapier Air defense rocket system until Kinlan explained that its computers, electronics, radar sets and propulsion systems, and even the metals used in the skin of the missiles, could not be duplicated. Yet seeing that it could work to shoot down an aircraft was most encouraging, and the British did set their minds on advancing rocket technology of their own. The engine itself in the missile gave some guidance to the fledgling rocket designs then under development, and one man in particular, Sir Frank Whittle with a company known as Power Jets Limited, was given much more attention than he had ever hoped he might receive.

Sir Frank had a design that was soon to receive full funding and support from the Crown, a jet aircraft that he called the Meteor. His diligent work, now aided by information that was provided by Kinlan's engineers and technical specialists, would soon result in an aircraft that would set all new records for speed, endurance, and rate of climb for a fighter aircraft.

On the 15th of May, 1941, Gloster Aircraft company had partnered with Whittle to produce a single engine prototype, the E28/39. His concept proved, and now with full financial support from the Crown, Whittle and Gloster quickly advanced their design to a twin engine model under the project code name Rampage. The plane was to be called the Thunderbolt, until they learned the American P-47 had already been given that name. So with its novel new engines, Meteor seemed an appropriate handle, and development was hastened along. The planes were nowhere near ready for

actual production and deployment, but the concept and commitment to jet aircraft was now cemented into British strategy from that day forward.

One other idea that stuck hard with all the British Generals was the use of armored personnel carriers to move infantry rapidly to the place they were needed in combat, and with much more security than they could ever hope to have in trucks or on foot. Yet in their eyes, the Warrior AFV was every bit a tank, with a gun as large and powerful as any on their other armored chariots. The thought that its true role was that of a fast infantry carrier that was also a powerful fire support weapon became lodged in their minds, and it would set their designs back home on a most interesting path.

Elsewhere, in the areas of regular arms production, the British were still relying on the old models that had been in the pipeline for some time, with none of the innovative thinking that was now driving German tank designers, who mistakenly thought themselves far behind their enemy. Hitler did not yet know the British would never produce another Challenger II tank for the duration of the war, and would be limited to the single brigade that was now in the Western Desert. All they could do to preserve that advantage, was possibly find some way to create a good high performance armor piercing round, and in this Kinlan's technical people were very helpful.

In the main, the British were quietly told by Kinlan that they had the means to deal with anything the Germans would ever build. The 17 Pounder gun with APDS shot was fully capable of knocking out virtually any German tank, but the British were going to have to get serious about putting that gun on a tank of their own.

"You'll end up putting them on American Shermans," he told Wavell and Montgomery in a very private meeting. "Eventually you'll get them onto a forerunner of my own tanks, the Cruiser Mark VIII Challenger, but you never built enough to matter. You'll also put one on a Valentine chassis and call it the Archer, a self propelled AT gun of sorts. There will be another model called the Achilles, a variant on the American M-10 Tank Destroyer."

"You have the plans and designs of these vehicles?" asked Montgomery.

"Someone in my crew here is likely to have them all. For my money, I can show you information on a tank you'll call the Comet. It will have a good 77mm high velocity gun to rival performance of the 17 Pounder, and it has decent all around performance and protection. Get busy, gentlemen. Let your people back home know the score. These are the tanks you need to build, and

in great quantity! Rattle around here in these old Matildas and the new little Crusaders, and you'll soon see the Germans in Cairo. Thankfully, I'll have something to say about that, but I can't be everywhere, or even stay in one place for very long. Gentlemen, I'm your ace in the hole, but you'll need to improve your hand a good deal if you want to beat Rommel, and that quickly. It took you until December of '44 to get Comets delivered to the 11th Armored Division. You'll have to do much better than that."

Thankfully, it would not take much to convince Churchill of the need to radically improve British armor, and so with Kinlan's help, and the advice of his people, the British stopped trying to build endless variations on the cruiser tank idea, and discarded dead end models like the Valiant. They focused on getting a better main gun, decent protection, and good mobility, but it was going to take them a great deal longer to achieve results. For the moment, Operation Crusader was going to be a come as you are party, launched with the vehicles the British had in hand at that time.

They would field about 275 Infantry Tanks, mostly Matilda II and Valentines. And then they would rattle around with another 467 cruiser tanks of every stripe, with the bulk being the new Crusader. To these the American Lend Lease program had delivered a light cruiser tank, the M3 Stuart, which the British came to call the "Honey." Combined with the light Mark VI Tankettes, they finally had good quantity in the armored category, with a little over a thousand AFVs in the Western Desert, but they would be facing some very stiff new competition.

Rommel's 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions still had all the older models. He fielded the Panzer III-H and III-J, along with a few of the long barreled Panzer IV-F1 and F2 tanks. The newly arriving 10th Panzer Division would have all new armor, with 48 Löew-55 Lions, 48 Leopards and 48 of the up gunned Panzer IVs, and there were Leopards assigned to various other units in a supporting role. All in all, Rommel would have only half as many tanks available, with 536 in North Africa when the operation started. To these he could add 18 Sturm III assault guns, and 16 of the new Marder self propelled AT guns to run with his panzer divisions.

So while he would be outnumbered in tanks nearly two to one, he possessed a clear edge in tank quality, and also had received a lavish allotment of 88s. Germany had built and deployed about 5500 of the powerful 88s by late 1941, but amazingly, although he was instrumental in using them

as tank killers, Rommel never had more than a handful of them, just 24 to 36 guns. Now he had quite a few more, about 60 of them on his Gazala line, with more in the pipeline. These, combined with an increasing number of PaK 50s replacing the older PaK 37s, and some captured Russian 76mm guns, were going to give the Germans a lot of stopping power against the abundant British armor.

And then came the new Panzerfausts, enough to equip every battalion with at least 24 Panzer Jaeger teams. The British were heading for much more trouble than they realized, and their hubris, born of the fact that they had Kinlan behind them, not to mention Churchill nipping at the heels of his Generals, was going to make them just a little more reckless than they might otherwise be.

The British also had numerous commitments throughout the Middle East which would hamper their ability to muster a strong offensive force in the Western Desert. 5th Indian, and both the veteran 6th and 7th Australian Divisions were still in Lebanon and Syria, enough of a force to hold what was left of the Axis troops there in check, though not enough to clear them from Northern Syria. To worsen that situation, an increasingly nervous Australia was worried about Japan, and with good reason. It was likely that both Australian Divisions would soon be called home to fight in Southeast Asia, which would force the British to find troops to replace them.

One such Division, the 70th Infantry, had already arrived as a permanent garrison force at Tobruk. For this revised operation Crusader, the British had managed to cobble together two armored formations, loosely grouped with available brigades, the 2nd and 7th Armored Divisions. To these they were able to find four infantry divisions to support the attack, the 9th Australian recalled from Syria, the 4th Indian, 1st South African and 2nd New Zealand Divisions. The Polish Carpathian Brigade was assigned to Tobruk.

Monty's XIII Corps had the bulk of the infantry, with 2nd New Zealand, 9th Australian and the British 70th Infantry at Tobruk. The 22nd Guards and 22nd Tank Brigade were his reserve. O'Connor's XXX Corps had 2nd and 7th Armored Divisions, with the motorized 4th Indian Division in support. The 1st South African Division was held as 8th Army reserve to support either Corps as needed. It was an order of battle that was slightly different from the original Crusader plan, and all the British could muster. Whether

that force would be enough to push Rommel off his Gazala line and start the retreat to El Agheila was the question at hand, and Wavell had his doubts.

“Rommel still has two Panzer divisions and good infantry,” he said. “That alone will match either of our two Corps, and then some. Then we still have the Italians to deal with, easier to manage, but numerous nonetheless.”

“That will likely be work for Monty on the peninsula,” said O’Conner. “We’ll have to break the Germans with the armor in XXX Corps, and I’m just the man to do it. Don’t forget, I know this ground well. I ran all the way to Benghazi in 1940, and I can do it again.”

“It all depends on the tanks,” said Wavell. “Don’t forget what Kinlan warned us about. See to your maintenance on those new Crusaders.”

“I will, sir. I’m assigning a support truck to every company with spare parts, extra fuel, the works. Lord, how I’d love to lead with Kinlan’s Brigade, but we just have to shoulder the battle ourselves now, and hold his troops in reserve.”

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General Crüwell was a big man, nearly a head taller than Erwin Rommel, the man he now came to meet as he took the reins for operational level command of the Panzer Korps. The General had come from the 11th Panzer Division, now in Russia clawing its way towards Moscow. He was promoted to General der Panzertruppe a little early, fresh blood in the operational arm of Rommel’s ill fated army, and ably assisted by Fritz Bayerlein, his Chief of Staff.

Bayerlein had also come from Russia, right from a position in the HQ staff of Guderian’s Panzergruppe 2. While Crüwell was taller, with short cropped sandy hair, Bayerlein was a round faced man, broader in the shoulders, with dark hair parted right down the middle, a fair complexion, soon to be well tanned by the desert sun, and dark eyes. Both men were ‘fresh off the boat’ and eager to get on with their new assignments. Anything would be better than the misery of the winter in Russia. The two men were waiting in the field tent, expecting Rommel at any moment.

“How was it back there?” said Crüwell, and Bayerlein knew exactly what he meant.

“Guderian has been pushing hard,” said Bayerlein, but he’s on the wrong road—much too far from Moscow, and with a major river to get over.”

“The only place he can do that is at Serpukhov,” said Crüwell.

Bayerlein nodded. “Yes, and after that it will be another 100 kilometers to Moscow. That may seem like nothing to us here. It’s that far from our secondary port at Derna to the forward depot at Gazala. But in Russia, you fight for every step forward you take. Either it’s the mud, or the Russians. Soon it will be the snow. Hitler has made a mistake in attacking Moscow.”

“What about Hoepner? He was much closer.”

“Hung up on the inner defense ring around the city. The last I heard they were going to try and reinforce his drive with 12th Panzer. It was fighting at Mozhaysk, and they are sending it north. Yes, if anyone does get through, it will be Hoepner, not Guderian.”

“Thankfully, the winter for us here will not be so harsh,” said Crüwell. “Unless we let these British tanks get the better of us again.”

“10th Panzer has arrived at Benghazi,” said Bayerlein. “They have some of our own new tanks, and I saw them in action on the road to Serpukhov. The British are in for a little surprise this time. The Russian T-34 was difficult for our Panzer IIIs, but not for our new Lions!”

“Yes?” Crüwell inclined his head, raising a finger like a school master. “Well it seems the British have lions here too. I can hardly believe the after action reports I read. They went right through 15th Panzer Division with this new tank of theirs, and rolled right over a well prepared minefield to do it! I’m told they cleared the mines using some kind of new munitions, and a fearsome engineering tank.”

“Yet why haven’t they come against us in all these months?” said Bayerlein. “Rommel was in a bad way after that last battle.”

“I suppose we hurt them enough to give them pause. There’s a new General at Tobruk—Montgomery. He’s the careful sort, very stubborn, very methodical. I don’t think they’ll move unless that man has his entourage well styled.”

“But surely they’ll try and flank our Gazala Line,” said Bayerlein.

“Most likely,” said Crüwell, “and that’s where we must beat them to the punch. The southern desert is an endless open flank, and we must make good use of it.”

“Indeed,” came a voice, as General Rommel entered the tent with a wry smile. Both officers gave him a crisp salute, Crüwell’s just a little stiffer, as he was a died in the wool supporter of Hitler and the Nazi movement. “Welcome to North Africa, gentlemen. To answer your question, General, that flank will most likely be commanded by O’Conner.”

“The man who chased the Italians all the way to Benghazi?”

“The very same,” said Rommel. “He will do exactly as you suggest, General Crüwell, what else? Only this time they will have more armor, and we will have fewer troops in the field than last time. For that reason, I contemplate no attack on Tobruk. We will fight a defensive action here, and count ourselves lucky if we can hold the Gazala Line.”

“What about 10th Panzer Division?” said Crüwell. “What about the Big Cats?”

“I have just come from Benghazi,” said Rommel. “They gave that division to Generalleutnant Wolfgang Fischer—a good man.”

“Then you have seen our new tanks?” Bayerlein rocked on his heels with a smile.

“Most impressive,” said Rommel. “Yet how they will fare against the British remains to be seen.”

“I have seen them fight in Russia,” said Bayerlein. “They smashed three Russian Tank Brigades on the road to Serpukhov!”

“Well, let us hope they can perform as well on the road to Cairo,” said Rommel. “Yet I must tell you what I have learned about this new British tank, and how we must fight it. And I will also tell you that I have no intention of trying to face it with our new Lions, and you will soon know why.”

Chapter 29

“It cannot be stopped,” said Rommel. “At least not by any tank we possess, and I do not even think our new Lions will do the job. This tank is fearsome. It can engage at ranges exceeding our 88s, and that while moving at speeds we have estimated in excess of 50 KPH! Our best 88 gunners can barely track them as they pass, and those that do manage to get a lucky hit say it has absolutely no effect.”

“Astounding,” said Crüwell. “How could the British be so far ahead of us?”

“That is the mystery,” said Rommel. “Thus far, the only place we have encountered this new tank is here and in Syria. The British moved that brigade east to stop Steiner before Hitler abandoned his Plan Orient and pulled that division off to fight in Russia.”

“A single brigade?”

“Yes, it can be no more than that, a mixed force of light tanks, mechanized infantry and a battalion of this new heavy armor. But mark my words, it would smash the tanks you set loose on that road to Serpukhov, Bayerlein, of this I am certain.”

“Then how do we attack?”

“We do not attack,” said Rommel, “at least not in the traditional way we have been accustomed to routing our enemies. Blitzkrieg counts for nothing here now, and you must know this. The British hold this special force in reserve behind their main line. Its speed is sufficient to rapidly react to any breakthrough, so any fast moving penetration by armor will certainly encounter this threat, and be annihilated. No. Here we fight as we did in the last war. In spite of the loss of Grossdeutschland, and Goering’s troops, I still have two good infantry divisions. The 90th Light has been built up to three full regiments, and Hitler has sent me the mountain troops he was holding in reserve for Crete, three more regiments. Those units, along with Meindel’s Sturm Parachute Regiment, are holding the Gazala Line, and they are dug in like the last war—wire, mines, reinforced positions with any good stone we could quarry these last months.”

“Trench warfare?” Bayerlein shook his head.

“Backed by every AT gun, and all the artillery we have,” said Rommel. “Hopefully we will have Stuka support this time as well.”

“And what about the three panzer divisions?” Crüwell’s eyes were wide. “You cannot conduct any offensive with two infantry divisions!”

“They’ll be held in reserve,” said Rommel. “We wait for the enemy to strike. Then we counterpunch their breakthroughs as best we can. If this new British Heavy Brigade appears, I will fight it with infantry alone, but not my panzers. They must be used to smash the lighter British tanks, which the enemy still has in abundance. Should the moment present itself, I will contemplate a move east, but only if the British are thoroughly beaten, on the run, and not until I know where those damn heavy tanks are. At the moment, the enemy is presenting every sign of an impending offensive, but we have not identified this Heavy Brigade among their forward deployments. This is good. It will give us a chance to lean on the ropes.”

“The Führer is expecting results this time, Herr Rommel,” said Crüwell. “He won’t stand for another defeat here.”

“What are you talking about? What defeat? We were that close to taking Tobruk!” Rommel held up two fingers to emphasize his point. “I had infantry firing at enemy positions in the harbor! And I am still sitting on the same ground I took with my first offensive, where I’ve been watching the Führer shuffle my divisions about like chess pieces!”

“Yes,” said Crüwell, cautiously, but firmly. “You have certainly been sitting here. I’ve been sent to see that we get moving again.”

“You’ve been sent?” Rommel gave him an incredulous look. “Is that what you think you are here for, Herr General? You fancy yourself a new crusader in the desert, ready to lift up our fallen banners and run with them all the way to Cairo? Well you have not seen this new British Brigade in action, nor has Hitler. I tried to press upon him the importance of upgrading our armor, and so now it is finally arriving with 10th Panzer Division. All the better, but gentlemen, we must be very cautious now, and very stubborn. No doubt you were both excellent officers in Russia, but here in the desert, there is much you have to learn.”

He gave them a quick map briefing, and related his intentions. “The Italian Trento Division is on the coast holding in front of Gazala. They have a regular infantry division behind them, and the Ariete Armored Division is

here, south of these escarpments. That is their reserve. Next comes our three mountain regiments. They'll hold the line between the escarpment and Bir Hacheim. South of that I've placed our 90th Light Division in this difficult ground leading down to Wadi Thiran. And Meindel's Sturm Regiment is covering these secondary tracks south of that wadi. He is the end of the line. The two Panzer Divisions are here." He circled the assembly areas well behind that hard crust of his infantry.

"They will most likely hit us with infantry, and then push hard with their armor through this sector." He fingered Bir Hacheim. "21st Panzer will react in that sector, and the 15th Panzer will stand in reserve should they attempt any envelopment south or through Wadi Thiran. Hopefully 10th Panzer will hasten up from Benghazi, and that will be my ace in the hole."

"Why not use both Panzer Divisions together?" said Crüwell. "I would mass them here, then push right up this road through Sidi Muftah to this crossroads here."

"The British call that Knightsbridge," said Rommel. "There's bad ground north of Sidi Muftah, and escarpments beyond that crossroad."

"Yes, but it is the most direct axis to Tobruk," said Crüwell.

"And for that reason," Rommel said quickly, "that will be where they position the bulk of their reserves. No. Any attack through Knightsbridge must go here." He pointed to a track leading southeast, "to Bir el Gobi. But all that is academic. We are not going to Tobruk, General Crüwell. My intention is to break the enemy offensive and hold the Gazala line."

"What? No further offensive east?" Crüwell folded his arms. "At the very least we could envelop Tobruk and restore the siege."

"If we beat the British badly enough," said Rommel, "destroy their armor divisions, then they will have no recourse but to withdraw." He tapped the map. In that instance they will have to decide whether or not to give us Tobruk. But don't get any ideas about a mad dash to the wire on the Egyptian border," he cautioned, which was the very thing he had done himself in Fedorov's history of that battle. That Rommel had vanished in the night, commandeering any vehicle he could keep running as he raced from one scattered unit after another and sent them all on a wild jaunt toward the wire. At one point he had been trapped east of the wire himself, spending the long night in a Mammut command vehicle within a few kilometers of 8th Army headquarters and not even knowing it. British messengers had been racing

past all night on motorcycles, but not a one gave a second thought to the solitary vehicle sitting sullenly in the desert that night.

This Rommel had already been chastened for his reckless abandon twice. He knew his enemy now, their capabilities, and the grave danger of unprepared advances into thin air that might meet with utter disaster should the British find them with those awful new heavy tanks and fast mechanized infantry. This time he would fight to destroy the British Army in the field, and not to simply take kilometers of useless desert ground.

“If we do move east again,” he finished, “then it will be a cautious, well managed pursuit of a beaten enemy, but until we achieve that, we stay right here on this line in the sand.”

Crüwell frowned, giving Bayerlein a sideward’s glance, but said nothing more.

The night of October 14th, radio silence was imposed all along the British line, and ominous hush that seemed to portend the imminent onset of the attack. The British hit the Gazala Line hard on the morning of the 15th, a little over a month before the historical start date of Operation Crusader. Montgomery was to begin the attack along the main coastal road, with the intention of taking Gazala itself, and then pushing on to Derna. To this end he decided to commit his 32nd Tank Brigade to support the infantry of the 2nd New Zealand Division, and they were going up against the Italian Trento Motorized Division, entrenched astride the main road in good positions.

The 32nd had over 50 Matilda II tanks, most with 4th RTR, and they led the attack, grinding through heavily sandbagged positions once the New Zealand sappers cleared a path through the mine infested wire. The success of this attack was largely due to those tanks, and the heavy artillery preparation Monty heaved over to cover his sapper advance. It was scissors, paper, rock, and this time the Italians were paper, and Monty’s tanks a hard metal scissors cutting through.

The Italians struggled to regroup, sending in the 102nd Engineer battalion to try and hold the airfield just south of the town, but their best reprisal was the artillery of the 46th Regiment, blasting away at the

advancing enemy. They were soon answered from a most unexpected direction, when the three destroyers that had been stationed at Tobruk sortied up the coast and began firing at targets of opportunity, which included the closely massed Italian artillery, troops reorganizing in Gazala, and the division headquarters even took several direct hits, causing a good deal of disorder.

Monty's advance was methodical. The Armor would punch through and blast away at the hardened enemy bunkers to eliminate machine gun and mortar positions. Then the New Zealand infantry would charge in support of the tanks, bayonets fitted on their rifles, and carry the position. All the while, Montgomery was closely directing the supporting artillery fire, walking it ahead of the advance, which made for an attack that seemed like a slow fire that was burning through the enemy lines.

Further south, beyond a staircase of ragged escarpments, the 99th Mountain Regiment had also been pushed off their prepared positions by the surging New Zealanders, but they immediately organized a counterattack near a secondary road. Beyond that point, west of Sidi Muftah, it was the veteran troops of the 9th Australian Division locked in close combat fighting with the 100th Mountain Regiment. The Germans held the line, except at Bir Hachiem, where the tanks of the British 5th RTR of 2nd Armored Division rolled out of the sallow dawn and made several inroads into the small settlement.

A stolid Sergeant rallied his men, bawling out an order to regroup for a counterattack. Up came the new Panzerfaust teams, fresh off the trucks, rushing through the confusion and smoke of the battlefield. They were going to take a terrible toll on the British tanks of the 5th RTR. Six Crusaders and two older cruiser tanks were the first to feel their bite. With relatively thin 40mm armor on those tanks, the Panzerfaust was lethal at close quarters when the armor attempted to break through.

The attack thundered on to the south, where the British 1st Army Tank Brigade was coming up the road towards a knob labeled Hill 541 on their maps. It would be defended by III Battalion of the 155th Schutzen Regiment of the 90th Light, but before the tanks got there, the dogged infantry of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had dismounted and charged in to attack. All three battalions of this unit hit the Germans, eventually overwhelming the position, which was buckling just as the tanks of the 1st Brigade arrived to seal the

deal.

O'Connor was listening to radio reports very closely on all the action, waiting for news of any breakthrough on the first day. The mystery was where the German panzer divisions were, as no unit of the 21st or 15th had been identified on the front. When the Indians took Hill 541, he thought he saw his first real opportunity, and decided to go all in or nothing. He got to the nearest field radio and called up General Brink of the 1st South African Division.

"Come on, Georgie! Move your boys up after dusk. I want to hit them with another full brigade of infantry before sunset!"

Brink was only too happy to comply, and he also had a couple battalions of fast armored cars to throw in to exploit any holes his men might open. That was to be the danger point for the Germans on day one of the battle. O'Connor was thinking to push through with that infantry, and see what reserves the enemy had at hand. It was like a bear sticking his snout in a beehive, and he was not going to like what he found.

The XXX Corps attack was developing in a very odd way, with 7th Armored sandwiched between two infantry divisions now, the 1st South African on their right, and the 4th Indian on their left. Both infantry divisions were breaking through, while the armor seemed hopelessly tangled with the infantry of the German 90th Light Division, dug in and firing from well prepared defenses. Reports of a new hand held enemy anti-tank weapon began to come in from one regiment after another. The Germans had something that could stop even a Matilda II dead in its tracks, which made the commitment of armor in a breakthrough role very costly, unless it was strongly supported by infantry.

So it was that, while Brink's infantry was swarming through the gap west of Hill 541, the fast motorized troops of the 4th Indian had swung down around the badlands of Wadi Thiran, where they finally found what they thought was the southernmost end of the German line, held by the 442nd flak battery, with 37mm guns. Using artillery to shake up the German gun positions, a full regiment of the veteran Indian troopers went in and put the remaining gun crews to rout. As dusk fell, O'Connor was getting reports that the Indian Division had found and turned the enemy flank, but they were all wrong. Dawn would bring the truth to light, and O'Connor would finally learn where the German Panzer Divisions were.

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Rommel had been listening to reports all that day as well, noting the progression of the British attack on his map, and surprised by its scale and scope. By mid-day, Crüwell was nagging him for permission to commit Ravenstein's 21st Panzer Division to stop the British attack between Bir Hachiem and the gap in the line at Hill 541, and he also wanted the 15th Panzers to begin moving up.

"Not yet!" Rommel admonished him on the radio. "Can't you see what he's doing? He's thrown four infantry divisions at the two we have on the line, hoping to pull our teeth, and there you are wanting to oblige him. Don't show your reserves yet. Keep your nerve. Tell the 90th Light to hold their ground, even if the enemy gets through. We will see what the situation looks like near dusk."

Crüwell stewed, wanting to meet fire with fire, and not really knowing what staying power those two German infantry divisions might have. He had not yet seen the new Panzerfaust, and beyond that, the idea that a single man could hold something in his hands capable of destroying a British heavy infantry tank would never enter his mind. So he chafed and fretted with Bayerlein, eventually sending word to Ravenstein to be prepared to move at first light the following morning.

He had come here to set things right for the man he most loved and respected in this world, Adolf Hitler, and he was going to do things his way, come hell or high water. There would be no high water to face in the dry Western Desert, but Crüwell would soon learn what it was to be in hell, and he would have a devil to pay.

Chapter 30

On the morning of the second day, Monty took Gazala from the Trento division, and he had no intention of ever giving it back. The Matildas of the 32nd Armor Brigade rattled into the narrow streets, backed by infantry of both the New Zealand and British 70th Infantry divisions. It was his intention to push well beyond that fortified town, moving west beneath the high stony escarpment that overlooked it to the south. From there he would have to choose whether to drive up the coast road towards Derna, or to swing southwest into the desert, and either choice rested on the outcome of O'Connor's maneuvers to the south.

In that sector, developments would lead to a most difficult decision. The 4th Indian Division had gotten through the tortuous wrinkled gullies of Wadi Thiran, then swung northwest, thinking they were turning Rommel's flank. There, several thin tracks led due west towards a distant Hill 597, perhaps 50 kilometers away, which was now getting visitors in the arrival of the 10th Panzer Division. Fischer's battalions were strung out west along the roads for miles, but once they snaked past that hill, every road was going to lead them right into the thick of that turning movement by 4th Indian.

It was an attack that looked so promising to O'Connor, that he quickly reinforced it with the 4th Armored Brigade, and troops from the 7th Armored Support Group on light carriers. This was the sector being covered by 15th Panzer Division and, in spite of Rommel's admonitions, it had been slowly drawn into that battle, the 115th Schutzen Regiment infantry going up to check the advance of the Indian troops, and then the tanks of Cramer's 8th Panzer Regiment swinging south to take up the road that led right through Wadi Thiran. He was supposed to be recovering in a hospital, later to be reassigned to a post in Germany, but that artillery round had not found him in this telling of these events, and so he still led the 8th Regiment into the winter of 1941.

Wadi Thiran spread, tree like, for nearly 50 square kilometers, with sandy gullies as branches running off in many directions to the north. There, on some relatively good ground between two branches, a big battle was raging,

where the German 33rd Recon Battalion had rushed in, only to find itself swarmed by Indian infantry. Cramer's II/8 Battalion came plowing through to the rescue, guns blazing, machine guns rattling, and his second battalion was not far west. Along with a machinegun battalion and the division pioneers, this made for a fairly powerful Kampfgruppe to push up that road, and to make matters for the British worse, Meindel's Sturm regiment posted well south of that position, was now marching to the sound of that battle.

The question now was what to do with the one loose cannon on Rommel's deck, 21st Panzer Division. It was sitting right in the center, directly west of Bir Hacheim, and Crüwell got ever more nervous when the British 2nd Armored Division plowed through after the South Africans and an ominous bulge in the front resulted. Ravenstein had already sent his 2nd and 8th MG Battalions forward to try and seal off that penetration, but Crüwell wanted to act decisively with the whole weight of that division.

Rather than waiting and counterpunching the enemy breakthrough as Rommel had advised, he hankered to send Ravenstein's armor quickly south to strike through the lines of the 90th Light Infantry that was now holding in a large horseshoe formation between the penetration achieved by both the British armored divisions. This would put him in good open desert where he thought he could effectively cut off either penetration at his whim. And this is exactly what he did.

Light on his feet, O'Connor saw what was happening, and pulled the bulk of his armor out of a planned attack to the northwest. Instead he swung them back to engage Ravenstein's tanks. His counterattack fell first on the German 3rd Recon Battalion, leading the way for the Panzers in their armored cars. They were not enough to stop the massed British tanks, falling back on to II/5th Panzer Regiment in some disorder.

The British 3rd RTR had 37 of 45 Matildas left, and another 31 of 35 Crusaders. It was joined by the 7th Hussars, with 20 more Crusaders and 22 'Honeys,' the American M3 Stuarts that had arrived to swell the ranks of the British Armor Divisions. 7th RTR had 28 more Matildas, making for a combined force of 138 British tanks. They would be opposed by 49 Pz IIIs, and a dozen IV-Ds, or 61 German tanks in that battalion. But off its left flank, II/5th Panzer had another 82 tanks, including eight of the newer Pz IV-F long barrels. That was going to even matters out considerably.

In a sharp duel, the British lost 21 tanks and a number of light Mark VI

tankettes. Turrets were rotating in all directions, their crews frantically firing, and platoons scattered all along the edge of a low escarpment, the entire scene completely clouded over with heavy dust. At times a light Crusader would emerge into a pocket of visibility and find itself sitting right beside a German Panzer III, the astonished crews gawking at one another before they gunned their engines and disappeared into the dust. Tanks collided with one another like jousting knights, some then firing point blank to blast the turrets of their enemies.

Off to the south, Lt. General Frank Walter Messervy had planted his banner atop Hill 522, the scene of his breakthrough the previous day. He was standing there with field glasses in one hand, and a radio headset in another, trying to ascertain just what had happened to his 4th Indian Division. He had not shaved for days, following a ritual habit to always go into battle with a beard, and now the so called 'Bearded Man' by his junior officers was in a quandary. Yesterday his exuberant infantry battalions had swarmed over and around that hill, then disappeared into the heavy haze over Wadi Thiran. He could hear the sound of battle there to the west, and the telltale rattle of German MG-34s, but had heard little overnight as to what had happened.

At dawn he finally learned that his men had pushed nearly 15 kilometers ahead, thinking they were turning the enemy flank, until they were suddenly faced with the sharp counterattack of Newmann-Silkow's 15th Panzer Division. One of his Brigadiers finally radioed in that they had been caught flat footed, and a good portion of the division was forced to withdraw into the cover of the wadis, where they were now fighting a difficult holding action against the Panzergrenadiers. At the same time, Cramer's panzers had swung down and were trying to envelop the whole division sector. Messervy could see the dust from that battle about 7 klicks south of his hill, and there was absolutely no support of any kind on his left. The flankers were now being flanked, and by German armor. He got on the radio, trying to raise O'Connor for help.

"What are you talking about, Frankie? That's Davies' whole bloody 7th Armored Brigade down there with your infantry as it stands! I've nothing else to send."

"Well I'm not getting round the corner here," said Messervy. In fact, if Davies doesn't stop those enemy tanks, Jerry will have my whole bloody division in the bag, and your whole bloody brigade along with it! Sir, I better

ask for permission to pull my people out.”

“Very well,” said O’Connor, the disappointment obvious in his voice. “If that’s your assessment, then fall back and try to cover the roads leading up to Bir el Gobi. We don’t want the Germans back there. Monty still has the 22nd Guards. I’ll see what I can do!”

Yes, Monty still had both the 22nd Guards Motorized Infantry Brigade, and the 22nd Tank Brigade to go with it. They were lined up all along the Tobruk bypass road from Knightsbridge to Sidi Rezzigh, waiting on his lordships beck and call. O’Connor also radioed Brink with the 1st South African Division to see if he had anything he could spare from his sector, and ended up extracting the 3rd Independent Indian Motor Brigade. He was now scrambling to cover his deep left flank, because somewhere out there, he knew Rommel had yet one more Panzer Division, and he was wondering exactly where it was.

The 10th Panzer Division was just where O’Connor hoped it would not be, moving across good open desert towards Wadi Thiran. Well screened by the action of 15th Panzers, that night it would move through spots selected and improved by the engineers in the wadi, and reach a point just north of hill 440, about 10 kilometers due south of the British flank. There, away from prying enemy eyes, the Panzertruppen would halt to refuel and make ready for operations on the following day. Just another 10 kilometers due east, they would find a road leading up to Bir Ash Shaeiq, and to Bir el Gobi about 30 kilometers north of that watering hole. If they got there, they would not only have the 4th Indian division and 7th Armored Brigade bagged, but O’Connor’s entire XXX Corps.

The Germans were not going to be polite that night and retire for the evening. Cramer was determined to turn that southern flank, and he doggedly pressed forward his remaining tanks, pushing the British back and advancing inexorably on Hill 522. General Messervy got very little sleep listening to the battle growing ever closer, until he could finally see the bright streaking tracer rounds of the tanks, still dueling with one another until well after sunset.

O'Connor had managed to move down the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and that infantry dismounted in the darkness, rushing forward to take up defensive positions and allow the 4th Armored Brigade to pull out and head south to the crisis point near Hill 522. While he thought he would be bolstering the embattled 7th Brigade, in actuality he was now assembling his entire division for what would be the decisive action of the battle the following morning.

That was when Fischer unleashed his hounds, the newly structured 7th Panzer Regiment of his division, with 48 Lions, and an equal number of Leopard medium tanks. They found the 7th Hussars at the point of the 4th Armor Brigade, up early and trundling south to try and cover that very exposed flank. At the same time, Meindel's weary paratroopers, having fought small actions all night, nonetheless joined the 15th Panzer in a renewed effort to reach Hill 522. Messervy had no sleep either the previous night, and now the Bearded man would go without breakfast.

As if perfectly planned, Ravenstein's 21st Panzer Division resumed its push against the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade that had relieved that armor, and they would act as the northern half of a classic pincer operation. It was not what Rommel wanted, but it was looking to be a very fortuitous plan hatched in Crüwell's fertile mind the previous day.

For his part, Rommel had heard little of what was really happening. He gathered that the British had taken Gazala, and were now pushing further west, but the rest of the line seemed to be holding. Yet he could not reach either Ravenstein or Newmann-Silkow on the radio to find out what was happening with his two panzer divisions. As if sensing that the battle was slipping from his grasp, he rode east all night from his headquarters at Mechili, looking to find Ravenstein, where he expected his division to be. What he found instead was a single bridging company, the Major in charge saluting crisply when he saw Rommel emerge from his Mammut command truck.

"Where is your division?" he asked the man.

"Sir, most of it is due east down this road, about 25 kilometers. When you get to the old shrine near the well site, our artillery should be very close by."

"Most of the division you say? Where is General Ravenstein?" But the man could not help him further. Frustrated, he got back in his Mammut, and sped away, ordering his Chief of Staff Gause to get on the radio and try to

find his panzer division.

As the sun came up on the third day, O'Connor was on the radio also looking for troops. He called up Montgomery, listening briefly to him cluck about taking Gazala.

"I've got the Macaroni's on the run," he said unceremoniously. The Trento Division is giving up the road to Derna and pulling up on higher ground to the east. Now it's time for Phase II of my little operation, the coup de gras!"

"Very glad to hear it," said a weary O'Connor, "but it looks as though I'm up against all three German Panzer Divisions now, while you're bullying down on the Italians. Rommel is up to his old style again, and he's getting round my southern flank. I need the 22nd."

"Which Brigade?" said Montgomery flatly.

"Both of them."

"Both? I was needing at least one of those Brigades to kick on through. They were assigned to XIII Corps. Leave them with me and I'll be in Derna in three days time."

That was an exaggerated brag, O'Connor knew, and he needed to press the gravity of the situation on Montgomery. There was no time for haggling.

"Look Monty, you may very well get to Derna with those troops, but if you don't hand them over, Rommel will be in Bardia behind us! Am I making the situation clear?"

"Damn!" said Montgomery. "Very well, it will be XIII Corps to the rescue then. I shall tell my Brigadiers they're wanted elsewhere. Will the road south from Bir el Gobi suffice?"

"Perfectly. And I'll need them to get moving at once."

"You know you might have placed this call to Brigadier Kinlan," Monty ventured in one last attempt to hold on to his local reserve.

"I just may have to do that if the 22nd can't save the day, but remember Kinlan is still a long way east in Egypt!"

"Very well, General, the Guards are yours."

That night the two brigades that shared the same number both headed south on the designated road. They were still far from the crisis zone by sunrise, pressing on with a breakfast of cold biscuits and water. That morning O'Connor also made the call Monty had suggested, though he had been reluctant to do so, for it wounded his pride to have to go begging to

Brigadier Kinlan again.

“Well,” he said, “we’ve a bit of a situation on our hands.”

“Let me guess,” said Kinlan. “Rommel’s got round your southern flank at Wadi Thiran.”

O’Connor was somewhat surprised. “Well you have it exactly.”

“Alright, General,” said Kinlan. “My boys have been sitting on their thumbs here too long as it stands. I’ll put together a battlegroup and get it heading east this morning.”

“You’ve a long way to go,” said O’Connor. “So I’ve taken the liberty of arranging for rail transport from the old railhead near Bir Thalatha to Tobruk. We’ve spent the last 90 days extending that line, and it will get you up here quick as a cat.”

Kinlan signed off, thinking. Damn if Rommel hadn’t beaten the British yet again. Once I get out west I’ll make sure he’s the only General to have beaten his enemy three times, while losing every battle! I knew we should have been positioned well west of the wire into Libya. Reeves is well west at Habata Airfield with the Recon Battalion. I’ll get him moving at once. And the Gurkhas are manning the forts on the wire. They might do in a pinch, but I’ll need a good battlegroup from Scotts Dragoons to finish the job.

“Simms.” He called for his Chief of Staff.

“Sir?”

“Scare up that report on our current ammo stores.”

Part XI

The Better Part of Valor

*“The better part of valor is
discretion, in the which better part I have sav'd my life.”*

— **William Shakespeare:** *Henry The Fourth, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 4*

Chapter 31

Rommel was incensed. When he finally found Ravenstein's headquarters on Hill 587, he stormed into the General's tent, clearly upset. "What in God's name are you doing?" he said angrily.

"Trying to stop the British!" said Ravenstein. "What else?"

"Where is the Panzer Regiment?"

"Crüwell ordered it to move south yesterday. The British tried to get round our flank, but he's turned the tables on them." Ravenstein tapped the map on a low folding table to indicate the position.

"My God! He's moved that far south?"

"Right around their flank," said Ravenstein. "10th Panzer came up through Wadi Thiran and he's got the whole of 15th Panzer down there with it. They're rolling up that flank!" He smiled, hoping the news would dispel Rommel's anger, but it only seemed to deepen his mood.

"That idiot!" he said. "Do you remember what happened to us three months ago? We've already fought that battle, doing exactly what Crüwell has done here! Then what happened? That damn British Heavy Brigade showed up and cut us to pieces! I spent three months putting this Army back together, and now Crüwell has put the entire Panzer Korps at grave risk again. You were supposed to hold the panzer divisions behind the infantry front, and then counterattack the enemy breakthrough. I authorized no major offensive around that flank! Do you know what is happening on the coast road? Montgomery is pushing right through the Italians!"

Ravenstein gave Rommel a sheepish look., but what was done, was done. "What can I do about it now? I had no idea Crüwell was not acting in accordance with your wishes."

"Where is the nearest radio. Get hold of Crüwell immediately!"

Far to the south, the weight of the 10th and 15th Panzer Divisions was indeed rolling up the British flank. The new German tanks were fearsome. I/7th Panzer Battalion of the 10th division broke through and was storming through the sea of dust and smoke right toward the brigade headquarters of Jock Campbell's 7th Support Group. On his left were the positions of the 4th

Indian Division artillery, and the Lions were about to break clean through.

Campbell could barely see what was happening, but he instinctively knew danger in the sound of those oncoming tanks. He rushed through the haze, reaching a battery of 25 Pounders, and immediately ordered them to level their barrels. "The enemy's right there!" he pointed, "give them hell!"

The frantic gun crews depressed their barrels, which had been elevated for long range support fire directed beyond Hill 522. That position had already been overrun by the 15th Panzer Division, and General Messervy, and his entire headquarters staff, was taken prisoner. Crüwell's plan looked like it was working, but he underestimated the tenacity of the British gunners. Campbell was racing through the field batteries like a mad jinn, bawling orders at the top of his voice. "Down! Down! Depress your guns to repel enemy tanks!"

The German tank battalion had found not one, but all three regiments of the 4th Indian Division artillery, 72 guns in all. The new armor on the German tanks was very good, but it was now going to receive the shock and shell of all that massed artillery, and the scene soon became a wild hail of fire, with some rounds glancing off the German tanks, while others struck hard, with terrible fire and concussion. Some rounds struck the forward tracks, blowing them off and immobilizing the tank. Others smashed into turrets as the British gunners loaded, fired, and loaded again. The Germans blasted away at near point blank range themselves, sending the heavy guns careening onto their sides in places, raking the gun crews with deadly machinegun fire in others.

The German battalion would lose four Pz IVF1s, five Leopards, and seven Lions in that deadly engagement. Three more Pz III H tanks in the HQ platoon were brewed up by the heavy fire. Many would have been salvageable if the Germans held the ground, but that was not going to happen.

Right in the midst of that wild battle, Rommel got through to Crüwell, raging at him to get those precious tank battalions back behind the covering terrain of Wadi Thiran.

"That is lunacy!" said Crüwell. "We've broken through!"

"Yes? And just where in God's name do you propose to go? Cairo? You don't even have the fuel to reach Tobruk from where those divisions are now. Do you think we can deliver it to you over that damn wadi? General Crüwell,

I am giving you a direct order now. You are to pull both 15th and 10th Panzer Divisions back at once! Get west of Wadi Thiran and reorganize there. We have trouble on the coast, and you've scattered Ravenstein's division across forty kilometers of desert. Now execute that order at once, or I'll give command of that Korps to someone who will obey!"

*

***Lieutenant** Reeves pulled up to the low hill labeled 551 on his map, looking to see what the track leading west was like up ahead. There were no real roads worth the name here, just places where columns of men and trucks had once scored the land, leaving tracks deep enough that the desert winds had not had time to cover them. The ground to his immediate front tumbled down into a stony field of loose gravel, and he soon met with some Gurkha scouts that indicated the best way down, as most of that battalion had left the wire forts the previous day, and they were waiting at this point to link up with the Royal Lancers.*

Reeves had the light Scimitars, 33 in all, spread over his three squadrons, with twelve more Dragon AFVs bringing up the rear. With him now were the three companies of the Gurkha Battalion, which had swelled their ranks by taking on more of those fierce fighters from this era, training them in the use of modern weapons and tactics over the last three months. They were motorized now, with British trucks getting them out here from the wire on the Egyptian border in good time.

Reeves looked at his map. They would pass Hill 469 if they continued west, and that would put them only about 30 kilometers from the fighting. He received a report indicating that the British had already moved both the 22nd Guards and 22nd Tank brigades down to plow right into the German turning movement around that southern flank. They arrived in the nick of time, better late than never, and were most helpful in stabilizing the situation.

"The question now is whether to push on or wait for Allen," he said to himself. That was the Colonel commanding the heavy tank battalion, following Reeves' tracks and now about 80 klicks east. Kinlan had decided he would get his Challengers west overland just as quickly as the laborious loading operation and train ride up to Tobruk.

"I'll be inside the fence if I take that route," he told O'Connor. That would put me in a good position to cover Tobruk on defense, but for my money, I'd prefer a good counterattack. Better if I move overland and turn up on their flank, just as we did last May. Can you hold for another day?"

"We'll hold," O'Connor told him. "You can come late if you must, but just be sure you get there. It was tooth and nail in the artillery park this morning, but then Jerry pulled back. I'd like to think it was our boys on the 25 Pounders, but they had another full tank battalion right behind the first, and it pulled out too. I smell Rommel. He's up to something, but I can't imaging what."

"Very well," said Kinlan. "We're coming as quick as we can."

By dusk on the 19th of October, O'Connor could look at his map and pencil in what the front looked like that evening. 4th Indian, realizing they were in a pickle, had managed to conduct a fighting withdrawal to the northeast. The weight of those two brigades he had filched from Montgomery had stabilized the flank in the nick of time, and now he learned where Kinlan's lead elements were, and was much heartened.

"By Jove, I think we've stopped them," he said aloud. As always, he was listening to the battle again, and the loud crack of those 25 Pounders he had been hearing all afternoon was finally abating. Darkness was coming, and with it a lull in the action. The Germans will either reorganize to hit us again in the morning, he thought, or they'll do what they should do now and pull back behind Wadi Thiran. I'm surprised Rommel tried this same maneuver again. You'd think he might have learned his lesson.

Implacable Montgomery was the one who really decided the fate of that battle. His dogged infantry kept after the Italians, forcing them back and away from the coastal road, which he now opened to any advance north towards Derna, if he could only find some troops to throw in that direction. His main effort had been to push the Italians back through a gap at the western edge of the high escarpment, and from there he was now in a good position to cut Trigg Capuzzo, a vital life line that ran west about 40 kilometers to the German depots at Mechili.

That was the thrust that got Rommel's attention, and with Ravenstein's division so scattered piecemeal along the front, he had no strong force in hand to counterattack. He knew in his bones that his position was now fatally compromised. It was no longer a question of holding the Gazala line and

punching off the ropes as he had planned, Crüwell had ruined all that with his wild, harebrained attack around that flank. Now it was a question of whether or not he could even safely extricate his panzer divisions. One battalion of Ravenstein's 21st was so embroiled with the retreating 4th Indian Division that it was soon entirely behind the enemy lines. Rommel had to organize a quick counterattack to break through to it, and get as many of those tanks out as he could.

He rode off at dusk, angry and looking for a pound of flesh. Where was Crüwell? Rommel moved from unit to unit, pointing out where he wanted the men to go, and slowly, like a madman on a mission, he began to pull his divisions off the line and get them moving in the dark toward a new defensive position he had prepared in his mind long ago.

We can't hold the Gazala Line, and with that coast road open it will only be a matter of time before they chase the Italians up to Derna. Now the main thing is to screen our depots at Mechili, regroup the panzer divisions behind that infantry screen, and see how much pluck the British still have in them, If nothing else, we've hit back hard, and they had to feel it.

Bitter with the rebuke Rommel had heaped on him, Crüwell was not yet prepared to ignore the order he had received. That night he called off his attack and began pulling back to Wadi Thiran. He got hold of Meindel and saw that his tough Falschirmjaegers were in a good position to cover that withdrawal, and it was this force that Lieutenant Reeves would encounter the following morning.

The Germans saw what looked like a column of cruiser tanks advancing, and they adopted the infantry holding position tactics that Rommel had drilled them on. Teams had already sewn mines the previous night, though they had no wire to deploy, but the men had dug into the dry desert and set up good machinegun positions, with a screen of troops in fox holes, with the new German Panzerfaust. One such team was well forward, where a large, solitary rock stood like a monolith in the desert. The private and corporal were hidden there, screened by the rock, and holding one of the deadly new weapons.

Reeves decided his 12th Royal Lancers had better keep moving. He wanted to scout out the way ahead, make sure the road was cleared of any mines, and determine where the enemy flank actually was. But in desert fighting, that was something that shifted and changed from hour to hour.

The morning saw the action start there, with a single Scimitar scouting forward down the road, looking to spy out the German positions. They came up on that monolith, and were suddenly surprised when the Germans appeared at the edge of the rock.

“Look out cobber! Hostiles left!” shouted the Sergeant as he quickly slapped his MG around to engage. The light tank’s turret rotated quickly left, ready to fire the 30mm main gun. But at that moment there was a hiss and a thunk, and the Sergeant saw what he thought was an RPG in the air. Then it hit the Scimitar square on the frontal armor plate.

If this had been a Challenger II, with frontal armor protection equivalent to over 1200mm, the round would have exploded, failed to penetrate, and then the tank would have simply gunned down those two brave German paratroopers. But this was not a Challenger II...

The Panzerfaust could defeat armor up to 200mm at that range, and the Scimitar had much thinner aluminum armor. The round blew right threw, killing the driver in the forward hull position immediately, and sending a hail of deadly shrapnel into the two man turret to also kill the Sergeant and gunner.

The two Germans looked at one another, seeing the smoking wreck of the Scimitar, and grinning at one another. Then they turned and fled back towards their lines in a low crouch, and there was one less tank in Reeve’s 12th Royal Lancers. The Lieutenant saw what had happened in his field glasses, about 500 meters back from that lead tank. It was a bloody ambush, he thought, ordering up the rest of his troop, which began laying down desultory suppressive fire on any position or terrain feature that looked suspicious.

Well, thought Reeves, we’ve found the German flank, but too bad for Big Al in number one out there. Sergeant Alvin Combs and his crew had the dubious distinction of dying before they were ever born. Reeves looked the situation over, eventually determining that he had what looked to be a full regiment of German infantry in front of him. They were dug in, and what was that they had just fired to kill that lead tank? He knew the Germans were not supposed to have any hand held AT weapons like that, not this early in the war.

Fedorov’s visit to Palmyra had changed all that.

With a shrug, the Lieutenant got on the radio and called up Colonel

Allen. "Infantry," he said. "But they just popped off a hand held AT round and killed my lead Scimitar. Gurkhas are still behind us, but I don't think we'll want to waste those men in a frontal assault. I'm looking at a regiment here."

"Very well Lieutenant," said Allen. "Hold there. My Challengers are still about 40 kilometers east of your position, but we should be there by dusk."

By the time Allen would get there, the British Army was sitting proudly on Rommel's Gazala line, having taken both Gazala itself near the coast, Bir Hacheim, and hill 557 south on the northern fringes of Wadi Thiran. Monty had reached Trigg Capuzzo, and had every intention of continuing his attack the next day. Yet at the same time, Rommel, in a whirlwind of ceaseless energy, had slowly managed to get his two infantry divisions back to a better defensive line. Neither side was beaten, for there was a lot of guff still left in the Germans, but both sides had been worn out by many days fighting.

All of O'Connor's armor needed fuel and ammunition, and his infantry needed rest, particularly the hard pressed 4th Indian Division, which had barely escaped the jaws of Crüwell's attack. When Rommel found Crüwell at long last, he spent ten minutes shouting at the man, who stood stolidly in the face of his rage until the Desert Fox finally pulled off his gloves, sitting on an empty supply crate, his wrath finally abated.

"Counterattack was the plan here, General Crüwell, not a major offensive. The better part of valor is discretion!"

"But if we merely stand on defense," said Crüwell, "the morale of the Army will surely fail. Victory can only come to those bold enough to seize it."

"A nice turn of words," said Rommel. "Here in the desert, victory comes when we destroy our enemy. Only then can we contemplate a move east. I made the mistake earlier of thinking the occupation of endless swathes of this desert was the outward sign of victory, but that will come only if we destroy the British 8th Army. That is how we plant the seed of victory. It does not matter where it happens, here, on the wire at the Egyptian border, at Mersa Brega, Tripoli, or even Cairo. You have thrown my entire defensive plan out the window. We cannot hold here, not with Montgomery pushing the Italians. I'll have to find a way to cover all the roads leading into Mechili from the coast now. That will take Ravenstein's entire division. Can I trust you with the other two, or must I relieve you here and now?"

"Where do you want them?" Crüwell said sullenly.

“We’ll hold the line west of Bir Hacheim. You pivot your entire sector back on that hinge. Cover the roads leading to our fort depot on the road to Msus. The wadi will provide good cover and positions for you to post a delaying force. We move tonight.”

“And then what?” said Crüwell. “Back to Mersa Brega? Another retreat?”

“Not if I can salvage the situation you’ve left me in,” Rommel gave him another hard look. “I intend to hold here as long as feasible. We’ll stand in front of Mechili, but if the British push hard for Derna, I may have no choice other than to move west again. Strategic redeployment is not retreat, Herr General, any more than a reckless advance is a victory.”

More than one Crusader had been chastened in the desert during that hard fought battle. Crüwell would spend a sleepless night, still burning from the scourging Rommel had given him and inwardly feeling that the other man had simply lost his nerve. The British would find they lost half of the tanks they took so long to build up, and that their new Crusaders were very unreliable, prone to breakdowns, under gunned, and under armored. Reeves would preside over a brief desert burial for the three men he lost in that Scimitar, and have a long talk with his men about the weapon the Germans might have used to kill them.

Brigadier Kinlan positioned his Challengers for a possible assault the following day, but as O’Connor sorted things out, it would be the better part of a week before the 8th Army could move again. The troops needed fuel, food, water, new equipment, tanks from the reserve pool, and well earned rest. Before they did move again, the Desert Fox would slip away.

Chapter 32

“So I’ll make you an offer,” said Karpov, looking Fedorov right in the eye. “Starpom. You stand with me, or you stand against me. It’s the same question this war asked of both of us, and now I want your answer. Starpom... I’ll make you my Number One, with a promotion to Captain of the Third Rank, not that the rank matters, but we’ll follow normal naval protocols. You’ll stand with me, right there on the bridge, confer with me, support me, and yes, you speak your mind as you see it. I’ll listen to you, and consider everything you tell me, and then I’ll make my decision, just like Volsky would. If you say yes, and stand with me, then I want your pledge of loyalty too, just as you would give that to Volsky. When I give an order, I want your Aye Sir, right after it, not an argument on the bridge in front of the other officers.”

“And if I disagree with that order?”

“Hell, Fedorov, you know I disagreed with the way Volsky was handling things from the moment we had that accident with Orel.”

“Yes, and when the Admiral wouldn’t see things your way, you tried to subvert his authority and take the ship.”

“That was regrettable,” said Karpov. “I’m not that man any longer. Surely you must see that now.”

“I’m not quite sure what I see yet. All I know is what you’ve done. You told Volsky you were a changed man once, and he placed his faith and trust in you. Look what happened.”

“I fought hard to get here, Fedorov. You think it was easy being dragged out of the sea three years ago, left for dead by you and everyone else?”

“Yes, Captain, but you must admit that your methods, and your judgment, are sometimes quite self serving. I understand that in 2021 you needed to stand up against the Americans, but in 1945? What were you thinking?”

“My blood was up. It was war,” said Karpov. “Like I said a moment ago, when you take up the sword, you had better know how to use it. When the Demon Volcano blasted us back to 1945, well there I was, with no magic wand in Rod-25 to get anywhere else, or so I saw things. And there was the

American fleet, Nimitz, Halsey, and all the rest. They had just beaten Japan to a bloody pulp, and then they thought they could do the same to me. They made a mistake in that, but it's all in the past now as much as we might think it's in our future at this moment. Yes, this is 1941, and that was 1945, but not in this world. The moment the ship shifted back to 1908, everything changed. Don't you see? I re-wrote all of that history! There was no 'incident' in the Pacific between the US and Russia in 1945. Believe me, I looked for it in any history book I could find here. I still remember it all, but it never happened in this world, because the Japanese took Vladivostok from us long ago. It hasn't been Russian held territory since before the Revolution."

"Thanks to your meddling in 1908."

"You want to argue all that again?" Karpov folded his arms. "If I had finished what I was doing, the Japanese Empire would not be calling Vladivostok Urajio now, nor would they be sitting on Port Arthur, all of Manchuria, and all of Primorskiy Province! Don't you see? I would have stopped them, but you and Volsky had to come along in your submarine, so sanctimonious, so self-righteous. That bit about being self-serving cuts both ways, Fedorov. Well look around. Read the history books now, because it was your hand that wrote them. Do you like what you see? There wouldn't be a goddamn Japanese Empire if I had been able to finish what I started. And by god, this war would look a whole lot different then, wouldn't it?"

Fedorov shrugged. "I suppose that's true," he admitted.

"Of course it's true! Alright, I understand what you and Volsky did, and why you thought it was necessary, but you were wrong, Fedorov. You thought you could put all the puzzle pieces back together again, but you were simply wrong. That is what I have known from the very first—you can't save the past, or try to preserve the future we came from by doing that. The moment we appeared here, everything changed. Those changes were subtle things at first, but the acorn becomes a tree in time. Now look at the three of us! We took up sides here, and we fought our enemies. Nothing could ever be the same after we made those choices. The history could never be preserved. All we could do was rewrite it, and that is all we can do here now. So I ask you again, and for the last time, will you stand with me? If so, then we'll rewrite it together, because believe me, the future we came from was dead the moment Volsky shot that first plane down. Understand?"

Fedorov thought for a moment, his eyes reflecting the torment of all they

had seen and done. In one sense, Karpov was correct. How could the history of this world ever recompose itself to become the future they came from? That realization had been growing in him for months, like that acorn, and now it's sturdy trunk seemed to tower up and up in his soul. This was the world they made together, all of them, Volsky, Karpov, himself, and yes, even Orlov. How could he ever reset the hands of this clock? With each passing second, the history continued to change. It was being slowly re-written again, and even if this ship, and everyone aboard, simply vanished into the ether of that strange fog again, this world would carry on and be what it would be.

"You realize what this means?" Fedorov said slowly.

"Of course I do," said Karpov.

"We'll never get home again," said Fedorov. "The future we've been trying to preserve won't be there. How could it be?"

"Exactly," said Karpov. "No, we'll never see 2021 again. Neither one of us could live that long, but we'll see the world we shape here with our own hands, and that can be a world you might be glad to live in. Look at it now... This war is hanging in the balance at this moment, and we can weigh heavily on those scales. What we decide now, what we do, will shape the future course of history. You and Volsky threw in with Churchill, of course, what else could you do? I threw in with Sergei Kirov—what else could I do? But Volkov..."

The sound of the man's name seemed like the hissing warning of a rattlesnake when Karpov spoke it. "Volkov has other ideas, Fedorov, and god help this world if he prevails. He's a traitor and a coward, and he simply must be defeated. Germany must be defeated, and now the Japanese along with them. That's job one. Then, once we've won, only then can we turn to the men of this world we forged alliances with and find our peace. The Cold War doesn't have to happen this time around. There need be no Berlin Wall between us. Yet we have a very long way to go before Germany and Japan, and now Orenburg go down to the flames of perdition they deserve. I've done what I could for Sergei Kirov. I've thrown the entire fate of the Free Siberian State on his fire. It could be no other way. He'll have to deal with the Germans, and I'll support him every step of the way. As for the Japanese..." He smiled, waiting, watching Fedorov very closely now.

Fedorov looked down, rubbed his forehead. Then he met Karpov's eye, finally knowing what he simply had to do. He had thought to oppose Karpov

and try to regain control of the ship, yet now he realized that battle was one he simply could not fight. So as Shakespeare had so eloquently put it long ago, the better part of valor was discretion.

“Starpom?” Karpov asked again.

“Starpom,” said Fedorov. “What else can I do? But Captain, Admiral, or whatever I should call you now. You had better damn well listen to me. I’m not meddlesome little Fedorov any more than you are not the man who jousted with me on the bridge when we first shifted here.”

“Understood,” said Karpov.

“Speaking of that other man,” said Fedorov. “Where is he?”

“My other self? Very strange, isn’t it Fedorov. All this is still so much of a mystery. Can you imagine how I felt when I first looked in that man’s eyes? I called him my brother, and that is the way I like to think of him now. He’s aboard my airship, Tunguska. I wanted my intelligence chief to brief him, bring him slowly into the reality of this world.”

“I’ll bet he wasn’t happy when you took his place here.”

“Yes, he squirmed a bit, but he listened to my reasons and agreed. Too much is at stake now. We cannot afford to make any mistakes. This whole thing is on the razor’s edge. One false move and we could lose this war. We have to be every bit as sharp as that razor, and that is why I need you, desperately. You’re a major force in all of this. I need your knowledge, your experience, your sound judgment, because it will take everything we have, together, to prevail. I know you were thinking to hide your real identity, gather allies aboard ship, and then what? Were you going to do the same thing I tried, and stage a mutiny? We have to put all that behind us now, there can be only one Captain here.”

“What about your brother?”

“An interesting question,” said Karpov. “From his perspective, the ship just vanished. For us it was just a few minutes time, and here we’ve bounced a full month ahead.”

“We’re pulsing,” said Fedorov. “The same thing happened to us many times on those early shifts. Chief Dobrynin ran his maintenance procedure, only this time no one threw a nuke at the sea, and so we didn’t move as far as we once did earlier. I think that energy really supercharged Rod-25.”

“I’ve told Dobrynin not to run the procedure again,” said Karpov. “Do you think our position in time will stabilize? We’re still in 1941.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “In the beginning we made small jumps, always a little ahead of the time we were in before, though we moved an entire year. This time it was a month, but we still might be in flux. Remember my metaphor about the rock skipping on the pond? We may not be fully settled in this time. We could move again. We’ll have to wait and see.”

There came a knock on the hatch, and Karpov looked over his shoulder, reaching to open it and seeing Nikolin there.

“Excuse me, Captain. But there’s more news. I got a clear signal from the BBC. The situation on the eastern front has taken a turn for the worse.”

“Well, out with it! What happened?”

“Moscow is being evacuated. The situation is very confused, but from what I could gather the city was burning, and the Germans have broken through.”

“The government is leaving the city? What about Sergei Kirov?”

“The news is not clear, sir. BBC says they were expecting a speech from the Kremlin tonight, but apparently that has been cancelled. The situation must be very grave.”

“Alright,” said Karpov. “Keep listening, Mister Nikolin. See what else you can pick up. And one more thing... Now that the airwaves are clearing up, switch to the secure channel I gave you. Try to raise Tunguska, and let me know the moment you get through.” Nikolin saluted and returned to his post. Karpov turned to Fedorov again.

“It seems we have our work cut out for us,” he said heavily.

“It does indeed,” said Fedorov.

Karpov thought for a moment. “We proceed as I have planned. There’s nothing we can do for Moscow, though I’ll have to find out what’s happening in Siberia if Nikolin can get through with that signal. Otherwise, we need to get this ship into the Pacific as quickly as possible. I need you at navigation now. Can you get us through?”

“The data I have on the ice conditions will all be wrong, but we can use the helicopters to scout ahead. We’ll get through.”

“That’s the spirit.” Karpov started for the hatch, then stopped, holding out a hand. “Fedorov,” he said... “I’m sorry for the things I did... with Volsky, on the bridge of Oki Island, and what I did to Zolkin. I was possessed with the thought you all wanted me dead, and that submarine didn’t help matters. Can you forgive me?”

Fedorov took a deep breath, then extended his hand and took the Captain's. "As the Americans say, this is a whole new ballgame."

Karpov smiled. "Then after you, Mister Starpom. Let's get started!"

Nikolin got through to Tunguska an hour later, and Karpov was elated to hear Tyrenkov's voice. He took the radio call in the briefing room off the main bridge.

"Sorry to slip off like that," he said. "Our position in time may not be stable yet, but if we do shift again, we think we will make small moves forward. In such an event you need to keep your wits about you. How are things back home? Any news I should be aware of?"

"The situation after Kolchak's passing has stabilized," said Tyrenkov. "All the Generals from the Eastern Provinces have pledged their support, but they're worried about the Japanese."

"Justifiably so," said Karpov. "I'm going to start working that problem very soon. Where are you now?"

"Were over the East Siberian Sea. Your brother wanted to scout ahead to look for you, but we've seen nothing for nearly 30 days. In the meantime, there's trouble in Moscow."

"So we've heard on the BBC. What can you tell me?"

"The situation is still not clear, but our man in the Kremlin got through this morning. There's been an assassination attempt on Sergei Kirov."

"My god! Did he survive??"

"We don't know. The NKVD are all over the Kremlin grounds, and there was apparently fighting between those troops and Kirov's Kremlin Guard. The General Secretary was to have given a speech to the nation via radio last night, and that was cancelled. The government is now evacuating the city and moving to Leningrad, and most of the western suburbs are on fire. My people there tell me they think it was deliberate. This may be a coup attempt, underway even as we speak."

"A coup? Who could mount such a threat to Sergei Kirov? One of the Generals? Surely not Zhukov."

"We don't know yet, but I have my suspicions. I'll get you more information soon, but this is all in flux now."

"And Volkov?"

"He paid a visit to the Wolf's Lair a few weeks ago, and then flew to Mongolia to sit with the Japanese. We have no hard intelligence on that yet,

but we were able to track his movements afterwards. He's returned to Orenburg, and there have been some unusual fleet deployments in the last few days."

"Explain."

"He's pulled all his airships out of the Caucasus. We thought he was thinking to use them to support his cross Volga operation, but they were ordered to Astrakhan, and now they moved up to Uralsk."

"Could he be planning an offensive on the upper Volga now?"

"No significant ground movement there," said Tyrenkov. "No sir, but the whole of his 22nd Air Mobile is on the move. He calls them the 1st Guards now. Units he had in the cross Volga operation pulled out yesterday. Something is going on, and I have my best people on it."

"Very well... If he moves any of those airships east, implement Plan Seven. Is there any buildup on the Ob River Line?"

"No sir, all is quiet there, we still have three full divisions manning the fortifications."

"The 78th is still at Ilanskiy?"

"Yes sir."

"Get word to General Kalinin. He is to keep a Ready Brigade on the Trans-Siberian line for immediate deployment west to Ilanskiy in the event of any trouble, and troops from the Ob line should be ready to move east. We are in the Laptev Strait, still heading east. Since you are in the East Siberian Sea, take the ship ahead and relay ice conditions to our navigator. Scout through the Chukchi Sea and Bering Strait. Then wait for us at Big Diomedes Island. One last thing. How is my brother?"

"Restless, but slowly adjusting to the new realities here."

"Any problems?"

"No sir. Do you wish to speak with him? The channel is secure. We're using the equipment you gave us."

"Very good. Put him on. It's time I give him a little briefing."

Chapter 33

Karpov explained their situation to his younger self, heard his complaints, the impatience in his voice, and remembered being that man. “You will soon be in the thick of things,” he promised again. Come December, we will have much to plan and do together. In the meantime, I’ve reached an accommodation with our Navigator.”

“Be careful with him,” said the younger brother. “He’s a slave to his history.”

“We’ll talk about that later. For now, I want you to know we may not be fully stabilized in this time. We could vanish again. If that happens I want you to post a detachment with a radio set on Big Diomed Island. Then move south into the Bering Sea and discover what the Japanese are up to in the Aleutians. Be patient. If we do vanish, we don’t know how much time could pass before we reappear, but we’ll return. Believe in that.”

“I will wait for you, Brother.”

“Good to hear you call me that. Oh... One other thing. Tyrenkov thinks Ivan Volkov may be up to something. Keep your ear to the ground on that matter. Your primary mission as Fleet Admiral is the safety and security of the men and ships you command, but even more, the security of our base and headquarters at Ilanskiy. I’ll tell you more when we meet again, but stay alert! I’ll hope to hear from you on what the Japanese are up to soon.”

*

The Siberian freighter Uritskii, operated with registration UOAX. It was built in 1929 by Ordzhonikidze Shipyard #189, the Baltic Shipbuilding & Engineering Works in Leningrad. It was an ISKRA-class cargo ship of 2513 GRT, sold to the Siberian Free State in 1934. As Fedorov took note of that, an odd sense of déjà vu came to him again, not for anything he personally experienced, but with the thought that here again was one of those tiny threads in the tapestry that seemed to bear the same color as in the history he

knew. That evening he went to Karpov about it, wondering what he might know.

“Do you realize the Siberian freighter Uritskii, is presently operating on the U.S. to far east trade lanes?”

“Uritskii?” said Karpov. “Can’t say as I know anything much about it. What is the problem?”

“It was on that northern trade route, near the Aleutians, and spotted the Kido Butai en route to Pearl Harbor.”

“It spotted a Japanese ship?”

“Japanese ships, sir, 22 of them, excluding the submarines and supply ships. The Kido Butai is the name the Japanese gave to their mobile carrier strike force. That freighter was under Soviet registry in the history I know, and it was the only ship to spot the Japanese fleet prior to the attack. It was allowed to steam quietly off when the Japanese identified it as a Russian ship, as neither side wanted trouble with the other.”

“You mean to say that the Russians knew Pearl Harbor was going to be attacked and yet they did not warn the Americans?”

“Correct. Historians presume Stalin may have known more about the attack than many realize, and frankly, he needed the U.S. entry into the war, just as Churchill did. The Americans beat Japan with a third of their war effort, and of course they were instrumental in beating the Germans on the Western front. Britain could never have done that alone.”

“But just remember,” said Karpov. “Eight of every ten dead German soldiers died in Russia.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten that, sir.”

“Why do you bring up this freighter?”

“It seemed an odd coincidence at first,” said Fedorov, “but then I realized you ordered your airship to scout down as far as the Aleutians. That could be dangerous. The Japanese fleet assembled in the Kuriles in late November before making the approach to Pearl Harbor by that little used Northern route. If they spot your airship...”

That got Karpov’s attention. “What might they do, Fedorov?”

“It would create both a diplomatic and military problem for them. They know you have allied with the Soviet Union, and there has been a long watch on your frontier with the Kwantung Army. If they choose to attack in the attempt to preserve the security of their operation, that would be an act of

war against Siberia.”

“And if they do nothing, as with that freighter you mentioned?”

“Then they basically risk detection should your airship report the sighting.”

“As it certainly would—but to me, no other ministry of my Government. The Siberian Air Corps answers directly to me.”

“Yet your other self is already on Tunguska, and so to whom would they report? Wouldn’t they just inform the Captain and leave it at that?”

“He has instructions to inform me, and my intelligence chief would certainly do so as well.”

“So the hot potato would be in your lap? What would you do sir, if I may ask?”

“That is what we have yet to discuss.”

“Well, assuming your intention is to persuade Japan to cede back occupied territories in Siberia, that sighting would give you a little leverage, but probably not enough to get a deal with Japan.”

“I’ve considered that,” said Karpov. “But let me ask you this—what if that force is sighted early. Would the Japanese persist with their attack?”

“I believe they would,” said Fedorov. “They had provisions in their attack plan that would simply change the strike wave composition in the event they were discovered. They would front load fighters in the first wave to deal with the possibility the Americans would have fighters up waiting for them. The bombers would then only be launched after the Japanese achieved air superiority. They would be outnumbered. The Americans had around 200 fighters on the seven airfields in Hawaii, but a great many were down for maintenance. I believe the number was 37 percent. That said, the Japanese would still be outnumbered, as they planned to launch 45 fighters in that first wave. Yet they had the A6-Zero, a much better fighter than the Americans. I think they would have eventually won, and pushed through to neutralize the fighter fields as planned.”

“Why wouldn’t they simply provide a heavy fighter escort for their strike planes and attack as planned?”

“Because of their mindset, sir. The fighter pilot was a bit of a free spirit, the samurai of the skies, if you will. Their mindset and doctrine was to range freely, untethered from the bombers, and seek out enemy fighters. In fact, those were their orders. They were not there to escort and defend, but to

attack. The Japanese plan itself saw offensive operations as the way to defend. They will attack, which is why your airship may be in some jeopardy.”

“You see, Fedorov, this is why I need you! Your knowledge of the history is essential here. To answer your question, I intend to contact the Japanese Government and inform them that I am personally aware of their plan to attack Pearl Harbor. I will tell them that if they persist with this plan, particularly if British colonies in the far east are also attacked, I would have no recourse but to declare war on Japan. They could avoid such a declaration by returning our occupied provinces.”

“You think they will agree to that?”

“Certainly not, but it is at least a suitable diplomatic nicety. You said yourself that this is both a military and diplomatic problem, and I’ve given it a good deal of thought. You see, Stalin maintained a cautious neutrality with Japan, and the Japanese even allowed American shipping into Vladivostok to support Russia. Stalin didn’t want to see divisions tied down against the Japanese when he needed them to fight the Germans. Much the same idea is in play here, but things are different now. The long war with Volkov sees Siberia with a standing army over three times what it was in the old history. I’ve sent Sergei Kirov close to fifteen divisions, but that is only half my existing force on the ground, and I can raise more. Not only that, I am promised new equipment from the Soviet factories now relocating to Siberian territory. This means I will have mechanized forces soon, and troops capable of posing a real threat to Japan’s interests in China. They will have to see me as a serious factor. I can back up any threat I make, both on the ground, and certainly at sea. They do not realize that yet, as they think I have no more than a few old destroyers at my command. When Kirov enters the Northern Pacific, all that changes. Then the real game begins.”

Fedorov smiled, nodding his head. “Kita No Kaze Kumori,” he said. ‘That was a Japanese wind code phrase that roughly translates ‘north wind cloudy,’ and that was code for the status of relations between Japan and Russia, and in this instance, with you. It seems we have a nice winter storm brewing in the Pacific if you take this line, Captain.”

“Are you advising me not to do so?”

“No, I haven’t said that. Now that I know what you intend, I think it is a carefully weighed cart of apples. But I also think it will probably not produce

the results you expect. Oh, the Japanese may make every outward appearance of accommodating you. They may even go so far as to open negotiations on what they will call the disputed territories. I think they might offer you something, appease you, and then they would simply have to hem and haw about it until they completed their attack. After that, you get nothing, and the Kwangtung Army is put on full alert, as is their navy. They would prefer to keep you neutral, but they will not compromise their war plan to gain that neutrality. They have bigger fish to fry.”

“They are the ones who end up in the pan, Fedorov, and I can put them there much sooner than they think. Their entire war plan depends on this Kido Butai, does it not? I can sink every last one of those carriers, and take all their naval air power away from them in a single battle. Then what could they do?”

“The Americans virtually did that to them at the Battle of Midway, sir. They continued to fight for many years after. I spoke of the Japanese mindset earlier. If anything, it is even going to be more determined, more entrenched, because Japan has become a major power in the Pacific, right alongside the United States. That is who they perceive as their real enemy now, America.”

Karpov nodded. “Let me share a bit of intelligence with you,” he said. “My man Tyrenkov informed me that Volkov flew east for a meeting with the Japanese in Mongolia after his visit with Hitler. You and I both know he is aware of this history, perhaps not with the detail and insight you have, but he knows all the mistakes Japan made in this war. You were pointing them out to me earlier—their failure to get the American fuel bunker and sub pens. Do you suppose Volkov has briefed the Japanese on this? Could he be trying to influence the outcome of this attack?”

“That is very likely,” said Fedorov.

“So you see, this changes things from our perspective. There is a demon on the other side whispering in Hitler’s ear one day, and in Tojo’s the next.”

Fedorov smiled. “Believe it or not, I’ve whispered in Sergei Kirov’s ear, and in Churchill’s.”

“Precisely. You know that intelligence wins this war. So does Volkov. So we have to consider that the Japanese may be planning a much more devastating attack on Pearl harbor if Volkov pointed out the shortcomings of their initial plan. Suppose they do go after those fuel bunkers, and the American sub pens, ignoring the battleships.”

“Oh, they won’t ignore the battleships. They’ll have to get as many of those as they can. But what you say does raise some fears.”

“Well, how far back would that put the American war effort here—in the Pacific?”

“Certainly months, possibly half a year. The fuel could be replaced. I told you the Japanese were very remiss about soft naval targets. Remember what I said about mindset. Battleships yes, oil tankers, no glory there.”

“Unless Ivan Volkov gets his message into their heads,” said Karpov.

“I suppose we would not know that until after the fact.”

“Correct,” said Karpov flatly.

Something in his tone put Fedorov on his guard. “You say that as if... Why as if you planned to let them go ahead and make their attack to see what they might do.”

“That thought has crossed my mind.”

Fedorov gave him a strange look. “One minute you’re talking about destroying the Kido Butai, and now you suggest we allow them to attack as planned? Just to see what Volkov may have told them?”

“Oh, no, I can find that out tomorrow if I wish. I could get on a secure line with Volkov and squeeze it out of him. He’d like nothing more than to boast that he now has Japan on a leash, and that I’d better look to my southern front, because the Japanese are coming. In fact, he may be making some initial moves to coordinate with the Japanese even now. I had some intelligence on unusual airship fleet deployments. He knows that a winter storm is coming. His finger is in the wind too, Fedorov. That’s why he’s been called the Prophet all these years.”

“Can you fight a two front war?” asked Fedorov.

“It’s barely one front now,” said Karpov. Volkov pulled most of his best troops off to the Volga Front. That’s where he thinks he’ll win through, and I wouldn’t disagree with that. At the moment, I’ve sent much of my western army group to Sergei Kirov, but there was some bad news in Nikolin’s report. Tyrenkov, my intelligence chief, thinks a coup may be underway in Moscow. There may have even been an attempt on Kirov’s life. We don’t have all the information yet, but I’ll know more soon.”

Fedorov shrugged. “That’s terrible news! Sergei Kirov was the only hope for Russia’s future.”

“I thought as much,” said Karpov. “But it seems the winds are rising and

everything is in play now. We all reap the whirlwind if someone got to Kirov. It could unhinge the entire Soviet war effort, and they were already this close to defeat as it was.” He held up two fingers to emphasize his point. “Here the house is on fire, the German Army has kicked in the front door and stomped right in, and now Japan is sneaking around out back. Even your British friends are in it up to their hatbands again, as they might say. There was a big battle in the desert, an operation Crusader. You know of this?”

“Crusader? It was an attempt to relieve Tobruk in November of this year, but they’ve already done that. Rommel has been sitting on the Gazala line for months. Perhaps they’re trying to move him west and take Cyrenaica. You’re saying the British already mounted that operation?”

“It’s underway now,” said Karpov, “and I’m told the Germans have new tanks. They’re starting to deploy to both the eastern front and to Rommel’s Afrika Korps.”

“That was inevitable,” said Fedorov.

“You mean because of the new British tank? You must have good information on that by now.”

“Captain,” said Fedorov with a shrug. “I think it’s time I told you what the Admiral and I have been doing the last year or so. This one will be hard to swallow, but as God is my witness, it’s all true.”

Part XII

Climb Mount Niitaka

“The fate of our nation depends on this battle—All hands will exert themselves to their utmost.”

—Admiral Togo

Flag signal message from BB Mikasa at the outset of the Battle of Tsushima Strait. This message was repeated by CV Akagi, fleet flagship, as the attack on Pearl Harbor was launched.

Chapter 34

The Imperial Japanese Navy that would undertake this journey was one of the largest and most professional forces in the world. The heart of the fleet were the carriers, unsurpassed by any other navy, and there were more available due to additions no man could read about in the older history this world was derived from.

There were 10 carriers Fedorov could name, with two that had originally been designed as battlecruisers, the fleet Flagship Akagi, and the Kaga. Yet in this world, another Kaga Class ship, CV Tosa, was also converted, forsaking her appointment with the scrap yards. Next came the Hiryu and Soryu, both ships built between 1934 and 1936 as full fleet size carriers, and they were soon followed by Zuikaku and Shokaku, perhaps the finest fleet carriers in the world. They were fast at 34 knots, well protected, with excellent range and a compliment of 81 aircraft.

To these seven ships, another project that was nearing completion as war broke out was the all new Taiho, a ship designed with much thicker skin in its armored belt and flight deck. It was not the same ship the Japanese would commission in 1944 in Fedorov's history, though it stole that name and many design features from the old Taiho. The idea here was to build "battle endurance" into a carrier, making it an armored knight and allowing it to take hits and still survive as a battle worthy asset.

As such, Taiho would get 152mm belt armor, 50% thicker than that on a Mogami class heavy cruiser, and a tough armored flight deck 80mm thick. It would also bristle with a dozen 100mm AA guns, and over fifty 25mm cannons, with a compliment of 65 aircraft. Said to be the toughest carrier in the fleet, it was also fast, delivering an amazing 33 knots with all that armor. The Empire's accelerated building program saw it delivered to the fleet almost two years early, Japan's 8th, and newest, fleet carrier

This same idea of creating a tougher fighting carrier had perhaps been born in the long standing duel between the big gun advocates and the carrier faction. It resulted in a pair of ships unlike any that had been seen before on the high seas, when two more fast battlecruisers that had been in the

shipyards were also slated for conversion to carriers. With war on the minds of the Imperial General Staff, and the need for carriers now taking the highest priority in the shipyards, these two projects were put on the fast track by creating a hybrid ship. The forward segments of the design, which had already been completed as a battlecruiser, would be left as they were. Their two twin armored turrets bearing 40cm guns were left in place. Everything aft of the main armored conning tower was cancelled, and instead an armored deck occupied that entire space, with the underdeck areas cleared for hanger storage sufficient for 24 aircraft.

It was this same idea that had led German designers to build the fast escort carrier *Goeben*, but the Japanese had been the first to launch such ships, commissioning both *Gozu* and *Mezu* in 1938. Like *Taiho*, they had thick skin, with 200mm belt armor, 100mm armored deck, a sturdy conning tower protected by 200mm, and those two heavy turrets. Weight was saved with that slightly thinner belt armor, lighter conning tower and the removal of all the aft superstructure along with that third aft turret. It produced an excellent, sturdy 'battlecarrier,' a new class in the navy that could run at 32 knots, sting hard with those four 40cm guns, and also throw 12 fighters and 12 dive bombers into the battle. The fleet was so pleased with the ships, that they took the third *Yamato* class battleship and ordered its immediate conversion along this same model, designating the new design *Shinano*. This order was cut shortly after the ship was laid down in 1940, and not after Japan's disastrous defeat at Midway. Thus *Shinano*, like *Taiho*, was also on the list of ships that would make an early appearance in the war, now on schedule for completion some time in 1942.

The eight fleet carriers and those two hybrids would also be joined by a number of smaller carriers, and the first of these were three converted ocean liners. *Hiyo* and *Junyo* were both liners purchased by the Empire for this purpose, and completed before the war, a full year early, with 48 planes each. They were hefty at over 24,000 tons, and could make only 25 knots, but added some middleweight punch to the Navy's carrier divisions that was very useful. A third liner owned by the *Nippon Yusen* shipping line was first slated to become a troop ship, and then reconverted to a carrier to become the 20,000 ton *Taiyo*.

In the lightweight division, several sub tenders had been built with the deliberate intention of converting them to aircraft carriers in time of war.

One was the Ryuho, at 16,700 tons, the “Great Phoenix” rising from the original design of the sub tender Taigei, or “Great Whale.” Two smaller tenders were also converted to light carriers, the Zuiho and Shoho, which were 11,000 ton ships carrying only 30 planes, but relatively fast at 28 knots.

At the bottom of the scale came Ryujo, a design that managed to squeeze 48 planes onto her small 10,000 ton frame, and could still run at 29 knots. This ship proved to be top-heavy, and this flaw had not been corrected by the time war broke out, and so she was dry docked in Yokohama, along with the venerable old 7,400 ton Hosho, the ship laying the claim as the first aircraft carrier ever built.

All told, Japan would deploy eight fleet carriers, her two new hybrids, three medium carriers converted from liners, and the three light sub tender conversions, making the IJN unchallenged with all of 16 aircraft carriers in late 1941. By comparison the US Navy had seven carriers, and the vaunted Royal Navy had eight, so Japan’s Navy had more naval air power at its disposal than both those allied nations combined. This was not something Fedorov knew at first, though he soon discovered the changes and noted them for his report to Karpov.

There were also a few differences in the battleships, one prominent exception being the second Yamato class ship, Musashi, which was also completed in time for the show, joining the fleet nine months early. With those two 72,000 ton monsters on the sea, Japan could also claim the largest and most powerful battleships ever built. And seeing the need for fast heavy gunned ships capable of running with her newest carriers, the Empire was adding a pair of excellent battleships to her list of commissioned ships, inspired by the British design for HMS Hood.

The two new ships were Satsuma and Hiraga, and at 42,000 tons they were heavier than any of the Empire’s older battlewagons dating to the 1920s. Each carried nine 16-inch guns on three triple turrets, and their long, sleek hull and powerful engines saw them running at 30 knots. Nothing in the fleet battleship division was faster, and only the super heavyweights could hit harder, which made these ships the equal of most any other battleship then afloat.

Japan’s “Battleship Row” was then finished off by their older designs, ten more ships in the 27,000 to 32,000 ton weight division. Nagato and Mutsu had eight 16-inch guns, but could only work up to 26 knots. Next came the

four ships in the Kongo class, Hiei, Kirishima, Haruna, and Kongo itself. They were a little faster at a hair under 28 knots, which was enough to see them often working with the carriers. The last four, Ise, Hyuga, Fuso and Yamashiro were much slower at 23 knots, but had good punch with their twelve 14-inch guns distributed over six turrets. Later in the war, those that survived would be eyed as possible battlecarrier conversions.

Next came the heavy cruisers, and the startling new innovation here was the B-65 Super Cruiser project, one conceived in Fedorov's old history, but never built. But here in these altered states, the seed of that project fell on good ground, and the result was a superb new class of ships that embraced the idea of the 'pocket battleship' first pioneered by the Germans.

There were two completed in the class, Amagi, and Kagami, and they featured the same long forecastle, clipper bow, and swept decks of the Yamato class, only with nine 12.2-inch guns. They were also well protected with 210mm belt armor and 180mm on the conning tower, and they were very fast at nearly 34 knots, with an 8,000 nautical mile endurance. Some called them fast battlecruisers, but the Japanese classified them as super Type A cruisers.

The cruiser classes beneath these two fearsome leaders were among the best in the world, with speeds pushing 36 knots, good 8-inch guns, and the world's premier torpedo on reloadable turrets, the dreadful Type 93, soon to be called the 'Long Lance' by historian Samuel Morrison. Nothing else in the world compared to it, unless it was to be found on the new flagship of the Siberian Navy, the battlecruiser Kirov.

Both on paper, and on the wild Pacific Ocean, this was a navy that was second to none. The British and Americans might have more destroyers, and better submarines, but these surface ships, particularly the lavish carrier divisions, made the Imperial Japanese Navy a dangerous and capable force, and one that now threatened to raise havoc all throughout Southeast Asia.

Fedorov concluded this extensive briefing with Karpov, running down the ships, their numbers and capabilities, and making particular note of the newcomers he had become aware of. "And let us not forget that they also have another good port in the north."

"Yes," said Karpov, "our port, Vladivostok. We shall have to do some long range reconnaissance of the Golden Horn Bay to see what may be berthed there. We already know they have strong air units based there, and at

Port Arthur as well on the Yellow Sea.”

“Those ports are both real strategic assets,” said Fedorov. “Even if they do decide to negotiate with you, I doubt if either one will ever seriously be on the bargaining table. I think they would sooner give you back all of Kamchatka than yield Vladivostok.”

“Then it will have to be taken from them.”

“Most likely,” said Fedorov, “but how? Your divisions in the east are a long way from being in any position where they could pose a threat to that port. It’s over 2600 kilometers from your main eastern command at Irkutsk to Vladivostok, and that is as the crow flies, cutting straight through Manchuria and the entire Kwantung Army. The Trans-Siberian Rail line going around the Amur River route is over 3200 kilometers. The only other way to take it by force would be by amphibious assault, and for that you’ll need a good deal more than this ship.”

“Your assessment is fairly grim, Fedorov.”

“But those are the facts, sir. The Japanese certainly know all this as much as I do. You can threaten and make demands, but I do not think you can take Vladivostok from them by force, and they will know it.”

“Then what do we put on the scales of war that would be heavy enough to break them?” Karpov was pacing now, finally realizing the true scale of the foe he was sizing up. What do they need more than anything else if they are to pursue their war aims?”

“Those aircraft carriers,” said Fedorov. “Without them they have some marvelous battleships and cruisers, but they will not be able to project naval air power. To lose them would mean they would be forced to restrict their advances to areas where they could quickly seize land based airfields and build up air power. If the Americans have carriers, they can establish sea dominance very quickly, neutralize those heavy surface units, and then easily interdict Japan’s effort to supply its overseas bases. Japanese sea power lies in the Kido Butai. Take that away from them and they are a third rate navy again, still dangerous, but manageable, and doomed to eventual defeat. They would not even match the Kriegsmarine, considering that Germany’s U-boat arm is far more potent than the Japanese submarine force, and their surface units are every bit as good as the Japanese, except perhaps for the cruisers.”

“This was what I came to realize,” said Karpov. “And there is the Ace I have in hand with this ship. Kirov alone can emasculate this Kido Butai.”

“But yet,” Fedorov held up a finger, “even in defeat the Japanese remained tenacious. They will not yield one island, let alone that port. It is too strategic, and by this time, too much a part of their economic and military infrastructure. They use it to supply their forces in Manchuria.”

“And on the rail line they took from us,” said Karpov sourly. “What you say is very sobering. Yes, I cannot push my eastern Divisions that far from Irkutsk, even if we could defeat their Kwantung Army. Nor can I conduct an amphibious invasion... But the Americans can.”

“Sir? You think you can convince them to take back Vladivostok for you?”

“Consider this,” said Karpov. “The US fought long bitter campaigns through Central and Southeast Asia, throwing their troops at one island outpost after another.”

“The navy’s leapfrog strategy,” said Fedorov.

“Exactly, and it took them at least three years before they could get close enough to the Japanese home islands to deliver that knockout blow—strategic bombing. Wasn’t that what really broke Japan?”

“After their navy was broken first,” said Fedorov.

“Well then,” Karpov rubbed his hands together. “I can offer the Americans another route, the northern route. What about an advance through the Aleutians? They are pointed like a sword, right at the Japanese mainland.”

“They are still too far away to support strategic bombing, sir. Adak is 3500 kilometers from Japan, and Attu is just under 3000. It’s the same distance to Guam and the Marianas, and the Marianas are much more strategically positioned. The B-17s can’t handle that range anyway. Their B-29s could do it, but they won’t have them for another year.”

“Yes, but the Aleutians could become a base to attack Kamchatka.”

“Still 2000 kilometers away.”

“And then Sakhalin Island.”

“But you don’t control any of those territories, sir, except northern enclaves in Kamchatka the Japanese have not yet occupied.”

“True,” said Karpov, “but with the American’s help I could control them, and contribute troops and material to the war effort to take and hold them. Imagine those B-29s basing from Sakhalin island a year from now? We could defeat Japan much sooner—cut years off the war in the Pacific!”

“Assuming the American’s agree. Don’t forget, if Japan takes the Philippines, which is likely, then you’ll have a man dead set on structuring the American war effort to take them back—General Douglas MacArthur. I suppose your plan is worth presenting to the Americans, but it will involve a good deal of diplomatic wrangling.”

“So I need some leverage with the Americans too,” said Karpov, thinking. “A good deal of leverage...” He smiled. “Thank you, Mister Fedorov, you helped me clarify my thinking on all of this. Now to see about getting us into the Pacific as soon as possible. That’s where the action will be.”

Fedorov knew the man well enough to realize Karpov had not yet revealed all that might be clarifying in that mind of his. The Captain has plans within plans, he thought. What did he mean about getting leverage with the Americans? He was a little ill at ease, but decided to say nothing at this point until he knew more. Instead he calculated their ETA in the Bering Strait.

“We should be at Big Diomedé in four sea days at ten to twelve knots average speed in this ice.”

That was another good prediction by Fedorov, but he was very wrong. They would get to the Pacific, but much later than they expected.

Chapter 35

By the time they realized what had happened, it was nearly too late. Fedorov had plotted a skillful course through the ice, and they passed through the East Siberian Sea, entering the Chukchi Sea two days later, which brought Sergeant Troyak up on deck to breathe that cold Siberian air that was so familiar to him. He had been born on the peninsula that reached towards the Bering Strait, and so this was a taste of home for him, and many other crewmen as well.

Fedorov had done his best to brief the crew, talking to them in small groups, seeing their astonished faces, hearing their many questions and answering as best he could. It took all of two weeks since they first left Severomorsk to finish the job, and soon the crew settled into a sullen silence. They had lost everything they ever knew, parents, wives, family, friends, and here they were at the edge of the world, being asked to fight a war that had ended long before any of them had ever been born. For some the shock was too heavy, and Doctor Zolkin was a busy man those last two weeks.

Fedorov had also told the Doctor of his encounter with Karpov, and what he had decided to do. "It's no use trying to split the ship down the middle," he said. "Trying to stage a mutiny was never something I wanted to do."

"Yet that's what he did," Zolkin protested. "He took this ship from Admiral Volsky, and had no right to do so."

"I'll tell you how he would answer that," said Fedorov. "He would say that might makes right. Yes, I thought I had to entrench here and stand against him, but honestly, what good would that do? I'd be setting one crew member against another. I'd be doing the very same thing we found so distasteful in the way he took command here. But here he is, with Grilikov and 60 men aboard. I once thought that if I could get to Troyak, and win his support, we might have a chance, but think what that would mean."

Zolkin took a long breath. "It would come to no good," he said.

"Yes, said Federov, "and a lot more of those bloodied bandages for you to worry about, all so we could say we beat Karpov, and put him in his place. I think my initial reaction was one of survival, and worry that Karpov now

had control of the ship again. I had no idea what he might do, but Doctor, something is different about him. He's quieter, more inward, less boastful, yet still surrounded by this aura of darkness that is difficult to penetrate at times. He offered me a position as his Starpom, and in that moment I realized that I would have much more control over what happens here in that role than I would likely have in the brig."

"Probably true," said Zolkin. "But just remember, if it comes down to something like the things you told me about earlier, I'm with you."

"I appreciate that," said Fedorov. "But for now, I think it best if you give no indication you know about any of that. Did you hear the news concerning Moscow?"

"How could I not hear it. It's been all over the ship. Nikolin has been translating the BBC news and spreading the word, and he put Radio Moscow on the ship's P.A. yesterday. Frankly, that's good for the men. They heard what the Germans were doing and it brought them together. I think they'll be spoiling for a fight soon."

"We may have one for them. Karpov is going to confront Japan."

"What? Alone? With this single ship?"

"That remains to be seen. Like I said, he's very careful now, and very calculating. He's got some plan in mind, and it's all aimed at recovering our lost territories from Japan."

"I hope he doesn't get any ideas about dropping an early nuke on Tokyo!"

"Thankfully, that hasn't come up. No. I think he'll show some restraint in that, and as Starpom, I'll have some say in it all as well."

There came a tremor in the deck beneath them, a fluttering vibration, and for the briefest moment Fedorov thought the whole scene around him went out of focus. He thought he was having a dizzy spell, until Zolkin expressed the same complaint.

"I must be losing my sea legs!" he said. "Did you feel that too?"

"I did," said Fedorov, "and I think I had better get to engineering..."

When he got there, his worst fears were confirmed. Dobrynin told him they had another flux event in core number two. "Just the one core," he said. "The other was stable the whole time."

Fedorov knew what had happened, the ship had pulsed in time again. Slipping away and back again, but how long this time. He rushed to the

bridge to report to Karpov, and when he got there the Captain was already quite concerned.

“Well Fedorov,” he said. “Your moon has pulled a fast one on us again, and the sea has too! I was out on the weather deck when we got this odd ripple in the ship—a kind of vibration, whisper soft, but clearly there. I was staring right at that moon, blinked, and the damn thing had moved right before my eyes! One minute it was up there,” he pointed, “the next moment it was down there. One minute I’m looking at a relatively clear sea, now we’ve got sea ice all around us!”

“We’ve pulsed again,” said Fedorov.

“That’s what I feared,” said Karpov. “I’ve had Nikolin on the radio the last five minutes, but we can’t raise Tunguska. Thankfully that odd interference hasn’t set in on the AM bands. He’s trying to pick up clues as to where we might be, or when...”

As if on cue, Nikolin looked over his shoulder, giving the Captain a thumbs up. He flipped a switch to put the broadcast he had stumbled upon on audio, but it was simply Morse code.

Fedorov listened, thinking, remembering their time in the Pacific. “Nikolin, is that standard Morse?”

“No sir... I think it’s—”

“Kana Code,” Fedorov finished for him. “Probably the Wabun variant. Switch your decoder to that system. It should be in the database. In another five minutes they had deciphered the message. Nikolin could make no sense of it, but to Fedorov it was crystal clear: “Kono junjo wa, 12 tsuki 2-nichi 17-ji 30-bu ni yūkōdearu: Rengō kantai shiriaru #10... Niitaka yama nobore ! 1208, Ripito, 1208!”

“What does it mean sir? Should I call for Mishman Tanaka?”

“No need,” said Fedorov. “Just run it through the translator here.” They had their answer soon enough: “This order is effective at 17:30 on 2 December: Combined Fleet Serial #10. Climb NIITAKAYAMA! Climb Mount Niitaka! 1208, repeat, 1208.”

“A code within a code,” said Karpov, looking at Fedorov.

“Except it is one of the most famous code signals ever transmitted sir. That is the Japanese signal authorizing the attack on Pearl Harbor. We’ve slipped again! It must be early December. That message was historically first transmitted at 15:00, Tokyo Time, on December 2, 1941. No doubt we may

hear others. ‘East Wind Rain’ was the Japanese Foreign Ministry alert code for the start of the war, and ‘The Black Kite Eagle And Hawk Will Fly’ was used for the Army. This one was for the navy, Climb Mount Niitaka, and it took them all night to broadcast it effectively so all fleet assets would get the message.”

“My God,” said Karpov. “We’re late! Where would the Japanese Strike force be on December 2nd when they got this message?”

Fedorov ran to his navigation station, quickly retrieving a pad device where he had stored his research on this campaign. A few taps later he had a map. “About here, sir. The Kido Butai refueled at 42 degrees north and 170 degrees east; at 2000 hours—today, if this is indeed December 2. The fleet rendezvous point on December 6th was at 34 North, 158 West. That’s our best chance to get close. If I punch in our present position, that would put them nearly 4000 kilometers south of us on the 6th. About 2160 nautical miles. That’s 72 hours sea time at 30 knots, but we’ll be lucky to make even half that speed given the ice conditions now. Ice minimum was in September, but it’s been building up ever since.”

“Damn!”

“We have no chance to catch them before the attack sir. Given these sea ice conditions, it could take us a week to ten days to get down through the Bering Strait. Even trying to catch them as they withdraw would be a very close shave. First I’ll have to nail down our exact time.”

“I’ll get that from BBC soon,” said Nikolin.

“Yes, and do everything possible to raise Tunguska,” said Karpov. “But even before that, I want you to send a message. Come with me to the briefing room and we’ll go over what I want.” He looked at Fedorov now.

“Mister Fedorov, the bridge is yours. We’re in a horse race. Ice be damned. Give this old grey stallion the whip!”

*

Kirov would not be able to navigate the thickening ice floes and get up enough speed to cross the enormous distance that separated the two forces. When this was clear, Karpov determined to fall back on his Plan B, or so he indicated to Fedorov. But he secretly had a hidden agenda in these

proceedings, one that saw his presence here a two edged sword.

I cannot get close enough to prevent the Japanese attack, he thought, nor did I ever wish to. This pulsing shift into December was clearly unexpected, and hopefully it will not happen again, but I will now make the best of the situation, and follow my plans. Nikolin finally got through to Tunguska, with yet another surprise! They took the ship back to Siberia. Volkov is scheming again.

Information was scattered. Tyrenkov had only been able to speak with him briefly. He told them they waited a week at Big Diomedes as instructed, until it became necessary to return to Siberian territory to re-provision. They flew to Magadan on the Sea of Othotsk, and then began to pick up information about unusual troop movements by the Japanese. They were pushing patrols up the northern neck of Kamchatka, and merchant ships docked at Petropavlovsk, unloading fresh troops and supplies. There was also movement in the Kuriles and Aleutians, and so after they re-provisioned, they determined to take Tunguska out there to have a look.

The Japanese had occupied the old outpost at Nikolskoye, and they were building a small airfield. Tyrenkov believed these troops were staging for the seizure of Attu Island, then an American protectorate, and saw this as an omen that war was imminent. Then came the news that German aircraft had been secretly staged through the Caucasus to Astrakhan and were now flying by night to airfields in northeast Orenburg. That raised Karpov's hackles.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"Returning to Magadan. Should we alter course to rendezvous with you?"

"No... Take the ship to Ilanskiy."

"Ilanskiy? What do we do there?"

"Stand on overwatch. I'm suspicious about those German planes. Any information as to type?"

"JU-88 transports, a squadron of Messerschmitts, a few He-111s. Sir... You don't think Volkov would dare another operation against Ilanskiy. It's winter, the weather is unpredictable, the roads are clotting up with snow."

"No, it does not seem likely, and Germany has still not made a formal declaration of war on Siberia. That is a mere formality, but the presence of those planes in the east is disturbing. I can see them in the Volga district, but not out east. Watch that situation closely. Find out what he's up to! See that

my brother is well briefed on airship battle tactics. Bogrov can help with that. Is all the new equipment working?"

"Yes sir, all installed and ready."

"Then get to Ilanskiy. Hopefully we'll stay put now, but be ready to implement Plan 7. Is everything ready?"

"Ready and waiting, sir."

"Very well... Tyrenkov. I'm relying on you a great deal now, but in my absence, should this damn ship move again, my younger brother has the authority to order Plan 7 to proceed."

"I understand sir."

After that Karpov sent his message to the Japanese authorities, a diplomatic nicety, as he really could care less what response they gave. He had it delivered by his embassy in Vladivostok, and Nikolin's radio signal was just a reminder to indicate he meant business. It was, in fact, the harbinger of his "Plan 7." He told them that Siberia was fully aware of their plan to strike Pearl Harbor, and even stated the present estimated position of the Kido Butai in his signal to make that stick. He said that unless Japan agreed to cede territories, withdraw south of the Amur River, and relinquish control of the Trans-Siberian Rail Line, that Siberia would have no other recourse but to declare war. As Fedorov had advised him, he did not expect the Japanese to bow to such demands, for that rail line was now vital to Japan's northern Imperial holdings.

Then, just to stick in a quiet knife, he had Nikolin transmit the position of the Kido Butai as they expected it for December 3 and December 6. He knew from his discussions with Fedorov that the American carriers would be too far away to do anything about the matter on December 3, but if they turned after this warning, and sailed east...

The Japanese are likely to achieve at least historical damage on the American fleet, he thought. If my warning prompts them to risk those two carriers, all the better. And if the Americans get lucky, perhaps with a little assistance from my long range helos, they just might put some hurt on this Kido Butai. That failing....

He smiled, for indeed, he had plans within plans within plans.

Mount Niitaka was the 'New High Mountain' as it was called, on the Japanese possession of Taiwan, was climbed for the first time by Japanese explorers in the year 1900, a most grueling ascent, studded with perilous cliffs, steep stony walls, and slide zones where the risk of avalanche was very great. It was so named because it was even higher than the sacred heights of Mount Fuji on the home islands, and it was symbolic of a great task to be performed.

On the morning of December 2nd, 1941, that was the code phrase that was flashed to Admiral Nagumo's Kido Butai, Climb Mount Niitaka! Japan was about to embark on their arduous expedition onto the steep, stony cliffs of WWII.

"Climb Niitakayama," said the Lieutenant. "The operation has finally been approved!"

Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo gave the man a quiet look, his white gloved hands still gripping his field glasses as he studied the wild sea. Those last numbers in the signal, 1208, were simply the date, December 8, 1941, which would be Sunday the 7th in Hawaii on the other side of the international date line. Yamamoto's long planned operation was finally about to reach its terminal phase.

It had been a long, silent journey from the Kuriles, with the sudden rising winds and sea of a winter storm to brave as they went. Yet the Admiral was not bothered by the weather. His real concern was in being spotted and in wondering whether this whole affair would ever come to fruition at all.

He was a navy veteran, having graduated from the academy in that fateful year of 1908, too young then to see action when Admiral Togo faced down that strange Russian ship off Oki Island. Ever thereafter, it was said that that enemy ship had been emboldened by the soul of the legendary sea Dragon, Mizuchi, and the shock of that encounter had done much to spur the development of the Japanese naval building program. They were determined to get sea dragons of their own.

Now Nagumo had them, right there in the Kido Butai, six of the eight fleet carriers with over 440 planes at his command. The words of the Commander in Chief, Admiral Yamamoto, were still fresh in his mind that night. The two men had met just before the fleet departed home waters.

"We have received certain intelligence from the breakaway Russian

Republic of Orenburg. Sakyamuno labored all night to get this information to Urajio by rail.”

“What is it?” Nagumo eyed the diplomatic pouch carefully.

“A very strange document,” said Yamamoto. “It contains a map of the American anchorages at Pearl Harbor, the exact positions of their ships, or so we are to believe. There is one thing notably absent on the map—there are no American carriers.”

“How could this information be accurate? It will be two weeks before we are in range to attack. Anything could happen in that time.”

“That is what is so strange about this map,” said Yamamoto. “It appears as if... well as if this has already happened! It even indicates our planned flight approach for the first attack wave! How could the Russians have this? I am in doubt about the entire mission now.”

“You suspect a security breach?”

“This man—Volkov—he clearly seemed to know all the details of our attack,” Yamamoto shook his head. “Sakyamuno told me that it was imperative we focus our effort not only on the battleships and cruisers we may still find there, but also on the submarine pens... here.” Yamamoto pointed to the map. “Also note these fuel tanks that were discussed as potential targets.”

“It was determined we could damage them, but not destroy the oil,” said Nagumo. “Remember, they are surrounded by dikes.”

Yamamoto nodded. “Yet this man, Volkov, insisted that they must be attacked, along with the dry docks and ship repair facilities.”

“The Prophet,” said Nagumo with a dismissive look. “I have heard of his many predictions. He flits about in that antiquated airship, whispering in Hitler’s ear one day, and in Tojo’s the next.”

“Yes,” said Yamamoto. “He predicted there would be a fire in Moscow, and the Soviet Government would flee to Leningrad. He predicted what happened to Sergei Kirov as well!”

“Guesswork,” said Nagumo. “I could have predicted that myself.”

“Nonetheless, I am inclined to consider the possibility of a third wave strike to target these things. Can it be done?”

“Genda argued strongly for this,” said Nagumo. “In fact, he still thinks we should invade Hawaii!”

“That will not happen this time out.” Yamamoto smiled. “Give thought to

this. If such a third wave could be mounted, then perhaps Genda's voice should be heard. I will leave this up to you. But there is more here."

"More?" Nagumo eyed the leather pouch again, and Yamamoto handed him a second page.

"This is where the carriers will be."

"Another prediction? This Russian dictator cannot possibly know this. Predicting where these ships will be before they even leave port is ridiculous."

"Our men on the Hawaiian Islands confirm that the carriers have been moving in and out of the harbor. One departed today. This paper says there are only two operating out of Pearl Harbor, not four as we first thought. A third is on the American West Coast, the fourth was called to the Atlantic. It indicates that the Americans will try to reinforce their mid Pacific islands, one carrier to Midway, another to Wake Island, most likely ferrying aircraft or delivering troops and supplies."

"Most regrettable," said Nagumo. "If they accommodate this man and do as he predicts, then I will not get a chance to destroy them at Pearl Harbor."

"Let us not put too much faith in this report," said Yamamoto, "but if it is true, those carriers will not be able to interfere. Just the same, do keep a wary eye over your right shoulder as you turn south for the final approach. If all goes well, you should receive the final go order sometime after your refueling operation on December 2nd."

"Climb Mount Niitaka," said Nagumo. "Someday I will go there to see the real mountain. I have heard it is a difficult height to master."

"The one you already have in front of you will be trouble enough," said Yamamoto. "Do not forget the words of Admiral Togo at Tsushima!"

"How could I forget them?" said Nagumo. "That is where your hand was injured."

"Aboard the armored cruiser Nisshin," said Yamamoto. "We fired almost every round we had during that fight, and the ship took much more damage than this old left hand of mine. Yes, I lost two fingers, but the Russians lost the war—twice..."

"It was the second victory that mattered most for us," said Nagumo. "That's when we finally put them in their place." He smiled.

"Just the same," said Yamamoto. "Now we are about to strike the most dangerous foe we have ever fought. Remember Togo's words, and remember

the Nisshin. I know you had your reservations about this plan, but if you are asked to climb this mountain, when you get there, fire every round you have.”

Nagumo put that remark beside their discussion about a third strike wave, and though Yamamoto had politely left the decision to him, he nonetheless felt that the Commander In Chief was urging him to strongly consider Genda’s exhortation for that third strike.

Chapter 36

The flags rose on the main mast of Akagi precisely on schedule, at 5:45 AM in the pre-dawn hour of December 7th, 1941. Time and Fate were stubborn, and determined to restore their dignity, no matter how badly ruffled their skirts were by the violations of Kirov and crew. They had conspired that day to bring the Kido Butai to precisely the right place, at precisely the right moment, to launch the most infamously famous attack of the war.

Strangely, it would not be the Japanese that would actually initiate hostilities. It would be the US destroyer Ward, which fired on a Japanese midget submarine that was creeping up behind a tug towing targets for live fire exercises near the entrance to the harbor. That was the first hit scored in what would soon become a long desperate struggle over 63.8 million square miles on the largest body of water known in the universe. And in Fedorov's history, the last hit would come many years later, again delivered by the Americans. It would be scored by Bafford E. "Loopy Lew" Lewellen, commanding the US Submarine Torsk as it stalked a Japanese cargo ship escorted by a frigate on August 14, 1945. Torsk would sink the escort with a new fangled sonar guided torpedo aimed by a gizmo the crew called a torpedo data computer, the legacy of the terror brought back to this tumultuous past by a ship called Kirov.

1945 was very far away when Admiral Nagumo stared down the staircase of Akagi's three flight decks, descending one after another to the bow of the ship as it turned into the wind. He knew what the flags on that mast were now saying to every member of the Kido Butai that could see them. They were the same flags Admiral Togo had raised at the Battle of Tsushima, the same words Admiral Yamamoto had pressed him to never forget. "The fate of our nation depends on this battle—All hands will exert themselves to their utmost."

Nagumo had a lot on his mind, the weight of that statement hanging right over his head on that mainmast. He had been entrusted with command of this operation, and the cream of Japan's fleet carrier divisions, in what he always

thought was a risky, and highly dangerous operation. There were too many things that could go wrong. The long sea journey east, the risk of early detection, the prospect that they would arrive and find an enemy fully alerted and ready for battle. And there was one other question he wished he could answer now—where were the American carriers?

In spite of Japan's clear superiority in that category, any carrier on the sea was deemed to be a threat by Japanese navy planners, and always a target of the highest priority. There were only three in the Pacific, with two more scheduled to transfer there soon, hoping to arrive before war came, but they would not get there in time. In spite of warnings that had come from many quarters, the British, US intelligence, blunt threats broadcast by Tojo himself, and that final secret message delivered by Vladimir Karpov, the US was woefully unprepared for the outbreak of the war.

The war fighting elements of the US Fleet were organized into three large Task Forces. TF 1, commanded by Vice Admiral Pye, was the heavyweight, with 6 battleships, 6 cruisers, 18 destroyers, 12 submarines, and 5 minelayers. It was also supposed to have a carrier, CV Saratoga, but this ship was fresh from overhaul in Seattle and off to San Diego to pick up her planes.

An old battleship man who had served on five such ships in his early career, Pye had boasted that there was little danger to the fleet at its new forward base in Pearl Harbor. "The Japanese will not go to war with the United States," he said as late as the 6th of December in staff meetings with Fleet CinC Admiral Kimmel. "We are too big, too powerful, and too strong." Thus, in spite of the war warnings, he had his powerful task force sleeping quietly in the harbor, with his overconfidence about to be roundly skewered in a matter of hours.

The other two task forces were at sea. TF 2, under Vice Admiral William Halsey, had three battleships, Arizona, Nevada and Oklahoma, with 18 destroyers and 3 cruisers. The battleships were to conduct night fire exercises west of Hawaii, while Halsey organized a new TF 8, and slipped away with Enterprise along with the heavy cruisers Northampton, Chester, Salt Lake City and nine of those destroyers.

Halsey took this force out on November 28th, heading for Wake Island to secretly deliver 12 Marine fighters. The planes were flying off the deck for Wake on December 2, just as Kirov reappeared in these troubled waters, and

the signal to attack Pearl Harbor was delivered. He had planned to return to Pearl by December 6, but was delayed by a storm in Fedorov's history—weather that was not going to occur in these altered states. The swirling, ever random moods of sea and sky would simply not obey the dictates of Fate and Time, and this would soon have a dramatic impact on the Japanese plans.

Vice Admiral Brown's TF 3 was designated the scouting force of the navy, led by CV Lexington under Admiral Newton, along with eight cruisers, 9 destroyers, 17 submarines and 12 minelayers. Like Halsey's special mission, Newton organized a smaller TF 12 and took "Lady Lex" and heavy cruisers Chicago, Portland and Astoria, with five destroyers, out to deliver planes to Midway.

It is often said that a single day can make all the difference in the world, and Fate was also to change the tabular record of movement for this group, when Newton went on his way 24 hours early, thus finding himself one day ahead of schedule on his return leg to Pearl. Instead of being 500 miles southeast of Midway, and effectively out of the game on December 7th, TF 12 was a little over 500 miles further on, steaming just 150 miles west of Kauai Island, northwest of Pearl.

The night firing exercises went off without a hitch, and Halsey had a mind to dismiss his three slow battleships and send them back to Pearl on December 5th. In Fedorov's history, this is what he actually did, which doomed all three as proverbial sitting ducks in the harbor. But with Lexington ahead of schedule, and his own task force unhampered by foul weather as it was, the Enterprise group was very near Lexington on the way home.

Rear Admiral John H. Newton was Commander, Scouting Force, getting a rare chance in the seat of a carrier commander for this one special mission. Otherwise his senior, vice Admiral Wilson Brown, would normally be in charge. Seeing the close proximity of the Enterprise as a unique training opportunity, Newton sent a message to Halsey asking if he would care to organize an impromptu fleet exercise involving all the assets they presently had at sea. The signal was simple, but Halsey could read between the lines. He smiled, realizing Newton knew he was about to be bumped back down to the cruisers as soon as they made port. With nothing else other than a dull cruise home, Halsey agreed.

It was to be a cover and converge exercise, where the three battleships

and the two carrier groups would stage as if they were a covering force for some other operation, and then converge on a rendezvous point. Thus those three battleships were not detached, and as Halsey looked at his map on December 6, he got a screwball idea.

“Hell, we always come into Pearl from the west. Why not make this rendezvous point up near Kauai? This time we’ll swing north of that island and come home from the northwest. We can have the battleships inshore, and the carriers and cruisers covering.”

What Admirals decide they often do, and this became the plan for the morning of December 7th, 1941. It would mean the two carriers would not be where Volkov’s report predicted, nor would Battleship Division 1 be waiting in the harbor with the rest of Pye’s ships. Instead, the American carriers would mount morning search patrols as part of the exercise, and aboard CV Enterprise, Scouting Squadron 6 was tapped for the job. Halsey had planned to send out such a mission anyway, having his planes search out in a 150 mile arc, and then just sending them on to land at Ford Island. There, they would have arrived just as the Japanese attack began, with six destroyed in that chaos as they tried to land. This time, Halsey decided they would fly an out and back mission, and return to the Enterprise.

Scouting Six had 9 planes, led by Lieutenant Commander Hopping. They would each take a slice of the search arc, with names that would begin rewriting the history of that eventful day, Teaff, Kroeger, Gallaher, West, Dobson, Dickens, Hilton and Weber. It was Ensign Teaff in plane 6S-2 that would score the jackpot, for his slice of the morning sky would take him directly at the point on the sea where Nagumo’s Kita Butai was now launching the first strike wave. Commander Mitsuo Fuchida was up to lead them, and they soon darkened the skies above those carriers like fitful bats, their dark wings barely silhouetted against the gloaming dawn.

The planes howled away on their mission, cruising through the grey early morning, lulled by the quiet songs from a radio station on Honolulu. When they had gone, preparations were made for the second wave, and Lieutenant Saburo Shindo would be among the first to fly, leading nine A6-Zero fighters in three Shotai. He would take the first Shotai up immediately, with extra fuel tanks to loiter over the task force on a defensive watch until the second wave was up.

The Japanese had every hope that they would catch the Americans by

surprise, as a seaplane off the heavy cruiser Chikuma had reported the fleet was there with at least six battleships, but with no carriers present. One of those six was the Utah, now designated a target ship. The other five belonged to Admiral Pye's TF 1. The three notably absent were now rounding the northern shores of Kauai Island, about 10 miles north of Princeville. They were simulating a shore bombardment on that island, screened by the carriers and cruisers. Amazingly, they were just far enough west so that the first strike wave could not spot them.

Events were now about to careen in a wild new direction, all because of the fickle weather, Lexington's hasty efficiency, and a crazy yearning by a cruiser screen commander to try his hand at carrier operations. Then came the message Karpov had quietly arranged, and the altered states were about to alter yet again...

*

"What do you make of this?" said Halsey, looking over the strange signal that they had just received on fleet channels. Captain George Murray leaned in closer, his eyes tight.

"Who could have sent it?"

"Came in properly formatted," said Halsey. "Looks like it's from Chief of Naval Ops, but the signal faded out and we lost it. This is all we got, but by god it's a mouthful! This thing is telling me the Japanese fleet is a couple hundred miles northwest of our planned rendezvous point!"

"Could it have been a sighting by one of our PBVs, or perhaps a sub?" Murray was very interested now.

"Well we need to get someone out there and take a good long look. This little exercise we've planned may become something else sooner than we expect. Let's get Search Six up right away."

*

"Squadron Leader to Little Lost Lambs... report status by assigned order." Lieutenant Commander Hopping was in Plane 6S-1 polling his

sheep.

“Little Lamb 2, all clear,” same the voice of radioman Jinks on Ensign Teaff’s 6S-2. And one by one the others in the flock all called home, until Ensign Weber’s radioman Keaney was about to sign off with the last all clear. But Teaff’s keen eye thought he saw something, probably another oiler like the one they had overflowed ten minutes earlier, the Richfield tanker, Pat Doheny. But the longer he looked, the more he saw, until his eyes finally widened with the shock that was soon to ripple through the entire US Pacific Fleet.

“Holy cow! Jinks! Do you see what I see off the port bow?”

“Who the hell are they?” said Jinks.

“Christ almighty! Those are aircraft carriers. Damn things are launching planes! Get on the blower and report!”

“Squadron leader, this is Little Lamb 1. Big Bad Wolf at 20 miles! My position: two-sixer point three north, one-five-seven west. Repeat Big Bad Wolf! Big Bad Wolf! Carriers!”

Jinks was so rattled that he sent that message right out in the clear, and it hopped into Lieutenant Commander Hopping’s head like a thunderbolt.

“Little Lamb One. Confirm. Did you say carriers?”

“Roger Sheep Leader. Five or six big flattops, and they’re launching planes! Mother of God... It’s the Japanese!”

Hopping needed no further persuasion, and he wasted no time, passing it on to the Enterprise, where Halsey got the news at 07:00 hours, just as a ward officer was reporting the three battleships had successfully made their simulated bombardment run off Kauai. He was about to give the order to sent the battlewagons home when the news hit him like an electric current.

“Get hold of that crazy cruiser Commander on Lady Lex! Looks like this is no goddamned drill! Then get word down below. I want Bombing Six up on deck in fifteen minutes!”

Those orders were stiffened further in a Fleet Signal, where Halsey ordered all torpedoes to be rigged with warheads, all dive bombers armed with bombs, all fighters to be ready for action, and the destroyer screen was to immediately attack any submarine spotted. The battleships were ordered to load all main guns, for real this time, and ready ammunition was to be moved up from the main magazines. The American ships at sea were to lock and load for action. Halsey had orders that he was to “intercept and destroy”

any enemy force encountered, so there was no question that his carriers had been ushered off to ferry planes simply to remove them from harm's way. Enterprise and Lexington were out there to fight, even if the odds were stacked very high against them.

At 07:10 it was Saburo Shindo's three Zeroes who thought they saw something out of place in the second wave of planes forming up. There was one stray goose, and it seemed to be edging around the flank of the main carrier fleet, dipping in and out of the few clouds puffing up in the rapidly brightening sky. He banked right, taking his whole Shotai with him to investigate, and was soon surprised to see what looked to be an American fighter!

The word was flashed to Akagi, and then he immediately dove on the enemy, sending Ensign Teaff into a banking dive as he tried to evade. The first air to air duel of the Pacific war saw hapless Teaff pounced upon by three well trained Japanese pilots, and he and his radioman Jinks would become the first American casualties.

Captain George Murray was at the Admiral's side, worry in his eyes as the ship was jolted into full battle readiness. "Don't forget those three fat pigs up north of Kauai," he said. "What'll we do about them? The Japs will find them sooner or later. Should we have the battleships turn east and rejoin us?"

"All they'll do is slow us down," said Halsey. "Yes, the Japs may find them, sooner or later, so I'd rather make it sooner, and ram them right down their throats. Signal Van Falkenburgh on the Arizona. Make sure he got that enemy sighting report, and tell him to get up there and give 'em hell."

Murray gave Halsey a look, seeing the fire in his eyes now, the grizzled war face he would become famous for. He knew the Admiral's order was going to send those ships into harm's way, and possibly to their doom, and he said as much.

"Well hell, Captain," said Halsey. "We call them battleships for a reason! If this isn't the fight they were built for, then what is? That order stands."

Aboard Arizona, Officer of the Deck, Ensign Henry Davidson handed Van Falkenburgh the signal, who read it silently before handing it off to Lieutenant Commander Samuel Fuqua, the ship's First Lieutenant and Damage Control Officer, and third in line of command. "Shall we sound

battle stations again?” asked Fuqua.

“Better make sure they know it’s not a drill this time,” said the Captain.

Fuqua nodded to Davidson, who went off to sound the wooping alarm signal, and Fuqua was already heading to his station at Central Control in the conning tower. The fate of BB Arizona was going to be much different this time out.

Admiral Nagumo was equally stunned by the news signaled by Lieutenant Shindo’s fighters. The breach of radio silence was only permitted in this extreme case, and the moment the breathless Lieutenant rushed in from the radio room, Nagumo knew the worst—they had been discovered. His precious Kido Butai had been certainly spotted now, and radio operators on the Akagi also heard the frantic enemy sighting report go out in the clear. The lines on his forehead deepened with concern, for his orders were to abort the mission should he be discovered here—yet now that was simply too late. The first wave was on its way. To call it back now and attempt evasion would be extremely dangerous. So instead his mind turned to the nature of this sighting. Was this a land based plane searching north off the islands, or could it have come from an enemy carrier?

He remembered the briefing file Yamamoto had shown him, indicating the enemy should be far to the southwest on this day. He did not give it much credibility then, nor would he do so now. If that plane was off an enemy carrier, then that ship had to be within 150 miles. He immediately turned to his Fleet Air Officer, Masuda Shogo.

“The second strike wave is spotted on deck and about to launch, but that plane could have been from an enemy carrier. In this event, should we hold back the planes from Zuikaku and Shokaku?”

“That would weaken the second wave considerably!”

“Yet I am inclined to order this. We have been spotted, and the enemy may be closer than we realize. To set loose all our arrows on Pearl Harbor would mean we have nothing left to defend the Kido Butai.”

“But sir, Genda insists we can organize a third wave.”

“Only after recovering planes that are already in the air,” said Nagumo.

“Kusaka?” Nagumo wanted the opinion of his 1st Air Fleet Chief of Staff, who had been in the thick of the planning for this attack.

“The seaplanes off Tone and Chikuma can launch an immediate search to the south and west. And the twelve fighters that were to accompany the planes off Zuikaku and Shokaku can be placed on fleet overwatch at once.”

“And if we do find the enemy close enough to attack us?” Nagumo continued to press.

“We can order the second wave planes from the other carriers to depart on schedule. Those from Hara’s 5th Carrier Division can delay their launch if necessary. Then, if nothing is found, they can either be sent on behind the second wave, or held for the third wave Genda has planned.”

Nagumo had never warmed to the idea of a third wave, but this suggestion achieved his purpose in leaving something in the fleet to strike a seaborne enemy if one was found close at hand. “Very well,” he said. “That will be the order. See that Air officers Wada and Shimoda are informed at once—but by flag signals. Even if we have been sighted, fleet units will continue to maintain radio silence.”

Quick orders were sent to the fast scout cruisers Tone and Chikuma. They were to mount an intensive air search in a 180 degree arc north, west and south of the fleet’s position. Nagumo would take Yamamoto’s advice to keep one eye over his right shoulder as he continued south, and this caution would begin the first carrier to carrier battle in history. As an additional measure, he ordered his escorting battleships, Hiei and Kirishima to move out ahead of the carriers with an escorting screen of destroyers.

That last ship, the Kiroshima, had a most interesting fate line, for somewhere in the skewed nexus points of Dorland’s time travel theory, it had encountered a strange beast of a ship from another world, chasing it fitfully through the Timor Sea, only to be mined and beached on a razor sharp shoal near the Torres Strait on the 26th of August, 1942. Yet that whole line of causality was now coming unraveled, save one steely thread that would remain strangely entangled with the monster Kirishima had faced. It was embodied in the raging soul of a man named Sanji Iwabuchi.

He had graduated from the Naval Academy several years after Yamamoto, and ended up also serving on the armored cruiser Nisshin for a time before moving on to an assignment aboard Hiei. There his irascible disposition soon saw him sent off to command shore batteries and seaplane

tenders, a rather ignominious demotion that he resented for some time. When he learned that there was a secret operation known as Plan Z going on, he wanted in very badly, longing for another at-sea assignment on a real fighting ship.

It was just his luck that the screening force needed men who were familiar with the two Kongo class battleships assigned to the Kido Butai, and with seaplane operations being planned from the cruisers Tone and Chikuma. Iwabuchi's experience in both finally paid off, and he was given a post on Kirishima as an aviation liaison officer. The Lieutenant was overjoyed, particularly since his post would put him on the bridge as liaison officer for sighting reports received from cruiser Tone. That was where he had transferred his flag after Kirishima sunk on his ill fated pursuit of Mizuchi, and so the strange bridge that connected the two ships was already being built, and under the surly supervision of Sanji Iwabuchi.

Events were developing rapidly. A signal had been received from Strike Commander Fuchida—Tora! Tora! Tora! In spite of every warning, the Japanese had achieved surprise. The reports were soon coming in from the first wave striking Pearl Harbor where the planes were swooping down on battleship row. The clear skies over the harbor were soon stained with the ugly black smoke of fires from the first hits, and daring Japanese pilots raced in, twenty or thirty feet above the water, to deliver their specially modified torpedoes. Fighters danced above, some sweeping down to ship level where they flashed past the stunned American crews, guns blazing.

The absence of Battleship Division 1 saw the berthings in the harbor changed. West Virginia was berthed where Arizona might have been, about 75 feet astern of Tennessee. The open water off Ford Island where Nevada should have been was now empty, and the Oklahoma, which had berthed outboard of the Maryland, was also gone, exposing the latter ship to the devastating torpedo attack Japan was now delivering. In those first five minutes, 40 torpedoes were launched, and 23 of them scored hits.

All of Pye's battleships, save Pennsylvania, which was berthed across the harbor on a protected dock, were gutted by multiple hits. The target ship Utah was not overlooked either, and was soon to be logged by the Japanese as a killed battleship. The eager Lieutenants crowded onto the Akagi's bridge were making notes on every hit being reported, with newly arriving signals stacked up on the clip boards.

And so, as the Kates, Vals and Zeroes continued to tip their wings and dive, Battleship Division 1 turned north with Arizona, Nevada and Oklahoma, into the winds of uncertainty. The crews were ready and standing to arms, while pilots on both Enterprise and Lexington were already climbing up onto their wildcats and SBD Dauntless Dive Bombers.

Far away, across the vast frozen stretches of Siberia, engines on other planes now sputtered to life. They were lined up in long rows on Volkov's forward airfields at Kochenevo, Shakalovo and Povarenka, just west of Novosibirsk on the Ob River line boundary. The pilots and service crews were German, but the troops now loading onto the planes were the men of Volkov's newly renamed 1st Guards Air Mobile Division. Miles to the west, well hidden from enemy eyes, the airships of Orenburg hovered low over clearings in the forest, their troop lifts and sub-cloud cars hoisting up the last of the men and equipment of this same division.

The weather had been sour for days, and Volkov thought he might miss the stroke he wanted to time with Japan's devastating entry into the war. But finally it cleared, and the operation was on. Soon the ships of his fleet would cast their long shadows over the taiga, rising up and up like a pod of great silver whales in the sky, and following the stiff winds at the trailing edge of the winter storm that was now moving east. His men, planes, and airships would soon be the lightning and thunder at the trailing edge of that storm, bound and determined to settle the score at Ilanskiy once and for all.

And just as Admiral Pye's battleships waited silently that morning to meet their ordained fate, the three airships now standing garrison watch at Ilanskiy hovered in the cold winter air over their mooring towers at Kansk. Off to the northwest, one more was hastening to the scene with all engines full, Tunguska, flagship of the fleet. She had been rigged out with Oko radar panels that were now deployed on the forward nose platform on the brow of the ship, and manned by two engineers Karpov had assigned there from Kirov. Up on the high central platforms, other men stood with needles of death, the secret weapons he had filched from Troyak's larders. If Tunguska was a formidable ship before, it was far more dangerous now, and standing on the main gondola bridge, his face and eyes set with the grim look of battle he always wore in combat, was Vladimir Karpov, the younger brother, former Captain of the battlecruiser Kirov.

His elder self was also standing to arms, hands clasped behind his back

on the bridge of that ship, which had finally freed itself from the wintery grip of the ice in the Bering Strait. Now the monster the Japanese would come to call Mizuchi was racing south at 30 knots into the storm of steel and fire that would soon become the greatest naval conflict of all time.

Karpov smiled, his mind on missiles and mayhem, and just retribution for the Japanese Empire that had dared to set foot on Siberian territory. Even as he did so, his younger self seemed to perceive his state of mind, and that same smile repeated itself on the bridge of Tunguska, a smile that was a warning to all enemies far and wide.

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: Season 3, Book 4

Tide of Fortune

The action continues on both land, sea, and air as the explosive engagements of late 1941 conclude. Operation Typhoon drives on to its high water mark as the tides of war reach the embattled city of Moscow, and the fate of Sergei Kirov is revealed. Further east, Ivan Volkov has planned a third massive attack on the strategic hamlet of Ilanskiy, where Captain Karpov aboard Tunguska is now thrust into the crucible of war. As the desperate fight is joined, his elder brother races south aboard Kirov with a message of retribution and warning to Imperial Japan.

Meanwhile, as Japanese planes begin their attack on Pearl Harbor, Halsey's 'missing carriers' find themselves in a perfect location to launch a devastating counterattack against the Kido Butai. Can they prevail, or at least intervene to prevent the great disaster that Pearl Harbor became? Or will their presence there, badly outnumbered by the Japanese carriers, merely assure the complete destruction of the American fleet?

All these battles explode through the history, while in the deserts of North Africa, Rommel must plan a new defense against a resurgent 8th Army. Even as that battle is joined again, the Axis fleet, now based in Gibraltar and Casablanca, begins a most unexpected attack. Admirals Tovey and Volsky must now join together with Argos Fire to face the storm at sea, and the mystery of Fedorov's key, delivered to Tovey as promised, opens a strange new door of mystery.

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