

Kirov Saga



Book XII in the Kirov Series

Three Kings

The Desert War Begins
An Alternate History of WWII



John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Three Kings

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

For readers who might be dropping in without having taken the journey here from Book I in the *Kirov Series*, this is the story of a Russian modern day battlecruiser displaced in time to the 1940s and embroiled in WWII. Their actions over the many episodes have so fractured the history, that they now find themselves in an alternate retelling of those events. In places the history is remarkably true to what it once was, in others badly cracked and markedly different. Therefore, events in this account of WWII have changed. Operations have been spawned that never happened, like the German attack of Gibraltar, and others will be cancelled and may never occur, like Operation Torch. And even if some events here do ring true as they happened before, the dates of those campaigns may be changed, and they may occur earlier or later than they did in the history you may know.

This alternate history began in Book 9 of the series, entitled *Altered States*, and you would do well to at least back step and begin your journey there if you are interested in the period June 1940 to January 1 1941, which is covered in books 9 through 11 in the series. That time encompasses action in the North Atlantic, the battle of Britain, German plans and decisions regarding Operations Seelowe and Felix, the action against the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir and Dakar, and other events in Siberia that serve as foundations for things that will occur in this book.

To faithful crew members, my readers who have been with me from the first book, the *Altered States* trilogy concluded with *Hinge of Fate*, and this is now the sequel to that set, and the bridge novel leading to the next trilogy, which will begin with Book 13, *Grand Alliance*. As we enter these next six fateful months of 1941, the war moves to the Western Desert, and so this series will present those actions as well, and not be merely confined to naval events. And as always, Fedorov, Volsky, Orlov and Karpov and others will be right in the thick of things, on land or at sea, for good or for ill. Enjoy!

-J. Schettler

Part I

Fire With Fire

*“Be stirring as the time; be fire with fire;
Threaten the threatener and outface the brow
Of bragging horror.”*

— William Shakespeare: *King John*

Chapter 1

Sergeant Hobson stood there in the darkness as the light from his Ronson wavered. He had been following the Barbary ape, feeling his way in the dark and expecting to catch it just round the next bend in the labyrinth of Saint Michael's Cave beneath the Rock. This tunnel led south, down the last of the rocky spine of Gibraltar until it ended somewhere beneath Windmill Hill. It went on for just another few hundred yards, and he could hear the chatter of the Macaque up ahead, but it was very dark. Then he came up short, surprised to reach an impasse in a great boulder that blocked his way.

He knew this rock, as it marked the end of the passage but his Macaque was nowhere to be seen. He held up his lighter, scanning the strange twisted shapes of the rocks. He remembered the old legend that said there was a hidden tunnel that went all the way under the straits to Spanish Morocco, though he knew that was folly. Then he keened up his senses, looking about when he heard the echo of his quarry resounding, hollow and very distant.

"Now where have you gotten to?" he said, hearing only the echo of his own voice. There was no sign of the beast.

The Barbary ape was gone, but Hobson wasn't about to let the creature off that easily. "If you've gone off that way, why it means there may be another passage down here the engineers have yet to find. If that is so..." He thought about it, wondering what he should do. Then his mind settled on the only course he could take. I'd best find someone who can do something about it, he thought. I'd best get to a Lieutenant, or better yet, a Colonel. We need to get Artisan Engineers down here to see where that bloody ape has gone.

What good would that do, he thought? Suppose there is another passage down there, or a whole bloody network of caves and caverns. Might they go all the way to Spanish Morocco as the legend has it? And what if they did? There's bloody Germans there by now as well. No way out for us any way you look at it... but then an idea came to him, and he raised an eyebrow. He had been one of the very few men on the Rock let in on a little secret, a special cave that had been dug high up on the Rock in a hidden chamber. It was called the "Stay Behind Cave," and he knew about it because he was in the detail that moved the rock out when the engineers finished the work. Six

men had volunteered to enter the chamber, where a year's worth of supplies, along with a 10,000 gallon cistern of water, had been stored to sustain their lives after they were sealed inside in the event the Rock was ever taken by hostile forces. Two were physicians. Others worked for British intelligence.

Cleverly positioned high up with two small observation slits, the team could observe both the Bay of Algeciras and the Straits of Gibraltar. They had rigged up a stationary bicycle that could be pedaled to generate electricity for a radio set, and the mission was to observe and report on enemy activity. It was to be called "Operation Tracer," the last trace of British occupation of the Rock, and Sergeant Hobson had little doubt that the men were already there, sealed away for their long voluntary entombment.

What if we could hide some of the lads down here, he thought? How many? There was no way to know until he got hold of the engineers and convinced someone to have a look. But there was one thing he did know. That Barbary ape was gone, without the slightest trace, and he knew enough about those wily creatures to realize they would not go anywhere unless there was a good chance of surviving. No. The little bugger knows something more about this place than we do, he realized.

And I'm bloody well going to find out where he's gone.

* * *

The loss of Gibraltar had been a severe blow to British morale. Even though Liddell was still holding out in St Michael's cave, there was already fighting for the upper galleries as the Germans sought to gain entry. It would be a long terrible siege. The German mountain troops would have to blast their way in, moving from one narrow passage to the next, around stony corners that led to chambers where the British could set off mines, booby traps, or simply lay in wait with a couple good Vickers machine gun teams. It would be a long and costly assault to pry the last of the British troops from their haunts, and the Germans were in a quandary as to how to proceed. Word from Berlin was adamant—get the job done—so the *Oberleutnants* and other senior officers gathered to discuss their options.

It was soon determined that, to fight their way in, they could expect to sustain hundreds of casualties, if not thousands. That was a loss that was unacceptable, especially considering that these were elite forces. It would be

foolish to expend them in a bitter battle for the caves and tunnels. Could they simply wait the British out, starve them into submission?

“That would be fruitless,” said Kübler in the final staff meeting to decide the issue. “They most likely have enough water and supplies for hold out for months, if not longer. We discussed this with Halder before the attack. A long siege is out of the question. Each week we allow to pass without a swift victory here will bolster the British morale at home. Their Mister Churchill will seize upon it as a rallying point. They have already stopped Goering and his Luftwaffe, or at least that is what I now hear. The squadrons are being re-deployed to the Mediterranean, and the Führer now considers this to be a primary war zone. If we stumble here, or delay, we will not be easily forgiven.”

“You heard what I have proposed,” said Colonel Lahousen. He was Chief of the Sabotage Branch of the Abwehr, a man tasked with handling special missions that required unusual tactics. It was he who had put forward the need for the Brandenburgers in this attack, an element that ended up proving very useful in the initial stages of the operation. Now he had another idea that might do the job, not more troops—gasoline. It could be hauled up in Jerry cans and simply poured into the upper galleries where the German mountain troops had already gained entry. Like any liquid, it would find its way through any crevice or crack, and migrate down into the lower galleries. Then all it would take is a match to finish the job.

It was a macabre and horrific plan, and would make for a terrible death to any man trapped inside those passageways. The British had food and water to hold out for months, but a gasoline fire would consume the oxygen itself. Those that weren’t asphyxiated would suffocate if they tried to resist further. Yet in spite of the sinister promise of success, many of the senior German officers were appalled by the plan.

The war would end in merciless nuclear fire. Millions would die before it was over and, on some nights, as many as 100,000 would be consumed in a single horrific holocaust of chaos and flame, entire cities burned away by deliberate fire bombing at places like Tokyo, Dresden and others. Yet now, in late 1940, there was still some semblance of civility and humanity alive in the way the war was being fought. The unconditional, unrestricted mindset of war had not yet set in, and so the German officers decided to give the British one last chance to make an honorable surrender.

They called for a brief cease fire and came forward under a white flag, offering generous terms again, only this time they would tell Liddell what they were going to be forced to do if their offer was not accepted. Kübler refused to attend the conference, so Colonel Lahousen was sent to make the final threat.

“We will not lose any more of men to persuade you to accept what you already know is inevitable,” he told Liddell.

“Oh? Well I must tell you, Colonel, that if so ordered I am prepared to lose this entire garrison to forestall your occupation of this place.”

“Have you ever seen man burn to death?” Lahousen asked. “It is not a pretty sight. Then again, the fumes from thousands of gallons of gasoline will be another agony, a choking death for some, until I decide to end the matter and use this.” He reached into his pocket and took out a book of matches, setting it squarely on the table between the two men and smiling.

“Good day, General Liddell. We will give you the three days you request, and await your decision. Do not force me to become the monster I may now seem to be. After all, this is war.”

Liddell waited those three days, and put the matter to Whitehall, where it went round for a good long day before Churchill finally decided, delivering a speech that he had made at an earlier time in the history Fedorov knew. This time it was the loss of Gibraltar that inspired the eloquence of his rhetoric.

“Our enemy has threatened a most barbarous reprisal should the brave defenders of the Rock remain adamant at their watch. They have threatened to burn the whole mountain black as death itself, consuming every last man alive in that awful fire. I cannot permit such an atrocity, and in this threat we now know the mettle of the foe we face in the Nazi war machine, which will stop at nothing to grind us under its heels. I have ordered General Liddell to stand down rather than face such a terrible end, but the task of resistance passes now to all of us. The fire that might have made an end of the brave defenders of the Rock must now burn in each of us, and forge the steel of our continued resistance. We are the Rock now, every man woman and child left in these British isles, and in our colonies throughout the empire. We may have suffered another hard knock, but they have not put us to the fire—no—not yet.

“We shall continue to fight them, resolute, on every frontier. We shall fight them in the deserts of Egypt. We shall fight them on the high seas,

where the Royal Navy maintains its watch with ceaseless vigilance. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. And should they dare set foot on this sacred soil, our homeland of England, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old. We shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone.”

The phrase “We are the Rock” went out like a clarion call, across the airwaves to inspire every man on the far flung fields of battle. Yet stirring rhetoric was one thing—the grim procession of British troops filing out from their caves and tunnels quite another, and the Germans countered Churchill’s eloquence with newsreels of the event, rubbing salt in the wound they had inflicted.

When the operation was finally concluded, Admiral Raeder sent Hitler a congratulatory note, praising his decisive will to prosecute the battle and secure this vital objective. He summarized again in that note many of the arguments he had made in favor of the plan:

“The significance of German occupation of Gibraltar is increased by the recent developments in the Mediterranean situation. Such occupation safeguards the western Mediterranean; secures the supply lines from the North African area, important for Spain, France, and Germany; eliminates an important link in the British Atlantic convoy system; closes the British sea route through the Mediterranean to Malta and Alexandria; restricts the freedom of the British Mediterranean Fleet; complicates British offensive action in Cyrenaica and Greece; relieves the Italians; and make possible German penetration into the African area via Spanish Morocco. Spanish ports, like Ferrol and Cadiz, are necessary for submarines and battleships, to facilitate attack on convoys. Occupation of Gibraltar is of great importance for the continuation of German war plans, if not decisive.”

For his part, the Kriegsmarine had played a secondary role in the

Gibraltar campaign, one that was largely designed to tie down the assets of the British Home Fleet and prevent them from reinforcing Force H. But Raeder had strong ships at sea, a task force under Admiral Lütjens with *Hindenburg*, *Bismarck* and supporting ships. They had successfully raided the Faeroes and savaged Convoy-HX-69, and now they were in a race south to reach the French Ports before the British could catch them. Everything was going according to his wishes.

* * *

Britain was in a quandary as to how to proceed with the war after Gibraltar. Only a few doughty souls remained hidden in the Rock. Six were concealed in their “Stay Behind Cave.” And one other was hidden in a place he had not yet come to realize or understand.

Sergeant Hobson had tried his best to get the engineers to have a look behind that imposing rock blocking the lower passage of Saint Michael’s cave. There was too little time, he was told, and where might it lead? These were the same arguments the Sergeant had run through his own mind, but a curious and stubborn man, he decided to have one last look when the word came down that the garrison would capitulate.

Somehow, he worked his way behind the rock, straining and squirming to get through a crevice so narrow that his head and shoulders could barely fit through. But he could smell fresh air there, a cool draft that had to be coming from some place, so he continued to squirm until he had managed to squeeze on through.

In that last week before the final surrender, he resolved that he would not be marched off to some German prison camp in Spain. Life might be better there than what he now contemplated, but comfort was one thing, a man’s pride and character quite another. The recollection of that young Lieutenant in the Artillery Corps that had taken up a rifle as the final retreat began was still with him. He remembered how the lad had thrown himself on that grenade, making the final sacrifice to save his comrades in arms.

“And here we are about to hand the Rock over to Jerry,” he muttered bitterly. “Some murderous German General holds up a match book and that’s the end of it. Well, not for me.”

In those last days he went about rounding up much needed supplies. If six

other men would stay behind, so would he. One by one, he forced the small supply packs through the crevice, and then he finally squeezed through himself.

He took out a matchbook, shaking his head as he did so. "The Germans think they've taken the Rock with a single match," he said aloud. "Well this one says we haven't given up yet, not while there's still one Barbary ape here on the rock, just as legend has it. By God there's one down here somewhere, and I'm going to find it!"

He used the match to light his oil lamp, watching as it illuminated the strange shapes of the carved walls of the cave. "Now then," he said, standing up in the dark, grateful that there was at least enough head room in his cave to allow for that. "Where have you gone, my young little weasel of an ape?"

Chapter 2

The cold light of the waning gibbous moon fell on other ships that night, as they surged through the rising seas like steel shadows. They were running full out, engines straining, the water high on the sharp bows as they pushed ahead. *Bismarck* was in the van, its dark shape illuminated in the cold pale moonlight, a grim silent presence on the sea. Behind it came an even greater mass, the looming hulk of the *Hindenburg* as it followed the wide frothing wake of the other ship. Kapitan Adler was on the bridge, fretting and restless that night, and ever mindful of the third shadow on the sea, well behind them yet still there, doggedly following their every move. He could not see it now in the darkness, but he could feel it, the threatening presence of another enemy battleship on the seas behind them.

Adler was still steaming with the thought that they should have turned and fought this ship the moment it first appeared on the distant horizon. But Lütjens had turned away, and he had received a stiff rebuke when he made an unwise comment intimating that the Admiral seemed to have no stomach for battle. It still bothered him as he felt that presence behind them, and he stepped out onto the weather bridge to have a look through his field glasses.

The night was cold and wet, a light mist on the air that was more than the spray from *Hindenburg's* bow. Rain was coming. He had checked with the weather man and knew the pressure was falling. So they would have a storm to shroud their massive steel shoulders soon, and thickening clouds overhead. That would keep the *Goeben's* planes on the deck for the foreseeable future, so he could not count on the *Stukas* driving off this meddlesome British battleship. But here he had the most advanced ship in the German Navy under his feet, its power and mass so evident as it plowed the seas—and they were running!

He shook his head, wishing he could make a sudden turn and rip open the night with those terrible 16-inch guns. That was how he would have handled the matter, but Lütjens had been adamant. They had their feast. Convoy HX-69 paid the terrible price for the meal in ships lost and blood and fire on the sea. Then, at the height of their feeding frenzy, the Royal Navy had appeared, a battleship challenging them off the starboard bow, and the Admiral had

turned away, leaving the wrecked convoy behind, along with the prospect of a good battle that Adler knew they would have won if the Admiral had found his backbone. *Bismarck* took the lead and he had followed, reluctantly, still stinging from the threat leveled at him by Lütjens.

Throw me in the brig, will he? Adler steamed, glad for the cool wet air of the night on his face now. Then he had second thoughts, realizing that his remark had been too much of an insult for Lütjens to permit, particularly on the bridge, in front of the other officers. That realization still burned at the back of his neck, and he knew he had invited the Admiral's angry reprisal, but that did little to comfort him. He would have to be more careful, he thought, yet he must make his voice heard as well. He was Kapitan of the *Hindenburg*, a posting any man in the fleet would envy, and not without reason. He was an experienced sea Kapitan, young, with a good fighting heart, a loyal party man. Why else was he here if not to find and fight the enemy? His judgment was sound, and he would have it heard, but he had to be more careful.

Lütjens was not a party man. He was a good, loyal officer, but not one to click heels and stiffen to the salute before the Nazi flag. It was said that when the Führer came to tour the ship before it sailed on this first maiden voyage, the Admiral offered a traditional naval salute, and not the one armed salute that had been adopted by the party. Lütjens seemed to have misgivings about National Socialism, reservations that seemed to manifest as a quiet disdain at times. Perhaps I can use that, he thought, but he put the matter aside.

In the future I will state my opinion in a more direct manner, he thought. No innuendo with a man like Lütjens, but I can have anything I say entered into the ship's log. If I disagree, then it can be made a matter of record, and perhaps then the Admiral will think twice before he so lightly dismisses the advice of this ship's Kapitan.

Even as he thought that, he realized how hollow it sounded. This ship's Kapitan... He was on the flagship of the fleet! Yes, an enviable post, but one that was ever fated to stand as vice Chancellor in the hierarchy of command. There would always be an Admiral on this ship, another man's shadow ever darkening his chair. He would play second fiddle here—unless he became the Admiral on this ship one day, and that thought set his mind to a more promising compass heading.

They had been running full out for ten hours after their feast on the

convoy. Now they had come to a position about a thousand kilometers east of Glasgow, well away from British air cover, though he gave that little mind now with the *Goeben* along. Marco Ritter had a clutch of good fighter pilots out there somewhere. The escort carrier was steaming with the new battlecruiser *Kaiser* in escort, another good reason they should have turned and sunk this British battleship.

He sighed, turning to greet an adjutant coming out to see him with a message.

“Fleet communiqué, sir. Wilhelmshaven reports they have radio intercepts on more capital ships that have joined the chase.”

Adler took the message, squinting at it in the darkness. “What does it say?”

“Sir, they believe the British have at least two other battleships behind us.”

“Anything to the south? What of this Force H we have been brooding about?”

“Nothing sir.”

Adler nodded, putting the message into his pocket. “See that the Admiral is informed.”

The man saluted and went off, and Adler looked over his shoulder again, seeing nothing but the low clouds and gathering rain. Well, he thought, two more battleships—a fair fight now. What could the British possibly have that could keep up with us? The ship behind them now must certainly be the HMS *Invincible*. That much was evident when it delivered a booming challenge at long range when it first appeared. The shells were well off the mark, but Adler knew the splash of a big gun round when he saw one, and that was a battleship that had fired at them, and not a cruiser. Only their battlecruisers could make thirty knots to keep up with *Hindenburg* like this, but they were thought to still be in the ship yards after the bruising *Graf Zeppelin* and *Bismarck* gave to them in Operation Valkyrie.

That was another aborted battle at sea that they should have fought and won. He knew Lindemann on the *Bismarck*. The man was not one to turn and run from any good fight. Yet he, too, had exercised caution at the outset when the Royal Navy charged in with more reinforcements—HMS *Invincible*, the pride of the British Home Fleet. But that was not all... There had been another ship, firing those amazing naval rockets, or so he had heard. He

spoke with Lindemann about it, and the man seemed strangely bothered, an uncertain look in his eye that Adler had never seen before. He had also heard what Kurt Hoffmann had said about what happened to *Gneisenau*, and the loss of one of their newest destroyers, *Heimdall*, was further evidence that some dark new demon was at large on the seas. But it wasn't a British ship—it was Russian!

He still had trouble getting his mind around that. How could the Russians have developed such weapons? This was obviously a very secret project, something that had been missed by the intelligence services, which did not surprise him. The Abwehr was a leaky sieve of late. Canaris could not really be relied on for anything of importance. Adler had the lingering suspicion that the man was a double agent, a dissembling obstructionist at best, a traitor at worst, though he knew he could never prove that. Canaris had whined on and on about Franco's unreliability.

Adler knew how he would deal with Franco—with a good Panzer Korps! It was just the way he thought he should deal with this British battleship behind them, but now there were three... That thought gave him pause. Was the Russian ship with them, the ship they were all calling *Fafnir*, the dragon of the Nordic seas where it had first made its appearance? It was said it could fire these new naval rockets at very long range, but they had seen nothing of this. Perhaps this was just an exaggeration, he thought, though the reports were very disturbing.

A rocket had come out of the night, high in the sky, then falling like a shooting star to skim over the sea and lance right in at *Graf Zeppelin*. The destroyer *Heimdall* had just been in the way, and took the blow that might have gutted the carrier. And the strangest thing about that attack is that there was no sign of any enemy ship on the horizon—no sign at all. *Graf Zeppelin* was well back from the action, so the rumors about the extreme long range of these naval rockets must be true.

Then he had heard what happened to the *Admiral Scheer*, and he could no longer dismiss the talk as the idle fancy of officers too new to battle in this war. Lindemann, Hoffmann, Krancke... these were all good men, well experienced, fighting Kapitans just as he was. They would not shirk from battle like Lütjens, and yet...

Three British battleships now. Perhaps Admiral Lütjens had been correct after all. If we had stayed there and fought with the first, the other two may

have come up on the action just as it was getting interesting, and they would fight fire with fire. It was a battle he still thought they may have won, but *Hindenburg* was out on its maiden voyage. The Führer was undoubtedly jubilant with the news of the wreckage they had already left behind them. If they had fought, there was always the chance that the ship would be hit, and that did not seem to be something Hitler would enjoy hearing about. Tell the Führer that his new fleet flagship has just sunk a hundred thousand tons of British merchant shipping and that was one thing—tell him that *Hindenburg* was blackened by the fire of the enemy's guns—that was quite another thing.

In this light he now came to see Lütjens' decision to turn away and make for the coast of France in better light. It's our maiden voyage, he thought. He wants to deliver the ship to a safe harbor, take his laurels, and then scheme on fighting his battle some other day. Perhaps that was the wiser course after all, he thought, but it still did not feel all that comfortable as he turned and started for the hatch and the warmth of the inner citadel of the conning tower. They still had a long way to go. The French coast was another 2000 kilometers away, and they certainly would not run at 30 knots the whole way. This odyssey was not yet over. They would have to fall off to two thirds to give the engines and turbines a rest. Then they would see if this shadow behind them fell off as well, or came boldly forward to engage.

I might get my battle in any case, he thought, and in spite of his confidence, in spite of the power he could feel beneath him as the ship hurried on, another voice whispered in the back of his mind, and gave the old warning—be careful what you wish for...

* * *

Another man who once stood in the shadow of an Admiral was also thinking that night. Vladimir Karpov was a man who might understand Adler all too well and, if he could have heard his thoughts, he might have reinforced that note of caution in the Captain's mind. But he was far away from the sea, hovering in the mist above the endless green forests of Siberia, scheming in his own way over what he would now do about Ivan Volkov.

There had always been someone like that in his way, he thought, and Volkov would be no different than any of the others—the school teachers, classmates, coaches, commandants and rival officers had all tasted the poison

of his envy and ire. Not even Admirals were spared, and now, after demonstrating his own brand of conniving duplicity and treachery, Volkov would not be spared either. But what to do?

Sitting there aboard *Abakan*, thinking, Karpov knew what he would do in this situation, if only he had the power. In two years he had scratched his way into the good graces of Kolchak, but that man still had half the army facing the Japanese at Irkutsk. What remained here in the west was barely enough to hold the line. One of his best divisions, the 18th Siberian Rifles, was now invested at Omsk in the second battle his men had fought with Volkov for that city. The rail line east was cut behind the city, and now there was no way he could get supplies or reinforcements in except by airship. Behind that forward outpost, he still had four good divisions on the main line of defense along the Ob River, including his elite 32nd Siberian at Novosibirsk, and then there was the cavalry he had boasted about to Volkov. They were mostly north of Tomsk watching that flank. He had gathered his only reserve division, the 91st Siberian, here at Ilanskiy after Volkov's ill fated raid. What was that man thinking? He threw two airships and a couple good battalions to the wolves here, all in a foolhardy attempt to take this place when he knew he could never hold it. Did he really think he could punch through and come all the way from Omsk to relieve this force?

No. He didn't think that at all. In fact, he intended to throw me this bone all along— Symenko, the surly Squadron Commandant in the Eastern Airship Division of the Orenburg fleet. Yes, he was one of Denikin's old guard, the bald headed old fart who tried to lead the White movement in the Revolution. Volkov made short work of him, and easily took control, and all he was doing with this raid was cleaning out his cupboard and settling some old, unfinished business. Karpov understood that instinctively as well.

But the raid could not go unpunished, nor could the treachery Volkov had used as a prelude to this attack at Omsk. What he needed now was a nice big hammer to smash this nail, but how? He thought, musing on the awesome sight of the nuclear blast that incinerated the Naval Arsenal at Kansk. He had seen that when he went up those steps, and now he knew there was no going back that way. The war in 2021 was in its final death throes. That world was not going to survive the missiles and bombs in their thousands.

I could certainly make good use of one right now, he thought. That would stop Volkov's offensive right in its tracks, but he knew where the only viable

warheads on earth were at this moment—on the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the ship he had once commanded in that hour of destiny... so long ago it seemed now. The heated memory of that final moment on the bridge would still come to him from time to time, and the lashing rebuke of Doctor Zolkin's words, the confused, yet stolid presence of Victor Samsonov as he stood up, refusing to obey, the last straw...

Yes, Samsonov was so mindlessly efficient at his post that it had seemed to Karpov the man was just another part of the ship itself. When he stood to oppose him it was as if *Kirov* itself has turned in rebellion, the weapon no longer willing to serve the warrior... He shook the bitter memory of those last moments with his comrades from his mind. Comrades? He sneered at that now. They were all traitors as well, no better than Volkov. One day he would settle that score, but he had other fish to fry now—Ivan Volkov.

He thought about that hammer he needed; about the arsenal at Kansk, and then an idea came to him, a devious, sinister thought of something he could do here that might suddenly change the balance of power. He did not have the warheads at his disposal any longer, and there would be no more until the Americans bumbled their way into the atomic nightmare five years from now. Yet he could create something that might serve his purpose very well here, and these old airships he commanded just might be the perfect way to deliver it.

The more he thought about this, the more he realized how easy it would be to do what he was now imagining. That thought rising in his mind like dark smoke, he turned to his Aide de Camp, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Summon all the engineers. Then tell Captain Bogrov to take us to the nearest fuel depot at Krasnoyarsk. He is to plot a course south to Kyzyl, the Kaa-Khem coal mine to be precise. Signal Big Red at Novosibirsk to head that way and meet us there."

An idea was mushrooming up like a dark explosive cloud in his mind, and with the information he had in his computer jacket, he knew exactly what he would need to do.

Chapter 3

Several weeks later Karpov had what he needed. The engineers had worked day and night, in double shifts, and all under his scrutinizing supervision. He used the information in his computer jacket to determine exactly what to do, and was pleased with the results, particularly after the first test deployment on a hapless flock of sheep.

It worked as planned.

The Germans had hit upon the primal fear of fire, and the agonizing death it would bring, to unhinge Britain's stalwart defenders under the Rock of Gibraltar. So he would use that same element to achieve his purpose here.

He strode down the long metal grating of Big Red's interior walkway, all the way from the tail of the ship, where the last of the loading operations were now being concluded. Along the way he removed his black leather gloves from his uniform side pocket, slowly pulling them on one at a time, and making a fist to set the fit just as he preferred. The sound of his hard soled boots resounded in the enclosed space, echoing up through the metal duralumin framework of the massive airship. Karpov was ready. He would leave the ship to board *Abakan* for the planned attack. It would be much too dangerous to remain aboard 'Big Red.'

That was the nickname of one of the largest airships in his small fleet, the *Krasnoyarsk*, or "Old Krasny," which meant 'red' in the Russian language. Most simply called the ship 'Big Red,' and the tarps that covered its duralumin skeleton had been tinted a dull red to fill the bill nicely.

The project Karpov had been busy with was the development of a hammer big enough to smash the nail he had in his shoe, Ivan Volkov. He knew he would never get his hands on another nuclear warhead, so he tried something else, a rudimentary air fuel bomb the like of which had been pioneered by a German engineer named Mario Zippermayr during the Second World War. In fact, the man was probably out there somewhere working on a similar project now, he thought, but I have beaten him to the punch.

He had come to the Kaa-Chem coal mine to get the dust—coal dust, which could be highly explosive if applied properly in the weapon his engineers had designed. He had rigged out a bomb container the size and

appearance of a sub-cloud car. In fact, he began with the empty shell of one such car to create his prototype. Then he used the data available in his jacket computer to find how to suspend the coal dust in a liquid, and combine it with oxygen in his new bomb. It would be a two stage delivery process, one to first burst open the receptacle and cause wide area dispersion of the material inside, and a second charge to then ignite the holocaust. The explosive shock of the weapon was severe, far beyond that of any normal detonation.

The trick was how to deliver it on target, an enemy ground force threatening his lines, without having his airships shot to pieces by heavy caliber flack guns. The answer was to drop or parachute the weapon over the battlefield from high altitude, and he drilled his zeppelin bombardiers hard on delivery even while the engineers were feverishly putting the weapons together. They tested for wind, altitude, potential drift off target. In time he had a deliverable bomb, and one of considerable power that had been tested to create an intense shock wave over an area of 600 meters in diameter.

Karpov had his hammer.

Big Red was soon rigged out with three of the new bombs, and Karpov assembled a small flotilla of zeppelins to make his first strike against the advancing forces of the Orenburg Federation. Volkov's 9th Infantry, 22nd Air Mobile, and 8th Armored Cavalry Brigade had formed the right pincer of his attack against Omsk. Two other divisions invested the town, encircling Karpov's 18th Siberian Division there, but these other three pressed on towards Novosibirsk, hoping to quickly storm the defenses.

There Karpov had positioned his crack 32nd Siberian Guards, blocking the way east behind their Ob River defense line. Volkov's men would have a tough fight ahead, with an opposed river crossing being the least of it. It was the perfect opportunity to test out his new weapon. If the enemy was able to cross here, then they could maneuver to stage a crossing north of the city, and cut the main road and rail connections.

Big Red was up and approaching the river crossing zone, where Volkov's forces were massing near a smaller tributary about 5 miles west of the main river. One advantage Karpov had was that he would not be opposed by enemy zeppelins here. He had amassed all the air power he could get his hands on and sent the fighters to the airfields in and around Novosibirsk. Volkov's single zeppelin accompanying the attack, the *Pavlodar*, was finally

forced to withdraw to avoid the ceaseless duels with Karpov's fighters.

Fighter squadrons were now in dutiful escort, and *Abakan* was there should any other airship return to challenge the action. Karpov had rehearsed the maneuver five times, each time doing no more than high level reconnaissance, and this had the effect of dulling the enemy's concerns, thinking the real attack was nothing more than another high level observation run. Now, in the pre-dawn hour, Big Red drifted ominously above the battle zone, accompanied by Karpov aboard the *Abakan*.

He could see that bridging equipment had been brought up the previous day, and knew the enemy crossing was imminent. But they did not expect the surprise Karpov had waiting for them that day.

"Well, Bogrov," he said to his airship Captain. "Today we teach Volkov a lesson he will not soon forget. You will see what the real application of power is here. Mark my words."

Bogrov marked them, though he inwardly felt there was something cowardly in the action. He had seen the test dropping of the weapon near the coal mines, and he knew there was not a flock of sheep down there, but men, human beings. Yes, they were enemies, but something in him preferred the more equal duel of airships, gun to gun, man to man, and not this dastardly attack. Karpov could see that he had reservations, though the Captain had said nothing.

"You have issues with this, Bogrov?"

"Sir? Well, war is war, I suppose, but they won't know what hit them, will they?"

"Volkov will know when he gets the news. This war is just getting started, Bogrov, and the gloves have not yet come off. This is strategic bombing. Before this war ends both sides will adopt this tactic, mostly the allied powers. Entire cities will burn in a single night. You will see."

There it was again, thought Bogrov, that odd way the Admiral had of talking about the war as if it had already happened, as if it was something he had read about once in a history book.

"And what will Volkov do when he gets the news, sir? That was on my mind."

"Hopefully he will take a hard lesson from what happens here today, and realize who he is dealing with when he raises his hand against Vladimir Karpov."

Bogrov thought he had raised it against the 18th Siberian Division encircled at Omsk, but he said nothing of that. “I suppose I meant that Volkov might think to do the same thing to us, sir. He has a lot more airships than we do. Suppose he were to rig out his zeppelins with these new sub-cloud car bombs as well. Then what?”

Karpov thought about that. What would the Japanese have done if they could have gotten their hands on an atomic bomb after being hit at Hiroshima?

“Perhaps you are correct,” he said. “He may think to fight fire with fire, unless I can talk some sense into him after this. But first, the lesson, the hard lesson of war—retribution. We’ll see how keen he is to cross the Ob after I get finished with his 9th Infantry Division down there. It’s a pity he hasn’t moved up all of his 8th Armored Cavalry yet, but we must go today. The weather will not hold, and today it is perfect. Signal Big Red. They may begin their bombing run.”

The massive zeppelin maneuvered out in front, and ten minutes later Karpov saw them fall, one, two, three, sailing down through the grey dawn to awaken the troops below when they ignited in a blinding flash and broiling fireball that carried a tremendous shock wave. Eardrums burst, the very breath of a man was literally squeezed from his chest as the shock wave thundered over the scene with terrible force. Yet more terrible was the searing fire that came after, devouring anything exposed, and literally sucking the oxygen right out of the air. Indeed, when the first small charged burst the weapon open to disperse the deadly contents, the liquefied coal droplets relied on the oxygen in the air to increase the potency of the detonation.

Karpov heard the three loud booms from far below, saw the bright red-yellow fireball ignite with their fury, and a slow smile crept onto his face. It worked! One of the three fireballs was slightly off target, very near the tributary, but that was also good, for it smashed a pontoon bridge under construction there. The other two had fallen amid the encamped enemy division, and thousands would not awaken that morning for reveille—a wakeup call that was never to be heard.

“Excellent!” Karpov said aloud. “Now! Signal Kalmenikov to start his attack!”

That night, the thick woods to the north of the site had been slowly

infiltrated by Karpov's tough 2nd Cossack Cavalry Division. The men moved like shadows on their grey white steeds, emerging from the tree line like a sweeping fog. They moved out at the canter, the mass of horsemen slowly gaining speed until the bugler sounded the attack. Then the Cossacks drew their cruel curved swords and came charging south toward the main road that led back to Omsk.

There were elements of the 2nd Armored Cavalry, armored cars, motorized infantry, who had also been roused by the thunderous explosions to the east near the river. The Majors told the Captains, and the Captains told the Sergeants, with orders shouting the alarm as the charge came in. The Sergeants told the buglers, and the buglers thought to raise their horns to rouse the sleeping men, but the Cossacks told them all.

The cold swords flashed in the grey dawn, and the thunderous sound of ten thousand horseman shook the ground. At one point in the column, six armored cars put up a gallant defense, the machine guns in their armored turrets taking a fearful toll. But they could not stem the tide, and the Cossacks swept by, some hurling Molotov cocktails at the light armored vehicles, and adding more fire and torment to the morning. Others threw grappling hooks and the horsemen literally toppled two of the armored cars by dragging them onto their side, rendering them useless.

Soldiers shaken by the terrible explosion, yet still alive on the outer fringes of the detonations, were dazed and confused, some barely struggling to their feet only to be cut down by those flashing sabres. The carnage was terrible to behold, and soon the chaos of panic began to spread, from one platoon to another until the encampment became a rout. The Cossacks swept through like a tide of death until they reached the village of Kochernevo, just south of the main road. There the hard shorn horsemen galloped through the cobblestone streets, setting fire to every building they could reach with Molotov cocktails and torches—fighting fire with fire. This was the site of the enemy headquarters, and now all the Majors and Captains were put to the test of war, and they fled in all directions, many ridden down and slaughtered by the last waves of the cavalry.

There had been many battles like this throughout the long history of the bloody Russian civil war. Tartar and Cossack cavalry units prowled the Siberian woodlands, but were seldom deployed en masse like this against formed units of a modern army. Yet here they had caught their foe

completely by surprise, shocked and stunned by Karpov's deadly new weapons.

High above, Karpov was watching the battle with his field glasses, as he often did on the ship. He had become accustomed to thinking behind the protective cups of the eye pieces, and watching the action unfold, as if he was seeing it in a movie. It brought him closer to it all without having to go there himself and actually enter the fray, which is just as he preferred things. Combat was for stupid soldiers. He was a General, an Admiral, and soon to become a head of state. These soldiers were merely things he used to achieve his ends, as he had thought to use the awesome power of *Kirov*.

He saw the gallant and deadly charge, the carnage it inflicted, and was elated. But soon, he knew, the enemy would respond by bringing up armor from the heart of that mechanized cavalry unit. The shock of his attack had done its job, completely unhinging the enemy river crossing operation, and so now he turned and gave another order to Bogrov.

"Signal Kalmenikov. Tell him to pull his Cossacks out and proceed to the rally point. And be certain they leave behind those gifts!"

The late Christmas presents Karpov was delivering were thickets of hand deployed mines, that were being dropped all over the ground as the horsemen withdrew. Now, when a more organized column of armored cars came barreling up the main road into Kochernevo, they got another nasty surprise, running right over the mines, which exploded to send the lead vehicle hurling up and then crashing down onto its side in another fiery wreck.

"Begin regular bombing now. Let them taste our conventional munitions."

Abakan was high up, but a hovering zeppelin was a near perfect bombing platform, with unequaled stability. The long rack of 100 pound bombs were deployed from each gondola, and the rain of evil metal fell unerringly to the scene below, the bomblets erupting with more fury, setting off many of the mines and leaving the whole target zone a hell of fire and shrapnel. The last touch were the barrels of another mixture Karpov had devised with his engineers, a makeshift napalm that he sent careening down into the entire mix, ending the attack with the hideous assault of fire, even as it had begun.

The hammer had fallen. The lesson had been taught, but it now remained to be seen whether Volkov would get the message Karpov was delivering that day. He would soon learn that the heart and soul had been burned out of his

9th Infantry Division, and his 8th Armored Cavalry Brigade had been gutted. There would be no river crossing operation that day, and by nightfall the remaining units were beginning to withdraw down the long road west to Omsk.

Karpov monitored their slow, steady progress, content. Now he contemplated what he might say to Volkov after his little victory on the Ob here. Should he offer the man a truce, demand the return of Omsk and withdrawal of all his divisions on Free Siberian territory to the south of Novosibirsk? He knew that Volkov had three big zeppelins operating there, the units Symenko had told him about, but thus far, only the 15th Division had been seen to cross the border zone. It was probing toward his defenses on the lower Ob.

“Signal Big Red. We return to Kaa-Chem. But we will take a roundabout course to throw off Volkov’s spies, and navigate there tonight under cover of darkness.” He was looking at his map as the operation concluded, well satisfied.

“Yes Bogrov, war is war. You can either be the one on the delivering end of an attack like the one you just witnessed or you will one day end up on the receiving end. War is war, and we do what we must. But doing it first is the best way, before your enemy gets his stinking hands on your throat. We could have fought a hard defensive battle here. An opposed river crossing would have been very costly for Volkov’s troops. But the best defense is a good offense, and I have just demonstrated that clearly enough.”

“Aye sir,” said Bogrov. “That you did.”

Part II

Strategy

“The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.”

— Michael E. Porter

Chapter 4

Far away to the north, other men were hidden away in tunnels as they pondered the fate of Gibraltar, weaving the tangled web of war. The lights burned late at Whitehall. In the Admiralty bunker, the lights had first been turned on 27th of August, 1939, and they would burn continuously with their own stalwart glow of resistance for six years, until finally turned off on the 16th of August, 1945. Admirals Pound, Tovey, and Fraser were present that day. As Tovey seated himself at the table, he had the fear that he might soon be scapegoated for the disaster of Convoy HX-69, and the escape of the German battlegroup that had slipped past his guard. To his great surprise and relief, Admiral Pound took full responsibility upon himself for the debacle.

“I must first apologize to you, Admiral Tovey, and to all present, as it was my insistence that Home Fleet deploy west in the Iceland passages that was largely responsible for what happened. Had I permitted the Commander of Home Fleet to decide his course of battle and dispose accordingly, we might have caught the German movement well north of the convoy. It was my feeling that our newly established air base on the Faeroes would provide sufficient coverage of the inside passage, and yet the Germans were able to run heavy ships right up to those islands and shell our boys senseless. I realize you did your best when the alarm rang, rushing HMS *Invincible* to the scene and shadowing the bandits as they fled south.”

“That we did, sir but with *King George V* and *Prince of Wales* unable to catch up, I thought it unwise to engage the enemy with my single ship.”

“The responsibility is entirely mine,” said Pound, “and I am prepared to place my own head firmly on the chopping block this time, and will fix blame nowhere else.”

“If I may, sir,” said Tovey. “We’ll have need of every head at our disposal in the weeks and months ahead. Your assumption that R.A.F. Vagar might provide us with adequate warning of any German movement near the Faeroe Islands was entirely sound—save for one factor—the *Graf Zeppelin*. That single ship has changed the equation considerably, and we have not given it adequate consideration. It was fighters off that ship that blinded our air search effort from Vagar. Now that it has happened once, we must take

every precaution to assure it never happens again.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Pound. “Yet it was also my bull headed order that you move both *Illustrious* and *Ark Royal* well west. Had they been closer perhaps we could have put up a challenge to this German carrier.”

“Perhaps,” said Tovey. “Our pilots are certainly capable and determined, yet we must get to work to give them a plane that can match what the Germans have aboard that ship. Their Bf-109 is superior in every respect to our *Skuas*, and even the new *Fulmar* may not be able to match it.”

“Agreed,” said Admiral Fraser, pleased at the gracious and diplomatic manner in which Tovey had eased the First Sea Lord down from the hangman’s scaffold. He was correct. They were going to need every head they could bring to the task now, and there was no longer any margin for error in these deliberations. “What we need is a plane like the *Hurricane* or the *Spitfire*. Mister Fairey proposed he could build a carrier-borne *Spitfire* a year before the war, and we were fools not to listen to him then.”

“It was Churchill who skewered that project,” said Pound. “He thought it would impede production of the land based variant and, as it stands, we’re barely able to keep production on those up to hold off the Luftwaffe. We do have the *Fulmars* coming on line now, though they are few in number. Yet, for the time being, they will have to suffice. At the same time I will listen to my Home Fleet Commander on this matter, and make every effort to see what we can do about a seaborne *Spitfire* or *Hurricane*. We already have a few *Hurricanes* modified for use on carriers. I believe those went to HMS *Furious*, did they not?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Fraser. “At least we know those planes can match the German Messerschmitts pound for pound, but we have all too few of them.”

“We had an order for 50 *Sea Spitfires* set to go,” said Pound. “I presume we’ll be calling them *Seafires* if we ever get them. I will see what I can do to move it along. There has also been some discussion about purchasing the American Grumman *Wildcats*. We’re calling them *Martlets*.”

“We already have hold of 81 of these American planes,” said Fraser. “The French had them on order, and we filched the delivery after that apple went bad. More will be coming.”

“All this is well and good,” said Tovey. “Yet we must also look to how we can augment the striking power of our carriers. At the moment it seems to

be tit for tat. Our *Swordfish* may be a bit long in the teeth, but they still get hits, and we have the only torpedo bomber of note in that plane. The Germans have nothing comparable. That said, their seaborne variant of that damnable *Stuka* has been giving us fits. Those planes are largely responsible for a good bit of the damage that was put on our Battlecruiser Squadron. Our battleships have better deck armor, but even they won't like 500 pound bombs careening down in the thick of a fight at sea. We must look to a similar design."

"The *Fulmar* is being adapted as a fighter bomber," said Fraser.

"Yes? Well I'm afraid it may not handle either role well enough to get the job done."

"We'll also have the *Albacore* to help out."

"Another torpedo bomber by trade," Tovey said quickly. "Yes, they've been fitting bombs to the wings, but it will simply not match what the Germans have in that *Stuka*."

"Agreed," said Pound. "We will do what we can on this matter, but tell me, Admiral, what about these naval rockets the Russians have? I understand that they can serve in a dual role, and strike both aircraft and ships. Is that so?"

"I witnessed as much," said Tovey with a quiet thrum of anxiety. If he could tell Admiral Pound the full measure of what he had witnessed and now knew about the Russian ship... but no, that would be tantamount to talking of gremlins and leprechauns with the man. He was lucky Pound had found the backbone to admit his own meddling when fleet deployments had ended in disaster. Yet he knew there was no way he could disclose what he knew about the Russian ship, and the men who had come here from that impossibly distant future. He could still scarcely believe it himself.

"Well? What about these rockets then?" said Pound. "Might we have a look at similar development?"

"I'm afraid we have no real projects active in that regard," said Fraser.

"The Russians clearly have them, and you seem rather cozy with them, Admiral Tovey. What about it? Might they share this technology with us?"

"Perhaps, sir, though from all I could learn of this ship, it is a prototype—one of a kind. It's the only ship the Russians have using these weapons and, as far as I know, there are no similar land based variants."

"That seems odd," said Pound.

“I thought as much,” said Tovey, thinking he had to lead this discussion along another path soon. He knew the Russians had a limited inventory of their wonder weapons, and that back-engineering them would take considerable time and effort, if it could be done at all. They had told him the rockets had computing machines in the nose, and radar as well, to guide them unerringly to their targets. He knew that was beyond the capability of Great Britain for the moment, and perhaps any other nation on earth, so he wisely said nothing of this. “It could be these weapons take enormous resources to design and build,” he said. “The Russians may only have this handful allotted to that ship, and nothing more.”

“Well, you might ask about that,” said Pound. “If they are forthcoming, perhaps we could speed things along with their development.”

Tovey smiled inwardly at that, knowing it would be long decades, the better part of a century, before Britain would ever have such weapons, or so he had been told by the young Russian officer, Fedorov. “In the mean time, we should not count on this technology to come on line any time soon. We’ll have to do with good old fashioned guns and steel, and some better aircraft, as we’ve been discussing here.”

“Indeed,” said Pound. “Well, now gentlemen, what to do about this war. We’ve lost Gibraltar. Churchill wants our recommendation as to how soon we can get on with plans for the occupation of the Cape Verde and Canary Islands. I can report that the planned occupation of the Azores went off without a hitch. Operation Alloy has concluded, but we must move quickly. The Germans will have eyes for the remaining islands as well.”

“Indeed they will,” said Fraser. “As to Operation Puma against the Canaries, Lieutenant General Alexander proposes to deploy the troops that were earmarked for the failed Dakar operation. Puma will commit 101 and 102 Royal Marine Brigades, and units of the new Special Boat Squadron in the initial assault. As to the Cape Verde Islands, Operation Sackbut, now renamed Shrapnel, can go as well. Brigadier Campbell has 2nd and 3rd Battalions, Royal Marines, ready at a moment’s notice.”

“Can we mount both operations concurrently?” Pound looked to Tovey now.

“The Azores Carrier Force will be assigned to Operation Puma,” said Tovey. “Somerville has moved Force H there to refuel, and he’ll provide the heavy covering force for Puma. The Cape Verde operation will launch from

Freetown, but it will need either surprise or considerable naval support. The French *Force De Raid* is still operating out of Casablanca, and the Dakar battlegroup has moved there, at least the heavy ships. This will make Casablanca a very tough nut to crack in the foreseeable future. The French will now have *Jean Bart*, *Richelieu* and *Normandie* there, a formidable task force. Both groups are well attended with cruisers and destroyers, and we must also consider that Toulon could send further reinforcements if the French get wind of these operations.”

“Formidable indeed,” said Fraser. “But the movement of these ships leaves Dakar open to attack if we move quickly. We have spoken with General de Gaulle again on the matter, particularly after these reports that he was unwilling to commit his troops against fellow Frenchmen.”

“What?” Tovey seemed surprised. “Well who did he think would be there, the Bulgarian Army?”

“Exactly,” said Fraser. “Well our Mister de Gaulle seems to have found his backbone after learning that Darlan has put a price on his head. He was considering a move into Equatorial Africa from Cameroon, but we’ve convinced him Dakar is the real prize now.”

“Cunningham wants to roll up his sleeves and have another go,” said Pound. “I think we should recommend it, only this time no mistakes. I’ll want the whole of Force H in attendance. If this *Force De Raid* wants to do anything about it this time, they’ll have to get past *Rodney* and *Nelson*.”

“Agreed,” said Tovey. “Eliminating Dakar is a vital necessity. It’s a dagger right on the throat of all southbound convoy traffic.”

“Correct,” said Pound. “With Gibraltar lost, and Force H operating from the Azores, we remain in dire straits, particularly now that the Germans have heavy ships at Brest and Saint Nazaire. We’ve lost *Barham*, and *Resolution* was brought home for repairs after the engagement off Dakar. That, if anything, has shown us that we can not underestimate the French Fleet in any subsequent engagement.”

“True sir,” said Tovey. “Those are fast, capable ships, and the French have their blood up after Dakar. Now, we pulled *Ramilles* and *Revenge* off convoy escort for the Azores operation. I propose to keep those two ships assigned as the close covering force for Puma and Shrapnel. Then we can let Somerville take a more aggressive stance against the *Force de Raid*. But make no mistake, gentlemen, He’ll be playing defense. Somerville has

Valiant, *Rodney* and *Nelson* at hand, but none of those ships could really serve to get after the French unless they chose to engage us further. Somerville's battleships are simply too slow. He'll have to operate as distant cover, and our first line of defense for these operations. As to carrier assignments, we will stay with *Glorious* and *Furious* for the moment, and the escort carrier *Argus* remains at the Azores. That leaves us *Ark Royal* and *Illustrious* to watch the northern passages. That said, the German heavy metal is now sitting in French ports, and so Home fleet must deploy accordingly."

"What do you suggest?" After HX-69, Pound had decided to let Tovey have the bit between his teeth and let him run.

"That is the problem," said Tovey. "We very nearly caught up with the Germans, but they slipped away. It's coming down to speed, gentlemen, that's what we need in a good capital ship now. Thank God we have *Renown* and *Repulse* back on their feet, and in a pinch I could get *Hood* out of bed if necessary, though that ship, and Admiral Holland as well, might need a little more time convalescing."

"Holland tells me he's fit and ready," said Pound.

"He will certainly be welcome if that is so," said Tovey. "I propose that Holland take up the watch here on the Northern Passages. We'll put two heavy cruisers and one of the two battlecruisers in each passage, the Denmark Strait, and the Iceland-Faeroes Gap. *Hood* will have to play on the back row, and reinforce either group as necessary. The German threat there is still significant. They'll have *Tirpitz*, and the Twins, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. On top of that there's *Graf Zeppelin* to worry about."

"And what if they make a run at the inside passage again?" Pound did not want a repetition of the maneuver the Germans had just used so successfully.

"With *Spitfires* at R.A.F. Vagar now, that should prevent any recurrence of what we just suffered with HX-69. Once burned, twice prepared. As soon as these operations conclude I shall return *Ramilles* and *Revenge* to Scapa Flow to watch that inside passage."

"Good enough," said Pound. "But what if the Germans bunch up on either of the Northern Passages as they planned it with Operation Valkyrie?"

"That's where my squadron comes in. I propose to move *Invincible* and the two new battleships south from Scapa Flow to the Bristol Channel. I could operate from Cardiff or Bristol itself, but it's a good hundred miles from those ports to the Celtic Sea, and I might want to post my squadron

further west.”

“Where? Plymouth will be under German bombers.”

“Milford Haven,” said Tovey. “Yes, I know the German bombers can reach that too, but they’ve largely ignored it. The place will need facility development, fuel depots, but it’s ideally positioned to allow my fast battleships access to the Celtic Sea and Western Approaches. From there I can mount standing patrols against any possible sortie by the German heavy units in French Ports. They’ll have *Hindenburg*, *Bismarck*, and we’ve identified what appears to be a light escort carrier. Beyond that, the Germans got hold of two new French ships in the docks, *Joffre* and *DeGrasse*. The former is an aircraft carrier, and given their success with *Graf Zeppelin*, I have no doubt that they will do everything possible to get that ship rigged out for operations.”

“Admiralty estimates that will be a long year at best,” said Pound. “But I agree that the threat is real, and it is certainly something Bomber Command will be having a look at soon. One other question, Admiral Tovey. The Russians ship, is it still in the Atlantic?”

Chapter 5

Tovey shifted uncomfortably. The Russian ship... the ship that had come from the depths of his long remembered dreams, from that impossible, unseen future, with weapons and technology that dazzled the mind and power that had not yet been fully engaged. Yet its very presence here was exerting a strange gravity on the war, bending the lines of history ever so subtly. Tovey had little doubt that it would soon emerge from the shadows and take a much more prominent role in the plans they were now forging. But how could he possibly wield this weapon that had come into his hands, or even explain the ship's presence to men like Dudley Pound?

"The Russian ship is presently at Reykjavik, sir, relieved by HMS *Renown* and a pair of cruisers."

"I see. And I certainly hope the Russians were not put off now that we have asked them to hold our coat and let the Royal Navy handle the Germans."

"They were very understanding. Admiral Volsky fully appreciates the political issues involved. The staff work done on opening the Arctic convoy routes to Murmansk is well underway. In that event, Admiral Volsky has offered to meet our outbound convoys with a flotilla of Soviet ships and serve as escorts in the Norwegian Sea."

"And if the Germans interfere?"

"After the hand off, sir, the convoy will be officially flagged as Russian. If the Germans want to take issue with that, then they shall have to take it up with Moscow. Frankly, I don't see how the Soviets can sit on the fence for long as things stand. They've thrown in with us, but haven't declared war on Germany, yet something tells me that will change soon enough."

"Agreed," said Pound. "Very well, gentlemen. These dispositions are sound. "God help the boys who went down on the Rock."

"We knew Gibraltar was lost the moment the Germans began their attack," said Fraser, "in spite of Churchill's sabre rattling to the contrary."

"Believe me, the Prime Minister knew we could mount no serious relief operation for Gibraltar. He wasn't happy about it, but at least he's made a good speech now that it's done. The question now is Malta. The Germans

will soon have a strangle hold on the Straits of Gibraltar, with guns on both sides, *Stukas* overhead, and U-boats freely entering the Mediterranean. This is a disaster of the first order, and we haven't taken the full measure of it yet. Without Gibraltar, relief convoys to arm and supply Malta cannot have any chance of success trying to run the Straits. They will have to be mounted from Alexandria, and Admiral Cunningham still has the Italian Navy to keep an eye on. We have therefore decided to see if we can catch Mussolini napping and visit him at Taranto. We have HMS *Eagle* there at Alexandria, and we're sending *Hermes* up through Suez to join the party now that it has come off refit at Port Elizabeth. That should allow a fifty plane raid against the Italian fleet anchored at Taranto. Our intention is to even the odds in the Eastern Mediterranean, if we can, and give Admiral Cunningham a little breathing room."

"I'm afraid the whole center of gravity of the war will be shifting his way, sir," said Tovey.

"Indeed. The War Cabinet and Bletchley Park both agree. With Gibraltar lost, the Germans can now move troops to Oran or Algiers, and from there they can move overland to the east."

"They can save themselves a long haul and just land at Tripoli," said Tovey. "Malta is a thorn in the central Med, but can do little to prevent or hinder such a movement by the enemy as things stand. What do we have there to stop them?"

"A garrison no bigger than the one we had on the rock, and no more than thirty six planes, six Gladiators and twenty-eight Hurricanes and two Sunderlands."

"We'll need to stiffen that garrison up," said Fraser, "particularly in the case of aircraft. That will be the only bite Malta has if the Germans take an interest there."

As soon as these Atlantic Island operations are concluded, we'll have a look at using those same troops to springboard to Dakar. That taken, our convoy route south around the Cape of Good Hope will be secure. Then it will be our job to get as much in the way of troops and material to Alexandria as possible. The Army wants to beef up the Middle East Command, and they are worried the Germans may soon attack the Balkans."

"We're seeing a buildup for that now," said Fraser, and the Italians have eyes on Greece."

“Yes, well we both know where that leads this war,” said Tovey.

“The Germans can waltz right through the Balkans to the doorstep of Turkey at Istanbul, and the Turks will be the last neutral state between the Third Reich and the Orenburg Federation. So that is where the War Cabinet believes the fighting will lead us. Right into the thick of the Middle East and Turkey. That’s where the oil is, gentlemen, and Herr Hitler will be eager to get at it. He knows that even if he takes the fields at Ploesti in Romania, it will not be enough to fuel his war machine, or navy. The Bosphorus is a chokepoint for all that oil traffic coming out of Baku.”

“The Army has plans to reinforce Greece,” said Pound. “If the Germans do move on the Balkans, then I doubt they’ll politely stop at the Turkish frontier. Should Turkey to cooperate, or worse, if they invade there, then we will have to be prepared to occupy both Iraq and Persia. The Royal Navy won’t be doing the fighting, but it will be our job to get the troops where they need to be. We’ll also have Greece, Crete, Cyprus and Rhodes to worry about in due course, and even Palestine if the Germans make such a move. But all that remains to be seen. For now, gentlemen, let us catch our Canary and snatch the Cape Verde Islands in the bargain. One day at a time.”

Yes, thought Tovey. That is the only way we can work it now. We can make all these speculations and grand plans for battles we might fight, but one day a man with a rifle or a good ship will have to face down an enemy and make them come true. One day at a time will have to do.

It was then that he thought he might make his announcement concerning the Russians. Admiral Volsky had recently sailed to Murmansk, ostensibly to survey the convoy route through the Norwegian Sea. They were also going to establish another lonesome Ice Watch with the fledgling weather station on Jan Mayan. With one of their radar sets posted there, and the other already watching the Denmark Strait, his job was much easier.

Yet Admiral Volsky had sent him an urgent message concerning a new development. He seemed very eager to meet with the British and bring the Soviet Government abreast of these plans. How to broach this subject without getting Admiral Pound worked up about it? He took off his shoes and waded in.

“Gentlemen,” he said quietly. “The Russians have communicated with me recently, and they propose a meeting of the minds at Suez to coordinate strategy and resources.”

“What? Without a formal declaration of war by the Soviets?” It was just what Tovey thought Pound might point out.

“I see little harm in opening talks,” Tovey suggested. “The Russians have proven quite useful. Their radar sets alone have enabled me to close the Denmark strait. Jerry has made two runs out that way in recent months, and he’s been caught flat footed and turned about in every case. I would like to take all the credit, but I’m afraid I would be remiss to do so. The Russian radar sets have given me the warning I need, and in each case I’ve been able to move my fast battleships into position to dissuade the Germans from any ideas they may have had about breaking out.”

“And what about the *Bismarck*,” said Pound. “What about *Hindenburg*. Yes, I know I do nothing but tighten the noose about my own neck to bring them into this conversation again. I’ve already admitted my culpability in that affair.”

“Well,” said Tovey. “They can either sit in those French ports, or come out to see if they have what it takes to challenge HMS *Invincible*, and may she live up to her name should that ever be the case. As to our operations against the Atlantic islands, I assume that meets with the Former Naval Person’s approval?”

Churchill agreed that action now was imperative, and with a favorable eye on the Royal Marines and commandos, he pushed for more decisive and timely action soon.

“The Joint Planning Group has argued the “Marines” are that in name only,” said Pound. “Being newly raised units, with no real experience in amphibious landings, they insisted that regular army units should spearhead any major amphibious operation, but Churchill told Keyes to continue building up his amphibious striking force.”

“Well,” said Fraser, “the Admiral continued collecting his “Marines,” in any case, and now he has a pair of “Brigades,” which are also that in name only, as they are each comprised of only two battalions of Royal Marines at this stage.”

“We can augment that force with units under War Office control,” said Pound, “though the Joint Planners still consider our amphibious forces inadequate for any significant operation against Vichy held territory. Remember also that these island outposts are not all French territories, they are held by Spain and Portugal.”

There were political considerations there until that fateful meeting at Hendaye that saw Spain defect to the Axis banner. Now Keyes argued his men were well suited to the task of seizing these islands, and he eventually won out with the fall of Gibraltar.

The loss of Britain's Rock had been a hard blow, but one that galvanized planners to look for an alternative place to base Force H. It was determined that this force had to maintain a watch on the West African coast, and operate as a counterfoil to the French *Force De Raid* based out of Casablanca and Dakar. While no single harbor could match the facilities and capacity they once enjoyed at Gibraltar, the combined facilities available in the island outposts would allow sufficient force to be kept in theater.

The first target in Britain's new Atlantic island campaign had been the Azores, an operation that had been mounted at Churchill's urging even while the fighting was underway at Gibraltar. Led by Captain Christopher Wells aboard HMS *Glorious*, 1st and 5th battalions, Royal Marines, had been put ashore against no more than a mild diplomatic protest logged by Portugal. It had been far easier than all the hand wringing and discussion that preceded it. Churchill was elated when he got the news that the Black Hole in the Atlantic, the place where Britain had little or no air cover, would now be well patrolled by planes from the airfield at the Azores. Now the question of how to proceed was on the table, with the Canary Islands Operation Puma on one side, and the combined Dakar Cape Verde Islands Operation Shrapnel on the other.

As it happened, the positioning of French Naval assets weighed heavily in the balance of that decision. The first battle off Dakar had convinced the Royal Navy that the French could pose a significant threat to any amphibious operation that they decided to oppose. And yet, in spite of the clear victory of Admiral Plancon's force over the covering force for Operation Menace, Darlan had come to the decision that Dakar was too far afield to be adequately patrolled and defended in the long run. In this he was strongly influenced by the Germans.

They pointed out that the garrison would be inadequate against any determined British attack, and it could not be easily or quickly reinforced, being simply too far away from other Vichy held bastions in the region. The nearest friendly force was over 2000 kilometers away in the Division de Marrakesh, and the Germans had showed no interest in reinforcing Dakar for

similar reasons. If it were built up to a size that might hold its own in battle, then it could not be easily supplied by sea. When the invasion plan was launched, OKW pointed out that the entire *Force De Raid* would have to be based there to have any chance of stopping it, leaving the better facilities at Casablanca vulnerable.

In the end, Dakar was seen as an outpost that would have to rely on the French Navy for its defense, and Darlan was inclined to position his fighting ships farther north to defend Casablanca. It was a strange logic, for the British planners had already determined that they simply did not have the force to consider an amphibious landing against Casablanca, but they saw the presence of heavy French naval units at Dakar as a most dangerous threat that simply had to be eliminated.

Operations were planned to heavily reinforce Force H and mount another major engagement there, but when Admiral Plancon was ordered to bring all his capital ships north to Casablanca, and make that place the principle base of the Atlantic *Force De Raid*, British planners now saw an opportunity to use the amphibious force Admiral Keyes had labored so long to build. They would take any table scraps that fell from French control, and it soon became clear that a second operation against Dakar could now proceed.

The plan then would be to begin with Shrapnel against the Cape Verde Islands in tandem with the second attempt at Dakar. These in hand, the navy would roll north to Operation Puma against the Canary Islands. Once taken, those islands would become the primary base for Force H, with the new Naval Headquarters Atlantic under Admiral Somerville at the Port of Las Palmas on the Grand Canary Island.

What the British did not know was that the Germans had good reasons for asking the French to pull out of Dakar. They had other fish to fry, and they could also see that the war was now heading to the Middle East. It was a strange push pull in the war where both sides moved in the same direction, the Germans and French gave as the British sought to take, but for a reason they kept very secret until their plan was ready to take real form and shape.

Admiral Keyes was quite happy to have Dakar back on his target list for possible combined operations by the Army and Navy. He saw these moves in as prerequisites to larger operations against French West Africa, but when Keyes inquired as to further plans, he was surprised and dismayed to learn there were none!

Any landing on the Atlantic coast of Africa would find itself with two thousand miles of inhospitable terrain between that place and the real center of gravity for the war now—Egypt. Britain's war effort would be to maintain a wedge between the advancing armies of the Third Reich, and the Orenburg Federation. The French *Force De Raid* aside, other Vichy holdings in Africa would be ignored. Britain would fight on, but the battle would be waged somewhere else—in the Western Desert, where Wavell and O'Connor were meeting now to plan the first steps in the long road home to victory.

Yet other men were meeting as well, and in a strange quirk of fate the name of General Richard O'Connor would also figure prominently in their planning.

Chapter 6

“Forgive me if I do not call you my Führer,” said Volkov. “I mean no disrespect, but heads of state follow other protocols, do they not?”

“Call me the devil if you wish,” said Hitler, “as long as you remain my trusted adjutant, all will be well.”

It was a meeting that had been planned long ago, but with developments in the war now heating up, the time was ripe for Adolf Hitler to meet with the shadow to the east, Ivan Volkov, the man who sat on all that oil, the man who held a knife at Sergei Kirov’s back. Hitler was no fool. He knew that Volkov’s disposition was not one to easily bear his trust. The man had schemed and assassinated his way to power over many long years, ruthlessly eliminating one foe after another until he forged his Orenburg Federation on the fringes of the Soviet heartland. The one man he could not outmaneuver had been Sergei Kirov, and now the war would settle their long simmering rivalry—or I will settle it, thought Hitler.

The place for this meeting was also symbolic of the Führer’s real interest in treating with Volkov—Ploesti. Hitler had come by train from Austria, Volkov in a squadron of four airships that crossed the Black Sea from his territory in the Caucasus. Ploesti was the oil center of Romania, and Hitler was keen to tour the facilities, where he made suggestions on how Germany could improve production, and increase oil flows and deliveries by rail to the Reich. It was his final stop before returning to Germany, a handshake here with Ivan Volkov, and a word on what was soon to come in his march to world domination.

Hitler was very pleased with the outcome of this diplomatic mission to the Balkans in late 1940. It had been his intention to lay a carpet of federated states all the way from Czechoslovakia to the Turkish frontier, and to do this he needed the allegiance of Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. One by one these nations fell under the shadow of his control, some willingly, as in the case of Hungary, which had been a client state since 1938. Others came grudgingly, for Romania had been pro-British and an ally of Poland at the outbreak of the war. Hitler made Romania a top priority, pleased when

General Antonescu ascended to the position of Prime Minister there, and then quickly signed the Tripartite Pact to effectively join the Axis in late 1940. Now Hitler had access to Romania's oil producing region at Ploesti, and valuable territory from which he could stage further operations.

With Hungary and Bulgaria also cowed, he now planned on the final resolution of the Balkans as a prelude to the decisive campaigns of 1941 against either Soviet Russia or the British Middle East. Operation 25, as it was called, was the plan to devour Yugoslavia, with armies staging on every frontier of that beleaguered state. Hitler would move the 1st Panzer Group to Bulgaria near Sofia, the XLI Corps to Romania and the XLVI Corps to Hungary to place a cordon of steel all along Yugoslavia's eastern borders. From the north, the German Second Army would stage from Austria with three Infantry Corps, from the west, the Italian Second Army would field a similar force, and the whole operation was happening three months earlier than it did in the history before *Kirov* staged from Severomorsk.

Now he stared at Volkov across the conference table, his dark eyes taking the man in, noting every line and detail of his uniform, the insignia, his military officer's cap. It was clear that Volkov saw himself as a military man, while Hitler sat there in civilian dress, the plain grey suit he often wore, a wolf in sheep's clothing. He sized the man up now, as a man might inspect a tool he was planning to use for some task. That was all Volkov was at the moment—an unwitting tool in the Führer's hand.

So Hitler would make him his ally, for his longstanding feud with Sergei Kirov was most convenient. He was tying down nearly forty Soviet divisions along the frontier from the Crimea and along the Volga all the way to the wilderness of Siberia north of Samara. That was very useful. Those were troops Kirov could easily move to his European theater were it not for Volkov. So he needed this man just now, and he would have to find a way to appease him, a nice scrap or two to throw him while he continued to devour Europe.

"I see that you have a bit of a problem on your hands in the Caucasus," said Hitler.

"Kirov's troops have invaded from the Crimea and invested Novorossiysk."

"And he has crossed the Don south of Volgograd. Will you stop him?"

"Of course," said Volkov, knowing he could not show weakness here.

“He merely took advantage of the situation in Siberia, that is all. I will reinforce that sector in due course and stop him.”

“Will you?” Hitler tapped the table with his pencil, looking at the map. “Why the attack at Omsk, Volkov? You had an accord with the Siberians there, and you threw it away.”

“Karpov,” Volkov said flatly. “It was all his doing. The man cannot be trusted. He was maneuvering troops to that frontier even as the ink was drying on the Omsk accord. So I took the necessary step of eliminating him from the scene before we begin joint operations to settle these affairs.” He lied about this, but lies had always served his purpose before, and this was no different.

“I see...” Hitler knew Volkov was lying, knew that Volkov had initiated hostilities and violated the accord, almost as if he had planned it all from the very first. “You had Omsk,” he said. “Now you must take it back?”

“Omsk was bait, nothing more. I wanted to see if I could get Karpov to move off his main line of defense along the Ob River. Then I could trap those forces in a quick pincer movement, smash them, and eliminate this nuisance.”

“And did he take your bait?”

“To a degree. He moved up three divisions, one in the city, two others guarding its flanks.”

“Yet he still sits on the Ob with the rest of his army,” Hitler tapped the map again. “My intelligence services tell me you suffered a severe setback recently. I’m told this man Karpov gave your troops a nasty surprise!”

“So I have taken stronger measures,” said Volkov. “Yes, Karpov is ruthless, but I will deal with the matter. If the bear will not come out of his cave, then I will go in after him. I have sent another army, and a heavy squadron of my Airship Corps across the frontier, and they are driving on Barnaul as we speak. I should reach that place by nightfall. From there I can swing north and take his main defensive bastion at Novosibirsk from behind. This will make a costly battle to cross the Ob unnecessary.”

“But you must force the river to the south first,” said Hitler. “Suppose you get another surprise there?”

“The Siberians have only two divisions there, the 93rd and 133rd. My airship fleet can isolate that place by cutting the rail lines. The only reason Karpov succeeded at Novosibirsk was because of inadequate air defense against his zeppelins. All of mine were busy elsewhere, but that has changed.

Rest assured. I will cross the Ob in a matter of days.”

“Very well. And how soon before you finish with this distraction?”

“A few weeks... Perhaps a month.”

“And all the while Sergei Kirov will continue to push into the Caucasus.”

“I can prevent that. It will be necessary to utilize my armies from Kazakhstan and the Caspian region, but they will be enough.”

“Oh? My intelligence services tell me that the Soviets are approaching Krasnodar and threatening the oil facilities at Maykop.”

“We will hold Krasnodar and stop that attack, but even so, Maykop is one of our smallest fields, no bigger than the new facilities we have near Grozny. The real oil is much farther east, at Baku and the northern Caspian basin, and that is what we are here to really discuss. Yes?”

“Of course,” said Hitler. “Ploesti will only take us so far.” He was careful to include Volkov in that statement, a vacant smile adorning his words. “I will need your oil, and the means to get it to Germany where I can put it to good use. We now have two good ports here at Costanza and Varna. Can you ship the oil there?”

“Possibly, though all of this depends on the outcome of this fighting in the Caucasus. Sergei Kirov has one thing I lack—a navy. Yes, I have my airships, but they cannot guarantee safe passage of the Black Sea while the Soviets maintain a strong naval squadron at Sevastopol. They have an old battleship, five heavy cruisers, eighteen destroyers and over forty submarines! Add to that the eighty odd torpedo boats and you can understand why a sea transit of the Black Sea will not be possible for any large movement of the oil... Unless you could assist us in neutralizing that fleet in some way.”

There it was, thought Hitler, the first request. He smiled. “I have no navy in the Black sea—for the moment. I have only just moved heavy units to a position where they can soon enter the Mediterranean.”

“That was a most significant victory at Gibraltar, just as I predicted,” said Volkov.

“Indeed it was. But before my battleships could hope to assist you in the Black Sea, there is still the Royal Navy to be dealt with in the Eastern Mediterranean. We have plans for that, yet even after they are concluded, and we dominate the Mediterranean Sea, there is still the matter of Turkey and the Bosphorus.”

“What about your Luftwaffe? They might easily deal with the Russian Black Sea Fleet.”

Of course, thought Hitler. That is what this man wants from me now. He flits about in those obsolete zeppelins and yet he has no modern air force. He needs my Luftwaffe to neutralize Kirov’s ships and protect his Black Sea ports in Georgia. Well enough.

“You realize that no state of war presently exists between Germany and Soviet Russia. That said, I will speak to Goering on this, and I will give you whatever support you need. We can sell you the planes and train your pilots in their proper use. After all, I will be wanting a good price from you on that oil! This is in my interest as well. I cannot have Sergei Kirov sitting there with a naval threat in the heart of the union we must now forge. Your oil, my steel, Volkov. That is the formula that will win this war. We are so close! Only Kirov and Turkey stand between us, and that is what we should now set our minds on. You must settle this business in Siberia quickly, and then move those divisions to stop Kirov in the Caucasus. I will give you all the support you need with my Luftwaffe. Then we must discuss Turkey.”

“Ah yes,” said Volkov, “the old Ottoman Empire, creaking and rusty, and ready to fall.”

“Well are you in a position to strike from the east?”

“Not at the moment. I will need those troops to stop this attack in the Caucasus. Yet with your air support, we may finish that job sooner, and then I can shift forces from Siberia and Kazakhstan to the Turkish frontier.”

“Excellent! And while you do this I have a few preliminaries to take care of here in the Balkans. I have Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. Yugoslavia is next. We are calling it Operation 25, after my Führer Directive by that same number. I anticipate a swift campaign, but Mussolini has complicated matters by meddling in Greece.”

“That will be to your advantage,” said Volkov, knowing the history of these events very well. The Devil’s Adjutant had more than oil and military support for Hitler. He also had vital information, foreknowledge of how the war played out, and every success and failure. He had sent a message to Hitler earlier when asking for this meeting, and strongly reinforced the need to cow Spain and take Gibraltar. He knew that Turkey would try to sit out the war as a neutral state, with leanings toward Great Britain. That had to be changed.

“Advantage? Mussolini will prompt the British to reinforce Greece, possibly even Yugoslavia. This will complicate matters.”

“No,” said Volkov. “See this as a benefit, not an obstacle. The British can ill afford to reinforce Greece now. They are already weak in the Middle East as it stands, and everything they send there will weaken them further.”

“Yes. I finally convinced Mussolini that he had to take action against Egypt, and that is now underway.”

“It will fail,” said Volkov darkly.

“Fail? Graziani has three times as many divisions as the British now have in Egypt. He crossed the border largely unopposed.”

Hitler stared at Volkov now. They called this man the Prophet, because his predictions have been uncannily accurate, but this one was foolhardy. How could he know this? How could the British defeat the Italian’s so quickly? They were badly outnumbered, not only in the Western Desert, but also in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, and he stated as much.

“You place too much faith in the Italians,” said Volkov. “Believe this. You will soon see how little prowess they have at the art of war. The British will defeat them easily in both the Western Desert and East Africa. They are useless! Even the Greek Army will soon have them on the run there. In time you will be forced to intervene to stave off a collapse of their colonial empire in Africa, and this you must do. We are here to discuss Turkey, but remember that the Turks will most likely be strongly supported by Great Britain when we begin our battles there. That is your real enemy for the next six months—the British!”

“Yes, yes, the British. I was planning to invade England, but was dissuaded by my Generals and Admirals. They convinced me to strike at Gibraltar first, which no doubt pleased you, Volkov.”

“That was a fortunate stroke, but you must continue what you have begun in the Mediterranean. There are three kings there. The first you have dethroned at Gibraltar, the second sits on a tiny island at Malta, and that is where you should bend your will to strike next. This will allow you to keep forces in North Africa adequately supplied. Finally there comes the real prize, the Suez Canal and the British position at Alexandria. Three kings. Slay them before June of 1941 and you will win this war.”

Hitler smiled. “Another of your predictions, Volkov?”

“Consider it good advice. Whether it comes to pass or not will depend

upon your actions. Yes, finish up in the Balkans with this Operation 25 as you call it. Yes, send me as many planes as you can spare, and I will stop Sergei Kirov from getting his hands on my oil in the Caucasus. Then we will smash Turkey, but if the British are not defeated soon, they will become a cancer that will grow in strength in the Middle East and become a major threat. They can read a map even as we do here, and they will do everything in their power to drive a wedge between us and prevent what we are now planning. Slay those last two kings in the Mediterranean, and you can assure your victory, and it will start here.” Now Volkov pointed at the map, fingering the Western Desert and the tiny island of Malta.

Hitler did not immediately see the importance of this. Graziani had just crossed the Egyptian frontier unopposed. He was staging to renew his offensive soon, and with three times as many troops and tanks as the British now had, he should be able to drive all the way to Alexandria. He made this argument again, in an almost offhanded manner, clearly confident and not sharing Volkov’s dark vision of imminent Italian defeat. Italy was on the attack, everywhere, he said again.

“They will be defeated,” Volkov insisted, putting more iron in his tone. “The British will counterattack and destroy the entire Italian 10th Army. There is a man there that you must watch very closely. He is presently commanding the British Western Desert force, and he will be the one who destroys Graziani’s army. He will kick the Italians out of Egypt, and overrun all of Cyrenaica, as far as Benghazi. If he is not stopped, he will soon pose a threat to Tripoli as well.”

“Who is this man you speak of? You make him out to be a demigod!”

“General O’Connor.”

“O’Connor?” Hitler may have been briefed on the matter, but it was one of those many minor details of the war that slipped from his mind. “Why should I worry over a single British General? They were no bother in France.”

Volkov smiled, then he was deadly serious again. “Listen to me,” he said. “Forces are present in this world that could unhinge everything we have been planning if they are not countered. This man is dangerous. He must be stopped, and I have every faith that you can handle the matter. It may need a good general of your own to match him, and German troops. And do not be stingy! If you send any force to North Africa, it must be strong. Don’t think

the Italians will ever take Egypt for you, not while that man remains undefeated—General Richard O'Connor.”

Part III

Compass

“Because your own strength is unequal to the task, do not assume that it is beyond the powers of man; but if anything is within the powers and province of man, believe that it is within your own compass also.”

—Marcus Aurelius

Chapter 7

General Archibald Wavell was a singularly important man in the hierarchy of British war plans late in 1940. After a wave of bitter reversals, it was his theater that would have the honor of launching the first counteroffensive against the Axis forces, and much was riding on its outcome. The British had been looking for some way to get back on their feet after the hard knockdowns they had suffered in the early rounds with Germany. The most recent setback at Gibraltar was a hard right cross to the chin that had been delivered by Operation Felix, a blow that evicted the Royal Navy from one of its oldest and most important bases. The whole of the Western Mediterranean was now lost, with enemies on every shore until the tempestuous waves washed ashore over a thousand miles to the east on the tiny island of Malta.

Wavell, the nominal Commander of all British Operations in the Middle East, was soon to be thrust into the fire of war, with threats on every side. On his immediate western front The Italian 10th Army under General Rodolfo Graziani had crept across the wire into Egypt, setting up a series of armed camps as they came, and pushing all the way to Sidi Barani on the coast. Behind him, across the searing deserts of Jordan and Arabia, the coup de tat staged by the Golden Square and Rashid Ali in Iraq was now threatening R.A.F. Habbiniyah and the British Petroleum oil concerns near Basra. North on the borders of Palestine, a hostile Vichy French presence in Syria threatened to become a danger to his right flank if reinforced by Germany, and the wolves were coming, slowly devouring the Balkans as columns of tanks and infantry pressed a relentless attack that had swept all the way to Greece as the bitter year of 1940 began to wither and die.

With threats on every side, and a supply line that stretched over 12,000 miles, all the way around the Cape of Good Hope, Wavell was now at the center of a gathering storm, and with impossible orders issued from Whitehall—attack!

Churchill had promised him more armor, sent the 6th Australian Division, and troops from India had been rushed to fill the ranks, yet with no more than five divisions, he was opposed by two times that number in General

Graziani's force, and also faced with an active war front to his south in the Horn of Africa. It was a typical case of finding oneself surrounded by threats on every compass heading, and something had to be done.

The solution would be to take on the most imminent threat, and turn his own compass needle due West against the encroaching Italians. He knew Whitehall was correct in prodding him to action. To sit there and wait for his enemies to slowly invest Egypt in a stranglehold of steel would invite disaster. And so, on this day he met with his Western Desert Force commander, Lieutenant General Richard O'Connor, to see what they could do about the situation.

"We're to take the matter in hand," he said to O'Connor, a quiet, self-effacing man who had recently been promoted from command of the backwater 7th Division in Palestine, the same division where he had served as Brigade Signals Officer in the First Battle of Ypres during WWI. Wavell had been there, losing sight in his left eye in that battle. There was no scar, no eye patch. The rugged handsome face still seemed unblemished, but the liability bothered him at times, particularly when the desert sand would blow on the fitful wind.

Wavell was no stranger to the desert. He had braved its tempestuous whirlwinds in his youth, standing with the fabled Lawrence of Arabia when he made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem at the end of that campaign in WWI.

Now Wavell looked to General O'Connor to be his foil in the battle that was looming like a threatening sandstorm in the Western Desert. Mentioned in Dispatches nine times during that war, O'Connor rose steadily in the ranks, achieving his Brigadier post quite early. No stranger to the suffering of war himself, O'Connor's experience in WWI, where grueling hardship and attrition style battles were the order of the day, led him to believe strongly in a new concept of maneuver in battle. So it was that he soon found service in a new unit pioneering theories of armored warfare between the wars, 5 Brigade under the command of J.F.C. Fuller, an early tank warfare expert.

Theory and practice of combined arms was only then emerging, a craft the Germans seemed to have mastered instinctively. Another General who had literally read Fuller's book was a man named Heintz Guderian, who had just ably demonstrated his mastery of the craft in the lightning Blitzkrieg across France.

For the British, however, tanks were still thought of as a kind of cavalry unit on the battlefield. Indeed, many existing tank regiments had been born from former cavalry units with long, storied histories in the British Army. As such, the roles they thought to assign to armor were scouting and reconnaissance, infantry support, and the occasional mad charge through any hole in the line the foot soldiers managed to create. It was a fundamental misapprehension of the real virtues of tank warfare—mobility and shock, and O'Connor seemed to be one of the first British fighting Generals to appreciate that point.

“My force is already in position,” said O'Connor. “The Italians have waltzed in thinking we were all asleep, but all they've done since is sit about in their lodgments and bake in the sun. It's high time we hit them—and with thunderclap surprise.”

“Without adequate infantry support?” Wavell was also a veteran of the First Great War, where it was infantry that formed the edge and crest of the battle line. When tanks came on the scene they were simply a means of breaking through wire and fortified positions to allow the advance of the real fighting man on the field, the doughty rifleman. Wavell would write after the war: ‘Let us be clear about three facts. First, all battles and all wars are won in the end by the infantryman. Secondly, the infantryman always bears the brunt. His casualties are heavier, he suffers greater extremes of discomfort and fatigue than the other arms. Thirdly, the art of the infantryman is less stereotyped and far harder to acquire in modern war than that of any other arm.’

“I should think you would want to wait for the Australian Division,” Wavell suggested.

O'Connor had seen the misery and struggle of the infantryman all too well in the first war, where the only tactic seemed to be the direct assault on prepared positions into mined wire, and under the intense fire of machineguns, artillery and sometimes gas. It was no way to fight a war in his mind, and he had no intention whatsoever of fighting this one in that manner. At present he had two divisions in hand, the 7th Armored and the 4th Indian Infantry. The thought of waiting for the 6th Australian Division to come up might cost him days of valuable time, and there was one element he seemed to have a firm grasp on—the importance of time in any battle of maneuver.

“The 6th Australian Division? Well where are they? I'd venture to say

they're still within five miles of the docks at Alexandria—simply too far away. It will take them days to get up here and sorted out, and in so doing they'll accomplish only one certain thing in revealing our intentions to the enemy.”

Wavell raised an eyebrow, listening, his riding crop tucked under one broad shoulder. “Then what do you propose?”

“A raid. Right now, with whatever I have in hand. We hit them in their encampments, lightning swift. We punch hard, and then move to punch again, like a good boxer with fancy footwork. I've 32,000 men—including the two divisions you mention. I'll be up against ten divisions, but they are not massed on any cohesive front. Our reconnaissance has them strung out from Sidi Barani all the way back to Benghazi. If we move quickly, hit hard, run, and then jog right using the desert, we can give the Italians fits.”

“And the infantry?”

“They can advance along the coast and take advantage of the mayhem I have in mind.” The General was almost up on his toes as he spoke, a restless energy animating his sharp intelligence. He was always an active man, quick on his feet, though never one to seek laurels in anything he undertook. It was enough to do a well reasoned job in the most efficient manner, and that done, it really didn't matter who took the credit. This was character as hard as the steel in his tanks, and it would soon be put to its first real test in this new war.

“Run off half cocked and you'll have your tanks scattered all over the desert, and with no infantry support.” Wavell did not yet share the vision in O'Connor's mind. His was a more carefully prepared chess game, with the pawns advancing and the heavy pieces marshalling in support. But O'Connor saw his mission now as that of a bold knight, leaping past his forward pawns to strike deep into the enemy camp and wreak as much havoc as he could. For this he needed one thing—the element of surprise—and he would lose it if he waited for the Australians.

“Let me go now, and I'll break up all their forward encampments and send them packing. The Australians can come along and round up whatever remains. I've been out with several forward patrols. I know the ground, the enemy's dispositions, and precisely where I want to hit them—right on the flank.”

“On the flank?” Wavell squinted at the map he held. “Why, they're digging in around Sidi Barani even as we speak, and that flank is well

guarded by these three encampments at Tummar and Nibeiwa.”

“It looks that way,” said O’Connor with a glint in his eye, “but we’ve found a chink in their armor—right here, near Bir Enba.” He pointed out the location for Wavell.

Reconnaissance was an art that O’Connor strongly believed in, and he cultivated the craft through every level of his Corps. His primary recon unit was the 11th Hussars, and they had been roving the no man’s land between British and Italian positions to ferret out information on the enemy’s dispositions. A light armor force with machine gun tankettes, they were given much needed support with an ingenious solution put forward by Brigadier W.E. “Strafer” Gott. He assembled ad-hoc groups of lorried infantry, engineers, a few AT guns and 25 pounders for heavy support, and he ran them about on the heels of the 7th Hussars recon groups scouting out the Italian positions. They came to be known as “Jock Columns,” after Lt. Col Jock Campbell of the Royal Horse Artillery, who contributed the 25 pounders. They soon discovered a weakness in the Italian line.

“One of my Brigadiers, Dorman-Smith happened on it,” said O’Connor, “and I’ve gone forward to see the area personally. We can move along an open wadi through an escarpment masking the position. I’ll run two brigades of the 4th Indian right through, and they’ll be behind those encampments you mentioned a moment ago, and taking them from a most unexpected direction.”

“But surely they have forces along the coast road at Azzizya and Bug Bug. You’ll run those Brigades right into the hornet’s nest, and once they get in how in the world will you get them out?”

“Yes!” O’Connor said exuberantly. “Right into the nest, but we are the hornets, and we’ll take them like a bolt from the blue!”

Surprise was essential to the success of his plan, which is why a cloak of secrecy had been thrown over the whole operation as he worked it all out. He would issue no written orders, confine planning to key staff members only, and not even the troops knew of the impending battle until that very night, just three days prior to commencement of the operation.

Yet it was more than mere secrecy as to timing that would create the element of surprise. O’Connor was taking an otherwise ponderous force in the 4th Indian Division, and giving it a dynamic new axis of attack. Instead of fighting up the coast road to come upon the Italian encampments from the

most expected direction, he would send his infantry through an inland gap in an escarpment, and have them drive north, then east to appear suddenly behind the enemy position. His armor would be on the left, driving north towards Bug Bug to cut the main coast road. He explained his thinking to Wavell.

“I’ll have 4th and 7th Armored Brigades right beside them on their left. We’ll punch through, and I’ll send 4th Brigade to Azzizya, and 7th to Bug Bug. Meanwhile the Indian Division takes those encampments from the rear and storms on to invest Sidi Barani.”

It was a bold plan, even daring considering how badly outnumbered the British were at that moment. Wavell looked at the map for some time, thinking. Though he had grave reservations, and did not yet grasp how an armored force should be fought in these circumstances, he gave his grudging approval for the plan they would come to call “O’Connor’s Raid,” Operation Compass.

“If you can give them a good beating it will mean the world to us now,” said Wavell. “We’ve got to get back on our feet. I’ll send the order up through Jumbo just to follow protocol.” He was referring to General Maitland ‘Jumbo’ Wilson, the nominal commander of British troops in Egypt at the time. In spite of his caution, he caught the glint of brilliance in O’Connor’s plan. It seemed rash, even foolhardy, yet if it worked... He turned to O’Connor, taking a long breath. “You may have your battle, General, and god go with you.”

O’Connor was elated. He had planned everything he would need for this operation, right down to the open desert supply depots he would create, the night marches the troops would make, and every other detail of the attack. He had even put his men through a training exercise where towns were mocked up to mimic the Italian positions as photographed from above. The only question now was whether the men and material he had in hand would be enough to do the job. The equipment O’Connor had at his disposal was not entirely suited to the action he had in mind.

The 7th Armored Division had only recently taken that new name, having been simply called “The Armored Division” before it arrived in Egypt. The divisional commander’s wife took a stroll through the Cairo Zoo one day, and when she returned home she drew a sketch of a Jerboa which soon was adopted as the divisional flash. Even as the Armored Division took its first

number, lucky 7, so it also came to be called the “Desert Rats.” It had only 65 tanks when Italy declared war, but Churchill had labored to send considerably more, and now General Creagh had 275 tanks, a mix of A-9 and A-13 cruiser tanks, and an equal number of Matildas, which were well armored tanks for their time, but not given to the lightning quickness O’Connor was now advocating. Where O’Connor saw his armor as a quick foil to slash and jab at his foe, the Matilda was more of a lumbering battle axe.

The A12 Matilda II could reach a speed of 16MPH. It was a tank designed for the role the British still had in mind for armor—an infantry support tank—a tank Wavell would understand implicitly. Most were gathered in the 7th Royal Tank Regiment, and realizing their limitations for the maneuver he had in mind, O’Connor would have them operate with the infantry as Wavell might expect. They were his heavy cavalry, to be thrown in at the appropriate time when the infantry had forced a key position to break the enemy line.

With a small 2lb main gun and a single 7.92 Besa machinegun, the Matilda might pose a threat to enemy infantry if properly employed, and its 78mm armor was impervious to any anti-tank weapon then fielded by the Italians. It was not the dashing armored chariot O’Connor had in mind, but the tank would prove a shock to the Italians when they found they could do very little to harm the Matilda’s waltzing through their positions. The tank would soon be christened “The Desert Queen,” and the Matildas were not alone.

O’Connor also had about 135 cruiser tanks in the 7th and 8th Hussars. The A-9 and A-10 cruiser had the same 2 pounder gun as the Matilda but, with half the armor at 30mm, it was twice as fast. The A-13 cruiser could make 30mph, and this was the lightning fast jab that O’Connor would put to good use. The rest of O’Connor’s “armor” were older Mark VI light tanks, which were really nothing more than fast machine gun carriers with thin 14mm armor. Yet speed was the order of the day in the general’s mind just then, and so he would gallop ahead with his cruiser tanks and an ad hoc brigade of armored cars, lorried riflemen, and anti-tank guns. O’Connor would put his Western Desert Force to good use, and prove his methods on the field, even with equipment ill-suited for the role he envisioned.

The plan called for speed, surprise, bold flanking maneuvers and night

movement so as to assure he would not be spotted by the Italian Air Force, and it was going produce something much more than even O'Connor had expected.

Chapter 8

The attack started when the Blenheims came in at 7:00 scattering loads of bombs along the Italian positions, a rude awakening that was made worse when the monitor HMS *Terror* opened fire on the coastal encampment with her two big 15-inch guns. The ship was basically a small 7200 ton floating gun turret, a spare that had been built for the battlecruiser HMS *Furious* before it was converted to an aircraft carrier.

It had been at Malta earlier, helping to fend off the Italian air attacks there with her anti-aircraft guns. Now it was cruising off the coast in the pre-dawn light, blasting away at the Italian positions and living up to its name in every respect. The shock of 15-inch shells tearing up the stony ground was tremendous, and a rude awakening that day for the Italians. *Terror* was joined by a few other smaller gunboats that were peppering known artillery and AT gun positions with smaller caliber fire, concentrating on the coastal towns of Maktila and Sidi Barani.

Further inland at Nibeiwa camp, the Italians heard the skirl and drum of Scottish bagpipes, and the growl of tanks. The surprise was that the attack was not coming from the east as expected, but from the west, behind them! The British had come in through the Enba gap as planned, infiltrating at night behind the Italian encampments, and they were taking them from the rear. Stunned by the sudden attack, the Italians burst out of their field tents and leapt for the cover of nearby slit trenches just as the Matilda's of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment came rumbling into their camp, along with infantry of the 11th Indian Brigade.

The Italians had a battalion of light tanks in their Maletti Group, consisting of thirty-five M11/39 medium tanks and an equal number of L3/35 light tankettes. Their crews were just settling in to morning breakfast when the attack came in. Twenty-three of the better tanks had been deployed to guard the entrance to the camp, where no mines had been sewn, and this was where the 43 Matildas of the 7th RTR were heading. They caught the Italian armor completely by surprise, their 2 pounder guns brewing up one tank after another in the opening salvoes, some before the shocked tank crews even had time to reach their vehicles.

General Maletti ran from his dugout field bunker and was cut down before he could utter a single order, so he did not see the systematic destruction of his unit, wiped out in just ten minutes by the heavier British tanks.

As the alarm was raised, frightened Italian soldiers grabbed any weapon they could find. Some fought, others ran for cover. Frantic artillery crews tried to turn their field pieces on the British tanks, firing at near point blank range, yet they were astonished to see their rounds simply could not penetrate the heavy armor on the Matildas. Faced with an enemy they could not kill, the camps fell one by one, the first easily, the second more stubbornly, but the outcome was the same. The Matildas would breach the enemy perimeter, and the Indian infantry would follow them in, rooting out one fox hole and machine gun nest after another.

Along the coast, a mixed force of 1800 troops under Brigadier General Selby was coming up from Mersa Matruh. They had been busy earlier building dummy wooden tanks inland in the desert as a good target for the Italian planes if they showed up, all a part of the deception O'Connor had planned.

By mid day the inland encampments had fallen and the British were mounting up the infantry in lorries to move on the coastal town of Sidi Barani. The thirsty Matildas had refueled and taken on fresh ammunition, and the bulk of all the 7th Armored Division's artillery was setting up to support this renewed attack. By nightfall the town had fallen and the British column had reached the sea, bagging several Italian divisions that were now cut off from any escape.

The Italians began to surrender en masse, causing a snarl as groups of 2000 men might be herded off by no more than a platoon of British soldiers to watch them. The fight had simply gone out of them. They were conscripts, sent by Mussolini to conquer Egypt, but had little real stomach for combat once cut off and with no sign of relief anywhere apparent.

"O'Connor's Raid" had been a resounding success, yet it was not over in spite of an unexpected setback when General Wavell radioed to inform O'Connor that the 4th Indian Division must now be withdrawn for duty in the Sudan.

O'Connor was surprised by the news, as he had not been told about this in advance, and it was most disconcerting. He would get the 6th Australian

Division as a replacement, but not for some days, which meant he would have no infantry support. Any other commander would have stopped his offensive there and then, but O'Connor was determined to exploit his initial successes, and decided to press forward with 7th Armored Division alone. He would soon turn the Italian retreat into a rout of historic proportions, a debacle in the desert not replicated again until the 1st Gulf War when half a million Coalition troops routed the armies of Saddam Hussein in Kuwait.

But O'Connor did not have half a million men. He had begun his offensive with no more than 30,000 against a force of 150,000 Italians. He had destroyed 73 Italian tanks, 237 artillery pieces and bagged over 38,000 prisoners in the first round of fighting. In doing so he had taken only 70 casualties. Now his numbers were cut in half, but rather than consolidating his gains, he did the unexpected and attacked.

The Italians had retreated up the road toward their bastion at the small port of Bardia. A rocky escarpment angled in towards the town from the desert, stretching some thirty kilometers to the southeast, creating a kind of stone funnel that any force advancing up the coast had to enter. As they moved forward to the west, the attacker would be compressed by this escarpment, which had only one natural opening at a place called Halfaya Pass.

To cork this bottleneck, Graziani had rallied a small armored force to defend the pass. The British 3rd Hussars were now in the lead, but they were mainly equipped with the light Mark VI machine gun tankettes, and ran into heavy Italian artillery fire when they reached the town of Bug Bug about half way to the pass.

"We'll meet fire with fire," said O'Connor as he sized up the situation. "Bring up the division artillery. And get word to the sea bombardment force that they are to keep as much fire as possible on that road."

Terror was still raining down heavy rounds on the retreating columns of Italian infantry and trucks, raising havoc as they hastened to the safety of their fortified ports at Bardia and Tobruk further west up the coast. Using the superior firepower of his 25 pounder artillery, O'Connor was able to blast his way forward, eventually taking Halfaya Pass and pushing on through Sollum. Now, confronted by an anti-tank ditch and miles of wire and bunkers outside Bardia, he was forced to wait for the Australian infantry. If he took Bardia, he knew the psychological shock of that loss would likely send his enemy on a

headlong retreat to Benghazi far to the west.

Lieutenant General Annibale Bergonzoli's XXIII Corps was digging in, occupying the strong defenses of Bardia with all the troops he could gather as they retreated up the coast, still harassed by British naval gunfire. Mussolini knew the man personally, calling him Barba Elettrica, "Old Electric Beard," because his whiskers and handlebar mustache jutted so wildly from his face. He sent him a message urging him to hold Bardia at all costs. Bergonzoli's reply was brave and confident: "We are here in Bardia, and here we will stay." He would soon command a force of 40,000 men there, making ready behind a double line of fortified concrete positions.

The task of taking the place with such a small force at his disposal seemed impossible, but O'Connor had no hesitation. He knew that it would need a combined assault by infantry, tanks and artillery to do the job, and he gathered all his remaining Matildas in the 7th RTR and planned to use them as an armored battering ram against the enemy line.

The engineer sappers of the Australian 16th Brigade finally came up in their trucks, inexperienced, but determined, tough men of the Australian bush who were accustomed to harsh desert conditions. They began unloading equipment, only to find that cases of much needed wire cutters were nowhere to be found. Orders were sent back to find them, and the infantry began to dig in to set up positions for their 3-inch mortar teams when it was discovered that none of the mortars had sites!

"How are we supposed to fire the damn things if we can't sight and register on the targets?" A gritty Sergeant put a plain enough point on the dilemma, and a young Lieutenant scratched his head, then found the nearest jeep he could get his hands on and started back down the road to look for the missing mortar sights. He would have to go all the way to Cairo to find them, where the crates sat in a warehouse, overlooked in the hasty forward movement of the brigades.

O'Connor took advantage of the time to finalize his attack plan and call for both air and naval support. That night Bardia would be visited by Wellington bombers of the R.A.F., which put in a strong attack to soften the enemy defenses, dumping all of 20,000 pounds of bombs. As the night wore on, the Royal Navy put in the second act, with the monitor *Terror* returning to pound the port defenses in the dark hours before the assault. At one point an old British river gunboat, the *Aphis*, had slipped into the bay off Bardia,

right into the harbor itself, and it was firing away at anything that moved on the shore, with an impertinent and daring display of bravery.

“Look there,” O’Connor pointed. “If the Navy can get inside the enemy’s camp like that, then we’ll scratch our way in too!”

General Iven Mackay of the Australian 6th Division was already looking over the ground. Selecting points that seemed suitable for an assault. As dawn came the looming shapes of the big engineers moved like grey shadows over the lunar landscape. These were big, muscular men, and their appearance intimidated the defenders when they saw how doggedly they came forward, moving up to prepare the way for the assault even under sporadic machine gun fire from the bunkers. O’Connor countered this by ordering a heavy covering artillery barrage to suppress the enemy guns. Then the shovels and wire cutters went to work, the aim being to fill in a section of the anti-tank ditch for the Matildas. Bangalore torpedoes were pushed under the wire to blow gaps and detonate hidden mines, difficult and grueling work under enemy fire, but the Aussies persisted.

It was not long before O’Connor could order up his battering ram, the tanks of the 7th RTR that had led his assault many days ago against the Italian encampments. The men were tired, some near exhaustion as they pushed along the narrow road, nerves jangled by the grating clatter of the tank treads. The Australian infantry had punched through the outer defenses, like ghoulish specters, their rifles and bayonets a frightening shock to the inexperienced Blackshirt militias on the front line. The Italians wanted nothing to do with these brawny, hard looking men, and began to surrender in droves.

Yet it was not all so one sided. In places the Italians fought hard, a stubborn sergeant holding his men together in a concrete bunker and refusing to give in until the Australian infantry had to work their way up and hurl in grenades. As the first prisoners were led to the rear, O’Connor was surprised to learn what he was up against. The Italians quickly told the interrogators that the port was defended by all of 40,000 men with a brigade of tanks in reserve. It was twice the size O’Connor had estimated, and now his 23 Matildas seemed a small force to consider challenging such a weighty garrison.

“40,000 men sir! Do you think the buggers are giving us a load of crap?” A staff officer had come in with the report, and O’Connor took the

information in, thinking.

“We shall soon see.” O’Connor smiled, his short white hair catching the morning sunlight at the edge of his officer’s cap.

“You mean to continue the attack?”

“What else? The enemy line stretches out for twenty kilometers to the east. They may have 40,000 men, but they can’t all be in one place at the same time, can they? We’ll hit them, just as we planned. See to the orders, Lieutenant.”

“Sir!” The man clicked his heels and was off, and soon the Matildas were pushing forward towards the gap that had been forced by the Australian infantry. When the tanks pushed through, they made short work of the pill boxes, blasting at them with their 2 pounder guns. When one post fell, the next bunker adjacent to it decided the wiser thing was to surrender, and the infection soon rippled back from the point of the assault.

The big Australian infantry rushed forward with the Matildas, Bren gun teams having to fire no more than a few hostile bursts before whole trench lines of Italian infantry would emerge, hands in the air, white flags waving. One Bren team came upon a line of L3 machine gun tanks, twelve in all, their motors revving up as though they were making ready to charge into the battle. More on instinct than anything else, the gunner fired at the closest tankettes, and was astonished when the whole line of twelve gave up and surrendered after a single burst.

Once the British tanks were ‘inside the wire,’ it had the effect of piercing a balloon. The entire defensive position began to collapse. It was not that the British and Australians were that much better at the art of war, but only that they were that much more determined to prevail. They had the will to win forward, and the Italians did not, preferring a quick surrender and a safe walk to the rear areas, and out of this damnable desert war.

Bardia fell that very same day, and the shock of its sudden capture by a force a third the size of the garrison rippled across Cyrenaica, sending columns of Italian Colonial infantry streaming west towards Benghazi. Old Electric Beard had been given a close shave, and now it was on to Tobruk, the first real prize O’Connor had in mind. It would offer a great natural harbor to supply his forward move from that point, but by the time he got there the 7th RTR was down to only eighteen Matildas.

Several tanks had broken down, others had simply run out of fuel and

ammunition, still others had run over a mine or slipped a metal tread and were stuck in the sand, no more than metal bunkers now. Yet O'Connor would not stop. He was out among the men, urging them on, commandeering any truck that seemed idle and stuffing it full of riflemen before he rapped his riding crop on the hood and pointed out the direction he wanted it to go. His energy seemed boundless, and he moved so quickly that he seemed to be everywhere at once.

The tired Aussies took heart to see this, and they shouldered their rifles and slogged on. They would use the same formula to take Tobruk: engineers, artillery, and those eighteen Matildas. A good bayonet with some guts behind it often resulted in surprising results. They would take another 25,000 Italian prisoners in the valuable port, including Admiral Massmiliano Vietina, the commander of the garrison. 208 guns, numerous enemy tanks and trucks were also taken, and many were used to flesh out the thinning ranks of the British 7th Armored division. In all, the British force had ended up capturing 130,000 Italians, losing only 500 men in the process, with 1373 wounded and 55 missing.

It was a triumph of will, determination, and the skill of all who fought that action. But it would not end with Tobruk. O'Connor radioed back to Wavell that he had both ports, and was given a hearty congratulations.

"Best to stand on that ground now and consolidate," said Wavell. "Your men will be tired, and it will take days to get food and petrol up to the front."

Everything he said was true, but O'Connor felt that if he could find a way to press on now, he might drive the Italians from Cyrenaica while he had them on the run. Yet his division was in no shape to move. It was scattered all over the desert, with seventy percent of its tanks and vehicles stalled, broken down, or out of fuel. Yet there was still that thirty percent, and he set out now to find it.

Chapter 9

The Italians were beaten. Graziani made one last call on his gilded, monogrammed telephone, sending a frantic message to Mussolini saying that all of Cyrenaica would soon be lost. Electric Beard Bergonzoli was howling about the need for Germany to attack with its entire air force. He was hastily evacuating the last of his Colonial troops from Derna on the north coast, even as the Australians pushed on up that road. As the Italians left, the Arabs drifted into town in their long desert robes, like phantoms emerging from the desert, and they began to loot the place, dragging away anything of value the Italians left behind.

Cyrenaica was a vast peninsula extending from Bardia in the east, then curving up through Derna, and west to Benghazi before it dipped down again to Agadabia on the Gulf of Sirte. The best road was along that curving edge of the coast, for inland the ground rose in the imposing terrain of the Jebel Akhdar, the Green Mountains.

O'Connor could see that he had one last chance to turn a solid victory into something truly decisive. If he allowed the remaining Italian troops to escape, he would only end up having to fight them another day. So he stared at the map looking for another way west, but found no roads fingering their way into the deserts beyond Bardia and Tobruk. There were goat trails, thin tracks tracing their way through the wadis, remnants of secondary roads that were really nothing more than the tracks of a vehicle that had wandered there, and they were all shifting with the wind on the sand.

So he decided. He would make his own road. He would simply get a column together and point it west, cutting right straight across the wide base of the peninsula, through the open desert. He Found General Michael O'Moore Creagh, commanding 7th Armored, and urged him to move via the thin trail network through Mechili, Msus and Antelat.

"Get west," he said. "Any way you can. I don't care if you have to cannibalize every unit you have, but gather any vehicle that has petrol and get them moving!"

Creagh made the decision to give this job to the intrepid commander of his division reconnaissance unit, Lieutenant Colonel John Combe of the 7th

Hussars.

“Look Johnny,” he said. “I’m going to cobble together anything that still has petrol and give you a flying column, about 2000 troops in all. You do the flying. Head southwest and position yourself defensively to block the Italian retreat to Tripoli.”

Combe looked at the map, seeing nothing but blank space along the route Creagh was pointing out. “Along what road?” he asked the obvious question.

“There isn’t one,” said Creagh. “At least not anything we would call a road. You’ll just have to make your own. We’ll follow as best we can with the rest of the division.”

“Very well.” Combe smiled. It was a classic cavalry action for his Hussars. He would dash on ahead through the night, braving the unknown, scouting out the way, and when he got there he would be facing off the remnant of the entire Italian 10th Army, perhaps 30,000 men, and he would hold until relieved.

“Got it,” he said, without a moment’s hesitation, and “Combe Force” was born. He had a squadron of his own 11th Hussars in old Morris and Marmon Herington armored cars, supported by B Squadron of 1st King’s Dragoon Guards, with a few Mark VI Light tankettes and another handful of armored cars. C Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, had a few 25 pounders, and he had some truck mounted 37mm anti-tank guns from 106th Regiment RHA. The infantry element was the 2nd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade, motorized infantry.

And off they went into the night, with the armored cars leading and Combe squinting at his map and compass. Just follow a compass heading southwest, he thought, and it was a fitting end to the operation he had led with his Hussars from the very first. They navigated around wadis, over cold stony ground, the vehicles jolting over the rugged terrain, through occasional thickets of desert scrub. Fuel was always an issue, but he reckoned he had enough to get his force to the west coast. Getting back was another matter, but that never entered his mind.

The sun rose on his force half way through that ordeal, and he pushed on, warily watching the sky for any sign of enemy aircraft. None came. The last Italian air strike had managed to zero in on a cluster of 8000 prisoners well behind British lines, where the Italians suffered the ignominious humiliation of being bombed by their own air force.

By noon the column had come up on a low ridge overlooking the road to Benghazi to the north, a place called Beda Fomm. Combe was elated to see that he had beaten the Italians to this place, and he busily set about arranging his small contingent into a blocking force. His few Bren carriers were out of petrol, so he left them behind and brought up his infantry.

“Get the lads dug in along this line,” he said. “We’ll position the artillery and AA guns behind.” He sent one small group up with a few crates of landmines and had them lay down a makeshift mine field, but that was the defense. He had a few mines, a single battalion of British infantry, and the handful of guns and armored cars against anything the Italians had left.

As it happened, he had beaten the Italians to this place by a bare two hours, for his troops soon saw the dust rising from an approaching column. It was led by the 10th Bersaglieri, which blundered into the shallow minefield and stopped with some shock and surprise. They quickly pulled themselves together, however, and organized a strong attack, determined to open the road again for the long column behind them.

Combe opened up on them with his 25 pounders to break up the attack, his gunners putting down disciplined fire on the enemy as they advanced. The Italians fell back, and Combe looked at his watch. He had received word that O’Connor had put together a supporting force of anything else that could move in Creagh’s 7th Armored division. They had been following the tracks his own column had made to navigate their way west, and by 4pm the lead elements arrived from 4th Armored Brigade, just as the Italians were putting in yet another strong attack.

Nearly out of fuel, the few cruiser tanks and Bren carriers that could still move charged boldly forward against what appeared to be an endless column of Italians. Combe began to open up with his 37mm flak guns, and a 40mm Bofors, setting several Italian trucks on fire and causing a panic on the jammed coastal road. Trucks veered away, plowing into heavy sand and bogging down as they came under fire. There were some 20,000 Italians clogging up the road, with fighting troops mixed in with support services, airfield crews, and civilians from Benghazi.

One British squadron of three cruiser tanks, a Bren carrier and one truck mounted 37mm AA gun took off north, running parallel to the coastal road and blasting away at the Italian column for all of ten miles. They stopped to fetch ammo from the supply truck and found out just how far afield they

were, a handful of men stinging the long python that might turn on them at any moment. So they simply turned around, firing at the enemy all the way south again, until they had returned to Combe's main lines to report the column seemed endless.

If the Italians had massed their fighting troops and made an all or nothing attempt to break through, they would certainly have prevailed. Had these been German troops, or Japanese, they would have brushed the scanty blocking force aside with no trouble. As it was, the British were determined to stop them, and the Italians were not as determined to break out, even though they tried gallantly in several attacks, the last a formation of nearly 100 light and medium tanks.

On they came, the tracks rattling, guns barking at the thin lines of the 2nd King's Rifle Battalion blocking the way. The British troopers opened up with their Vickers MGs, but it was the 25 pounder artillery that would have to do the job if they were to hold. The artillery crews leveled the barrels of their field pieces and began to pour well disciplined fire on the advancing tanks. Blasting away at them as they charged bravely forward.

"Where's our bloody tanks?" an artilleryman shouted over the din of the firing?"

"Back there," the Gunnery Sergeant thumbed over his shoulder. "Out of bloody gas. Now load and fire, boyo, because that barrel is all that's between you and those enemy tanks!"

The British had nipped at a part of the flank of the Italian column, capturing about 800 prisoners there, mostly service troops. But, as fate would have it, there were three fuel trucks in the column, and several Tommy's got them back to Creagh's 4th Armored where the tanks were hastily filling up with the much needed fuel. That was a fortunate find, for the supply column on its way from Bardia with more fuel had run into a sand storm and was now completely lost.

"Nice of the Italians to make the delivery just when we needed it most," said a tanker. It was just another barb in the Italian 10th Army's side, a force that was now in the last desperate throes of the most ignominious defeat in the history of Italian arms.

Twenty Italian tanks had managed to break into the lines of the Kings Rifles, but they soon realized that they had no supporting infantry and that the rest of their brigade had been stopped by the artillery fire, well behind

them. One British Sergeant took out his pistol and leapt atop an enemy M11/39 tank, rapping on the turret hatch, which, to his surprise, was immediately opened by an ornery Italian Lieutenant.

“Hello mate,” he said calmly. “You and your lads might want to give it up now before those 25 pounders get you bore sighted.”

There was the Lieutenant, sitting behind 30mm armor, with a 37mm main gun and two 8mm Breda machine guns bristling from his upper turret, and he was facing a single British Sergeant with a revolver. He could have slammed his hatch shut, which he should never have opened in the first place, and gunned his engine to continue his attack, but instead he just climbed out of his tank and surrendered. The Sergeant single handedly captured three of the twenty tanks in the lines with nothing more than his sidearm. Seven others were knocked out by the artillery, and the rest turned and fled.

The incident was symbolic of the entire battle, where this vastly superior Italian force seemed not to have the slightest idea of how it should fight the enemy tormenting them in the desert. When this attack failed, the Italians decided to wait for further orders from behind, where Electric Beard Bergonzoli was furious that his escape to Tripoli should be blocked by such a small British force.

Darkness put a merciful end to the chaos of that day. A few British fuel trucks had finally made it all the way from Bardia, and the rest of the tanks that had joined the action were able to refuel. The Division, if it could still be called that, now could count nineteen tanks in the 2nd RTR, and a division reserve of 10 cruiser tanks. The men passed a sleepless night, cold, with the threat of rain on the crisp desert air.

To the north, Bergonzoli was also busy organizing his last attempt to break through at dawn the following morning. He would execute a small flanking maneuver, turning east off the road, and charge in with the last of his tanks, a force some 60 strong. Once they had tied down the British tanks and guns, his infantry would push on up the road, where he hoped his sheer numbers would overwhelm the 2nd King’s Rifle Battalion, still dug in and huddled over tins of Bully Beef and cold water.

The next morning, Brigadier J.A.L. Caunter would organize the defense, setting out his 19 tanks to receive the enemy when they discovered what Bergonzoli was up to. “Blood” Caunter, as he was called, was a man who never flinched from a tough job. When he went fishing, it was not for carp or

herring, but sharks, and he would later write a book about angling for the most dangerous sharks he could find in British waters. Now, however, he was angling to catch Bergonzoli's armor by surprise, and the last tank battle of the campaign was about to be joined near a small rise, studded with the blanched white sandstone dome of an old Arab mosque.

The British called it "the Pimple," and it would be a landmark for their well rehearsed battle maneuvers. Blood Caunter had the advantage of experience, grit, and good radios in his tanks to coordinate his movements. Even though the enemy outnumbered him three to one, the Italians had no radios, and had to rely on flag signals from one tank formation to another to coordinate their attack.

But on they came, flags fluttering as the first wave of thirty tanks led the attack. Caunter had a bugler take a quick swig from a canteen and sound "stand to," and the British crews leapt into their well positioned tanks, waiting for the enemy. They would get in the all important first shot, trying to even the odds before the Italians could rush in at close quarters and overwhelm them with sheer numbers. Eight Italian tanks brewed up in the first wave, whereupon Caunter executed a smart backward withdrawal, placing his tanks below the line of the low ridge he had been on.

Thinking they finally had the enemy on the run, the Italians blundered forward, some units stopping near the mosque to await further orders by flag as to where they should go next. Those that saw the signal to move ahead ended up being sky-lined on the ridge, and Caunter's tanks savaged them again, sending them reeling back towards the mosque.

At this Caunter sent in his reserve of ten cruiser tanks. "All stations, tanks left and attack the pimple. I repeat, tanks left and attack the pimple!"

The cruisers swept away, the tracks churning up the dust and sand as they wheeled in a well coordinated turn, storming in and taking the last of Bergonzoli's tanks in the flank, smashing up an already badly disorganized formation. It was the final straw, and the Italians had had enough. They were not going to break through at Beda Fomm, and would soon be herded back to become prisoners for the long duration of the war.

Operation Compass had come to its wheezing end, over nearly 800 kilometers of inhospitable desert, against a force five times its size. The brilliance and determination of General O'Connor, and all the Brigadiers that commanded the dogged troops he led into battle, had given Great Britain the

one thing it so desperately needed at that time, a victory.

O'Connor's face would make the news, the energetic British Terrier that had beaten the Italians senseless in the Libyan Desert, defending Egypt and liberating all of Cyrenaica. He had taken two small ports in Bardia, Tobruk and soon added Benghazi as the Australians continued to press the Italians from behind. The airfields he had secured would be vital to the defense of Malta, for when the Italians moved into Egypt, the only way the British could get more *Hurricanes* to Malta was by carrier. Now they would have plenty of new airfields to leap frog the fighters forward.

It was a jubilant time, and a much needed relief from the anxiety that the Italian advance into Egypt had caused. Secretary of War Anthony Eden took a leaf from Churchill's book and characterized the victory in a single phrase: "Never has so much been surrendered by so many to so few."

Churchill himself was a bit more direct: "It looks as if these people were corn ripe for the sickle," he said in a congratulatory message to Wavell. The stalwart General placed the praise on O'Connor's handling of the battle, getting the utmost from the slim resources he had, with imagination, skill and considerable daring. Yet O'Connor never sought the limelight and considered his actions as nothing more than the simple performance of his duty. His face did make the news, however, and more than an admiring population in Great Britain would see the magazine covers. Dark eyes would soon take interest in what was happening there in the Western Desert. A conjunction of minds and forces was soon about to change everything again, as Germany decided how it would now deal with the sudden and complete defeat of the Italians in North Africa.

* * *

Aboard Kirov, Anton Fedorov had been following all these developments closely from any reports Nikolin could fish from the wire traffic. He knew what lay ahead, at least in one telling of these events, and he had been amazed at the integrity of the history concerning O'Connor's Raid and Operation Compass. He turned to Admiral Volsky, explaining that all this was about to be reversed, and wondering what they could do about it.

"You mean to say that after such a resounding victory this British General will be defeated by the Italians now?" Volsky did not understand.

“No sir, not the Italians, though they will reinforce their position in Tripolitania and continue to fight. If the history continues to hold this course, the British will soon be sent reeling across the desert in retreat by the Germans, and principally by one man, General Erwin Rommel, the man who will come to be called the Desert Fox. He’s out there somewhere even as we speak, waiting in the wings, and he is about to take center stage if things hold together. In fact, O’Connor may soon be captured, along with many other Brigadiers who just fought this victorious battle against the Italians. Britain will lose one of its most daring generals just as a foe of equal skill comes on the scene for the other side. This reversal sets back British plans for half a year, and in this history it could be even more significant, possibly fatal.”

“My,” said Volsky. “History can be a stubborn mule at times. Must this happen, Fedorov? Might it not change?”

“It might if I could do one thing, sir.”

“What is that?”

“Warn General O’Connor, so the British will not be deprived of his brilliance. We must warn them, sir. Information is as much a weapon as anything else in this war, and that we have in abundance, no matter how many missiles remain in our magazine.”

“Admiral Tovey has sent word that there will be a meeting in Cairo to plan the defense of Egypt and the future course of the war. We are invited as observers and agents of the Soviet government. It is either that or we sail for Murmansk to arrange these convoys, but Admiral Golovko can handle that for the time being. These old bones are starting to feel the cold up here. Warmer waters would be most welcome. Would you like to go?”

“Of course!” Fedorov was elated.

He thought it would be a perfect time to discretely offer the British the benefit of his foreknowledge of what was to come. Nothing was certain, but he might help them avoid some key blunders, like the ill fated and futile effort to reinforce Greece. He might also let them know how important Malta will become to the future war in the desert.

As he pondered this, another event was about to happen that would now weigh heavily in the balance. It would begin with a simple coded signal, heralding an arrival that had been long expected, and one that would change the entire course of the war.

Part IV

Arrivals

“One must pass through the circumference of time before arriving at the center of opportunity.”

— Baltasar Gracian

Chapter 10

The periscope mast broke through the placid sea, leaving a quiet frothing wake behind it. There, cruising like a great whale just beneath the surface, was the massive shadowy form of the hidden submarine. On the bridge of the boat, its commander had hoped to see the gleam of moonlight on the water, a glimmering trail that would lead his eye over the stillness of the sea, but there was nothing. The night was thick, the darkness so solid that it seemed a tangible thing. Then he saw the strange luminescent light, just as before, a soft pale glow swelling away from the sub in all directions. He sat eyeing the charts of the region, his hand slowly rubbing the back of his neck to chase away the tension there.

“Anything?” he said quietly in the taut stillness of the bridge.

“Nothing sir. Clean in all directions, but my coverage seems very limited.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m getting the peninsula, but not much else beyond fifteen to twenty kilometers.”

The Captain leaned over his radar operator’s position now, eyeing the screen, then glancing furtively at the digital displays from the sub’s mast cameras. “Fifteen kilometers?”

“Range seems to be increasing now sir, but very slowly. It’s as if there’s a bubble expanding around us.” Lieutenant Gorban pointed to his screen as he spoke. “That’s the tip of Cape Aniva, and this is the peninsula stretching up to Korsakov, but I can’t see across Aniva Bay to Cape Crillon. It’s as if it wasn’t even there!”

“No surface contacts?”

“Nothing, sir. Absolutely nothing. But who can say with the equipment acting up like this?”

Gromyko ran his hand over the short close cropped hair on the back of his head. “They said this was likely,” he said quietly to his executive officer, Belanov. “We should have full sensor coverage within the hour, but what about *Kirov*?” He turned to his communications officer now, Lieutenant Alexi Karenin.

“Get that message off.”

“Aye sir, initiating beacon signal now as programmed, but—”

“But what, Mister Karenin?”

“Well my equipment doesn’t seem to be functioning properly either.”

Gromyko gave him a frustrated look. “Chernov?” The Captain looked to his able sonar man now, Lieutenant Andre Chernov.

“There’s a lot of noise, sir, a very deep rumble. I have no contacts but with the sound field this distorted I would have to go active to be sure.”

“Belay that for the moment. Sit tight and keep listening, Chernov. Until we know where the hell we are I’m not moving a muscle.”

“Sir,” said Belanov, “has it happened? Have we moved?”

“Take a look at those screens,” said Gromyko, pointing to the digital displays from his mast cameras. “One minute we had decent moonlight, the next it’s pitch black, so something has obviously happened to us.”

Even as he said that he recalled the words of Director Kamenski when he was with them on the boat, first trying to explain the impossible truth that was now before them. It was very strange indeed. He had told them they discovered odd effects related to nuclear detonations, effects beyond the blast, radiation, and EMP pulse.

“*The detonation ruptured the time continuum,*” said Kamenski, but it took a while for the information to register on his own internal sonar.

“*Excuse me, Director... Time continuum?*” The recollection of his own plaintive question was the only meager protest he had offered. It was incredulous, preposterous, unbelievable, but here was a former Director of the KGB, certainly not a man given to flights of fancy, and he was giving him this story with plain faced candor evident in every aspect of his tone and manner.

“*Yes, Captain, the fourth dimension. Time. You know the first three well enough as you move about them in this vast ocean here—length, breadth and height, or depth in the case of your submarine. Well you must also know that you move in the fourth dimension as well—in time. Until Tsar Bomba went off, everything moved in only one direction through time, from this moment to the next in that second by second journey we all take from the cradle to the grave. But Tsar Bomba showed us that journey could also be affected by very powerful detonations—and time itself could be breached. Physical objects could be blown through that breach, and they would end up in the same*

spatial location, but in another time.”

It was all so wildly impossible that if he had not seen it happen with his own eyes he would not have believed it. In fact he did not quite believe it now. He had half a mind to surface the boat and put those human eyes to the test. Might his digital readouts and screens be lying to them? In the world of 2021 they had all grown so accustomed to believing the digital image of a thing was reality. But what if it was all wrong? What if all those ones and zeroes in the data stream between the mast camera’s lens and his monitors here was as befuddled as the radar seemed to be now? He knew that was very unlikely, but there was still something in him that wanted to break to the surface, wanted air, the smell of the sea, a look at the night stars overhead. But that would not happen—not until he knew what their tactical situation was. Gromyko was a very cautious man. That was a good submariner’s first order of business—caution.

“Very well,” he said still rubbing the back of his head. “We wait. Down periscope. The boat will run silent.”

“Aye sir, main mast down and the silent running lights are on.”

Now Gromyko looked at his sonar man. “Your game, Mister Chernov. Until you can certify the sea is clean around me, we’ll sit here like a hole in the water and wait.”

Chernov vanished beneath his headset, using the ship’s powerful sonar to listen at high amplification to all the sounds around them now. The deep, threatening rumble he heard filled him with a sense of dread. Then he realized that he had heard something very like this before. Following that thought, he reached over, toggled on his signature bank, and looked for a pattern match. There it was!

“Captain... That background noise I reported—it’s geothermic.”

“Geothermic?”

“It’s that damn volcano sir, the one we were trying to get away from when the Chief Engineer on *Kirov* reported it was muddling up his procedure.”

“Yes,” said Gromyko. “And that led us on quite a merry little adventure.”

Kazan had moved south through the Sea of Japan to a point very close to the North Korean port of Wonsan. There they had stumbled upon an operation by the North Korean Navy, and an accident in the engine room had created a sudden noise on a squeaky bearing that gave their position away. It

had plagued them ever since, on the run down past Ullung Do Island, and during that encounter they had with a combined Japanese American ASW group. Then the Shadow Dance had begun, the stealthy undersea duel where the slightest failure of nerve and technique could have finished them.

That had been a very close thing. There was little margin for error with the odds stacked so heavily against him. They had been engaged by at least three enemy subs, one of them a good American boat, and a Japanese surface action group with helicopters. They had been fired upon, more than once, and it took all his considerable skill to evade the deadly undersea lances aimed his way, though his boat and crew performed admirably.

By any measure they should all be dead now, fish food on the bottom of the sea, but they came through intact. They ran that infernal procedure on the reactors, dipping a strange control rod into the mix—Rod-25 as they called it. Just as things were winding up to the breaking point in that tense undersea duel, a hole had opened in time, and the submarine slipped right through!

It had been so close that one of the enemy torpedoes came right through that hole in time with us! But fortunately, it was as punch drunk as our own systems seem to be now, thought Gromyko. Damn thing lost its hold on *Kazan*. Either that, or it was fooled by the large mobile decoy I launched. One way or another, the boat had come through without a scratch.

Yet there were other contacts in the region, and they did not get off so easily. The American torpedo's systems must have gone into reset mode, and it circled, looking for a new target when it heard a lot of surface noise overhead—Japanese ships from World War Two! They never knew what hit them. A Japanese freighter went down that day, killed by a torpedo fired at *Kazan* nearly eighty years in the future! It had sealed the fate of that unfortunate ship, and also made good on an appointment the USS *Bonefish* had with doom, the last of "Pierce's Polecats." The American sub had been lurking in the vicinity, and it was found by Japanese ASW ships and sent to a watery grave, though Gromyko never knew that.

Now he smiled, wondering just how the Japanese and Americans must have felt about that little maneuver they pulled with Rod-25. One minute we were there, and they thought they had our position pegged due to that damn noisy bearing in the engine room. The next minute we're gone—decades gone—all the way to 1945!

That was enough to swallow in one gulp, but it hadn't ended there, the

boat's position in time remained unstable, and they fell through another gopher hole in time, as Director Kamenski had put it. This time they went all the way back to 1908, drawn there as if by some magnetic force, or perhaps by the skill of that reactor engineer, Chief Dobrynin. That had been their target date all along, but it took two hops to get there. They just had to switch trains in 1945.

There, in 1908, they began their real mission, the stalking hunt for their own comrades aboard the battlecruiser *Kirov*, now deemed a rogue ship under a rogue Captain with delusions of grandeur, and a plan to unhinge all recorded history from that day forward. It was coming down to the missiles, he knew, and he had little doubt that if he got off the first shots he would prevail, even when facing the most powerful surface ship in the Russian Navy. Instead they had launched a desperate plan to sneak up close to the ship and run that control rod procedure again, and amazingly, it had worked!

We were right on the razor's edge there, thought Gromyko. If their sonar man had heard us and they put a *Shkval* torpedo into the water, we were all dead men. But *Kirov* had struck an old mine, not powerful enough to damage the ship seriously, but enough to wreck the big Poilinom Horse Jaw sonar in the underwater bow bulge. That may have been their salvation, the devil's horn on the antiquated old mine that Karpov had blundered into.

Gromyko had no idea what was going on at that time on the bridge of *Kirov*, how the ship was in a state of near deadlock with the struggle for control between Captain Karpov and his *Starpom* Rodenko. The ship's doctor, a man named Zolkin, had boldly stepped forward to Rodenko's side, taking a bullet from Karpov's revolver for his trouble. Then, one by one, the junior officers of the ship's bridge crew stood up, defiant to a man. They would no longer follow a Captain who would do deliberate harm to one of their own.

And that is where it had ended, or so he thought. Now they were trying to get home, and Rod-25 had pulled both vessels forward in time again, but the load was just too heavy. That was how the Chief Engineer Dobrynin had described it. He had been with Fedorov on another impossible journey to the past using that same control rod, this time on that new floating nuclear power plant, *Anatoly Alexandrov*. The two men had spawned this whole mission, pulling Gromyko, and now his boat and crew, into the incredible vortex of this amazing saga.

It seemed his part in the story was not yet finished. He had been briefed by both Fedorov, Dobrynin and then Admiral Volsky, and his orders were clear. They were all trying to get home, back to 2021 where they belonged, though he knew that world was perhaps the most dangerous place they could ever wish to go. They had left it in the midst of that tense undersea engagement, just one more minor naval action that was part of the ever widening blast wave of a new war, the final war, the war the officers and crew of *Kirov* had come to dread, and one they were desperately trying to prevent. Something told Gromyko that they had finally returned to that blighted time.

“Geothermic?” He said again. “You mean it’s the Demon Volcano you’re hearing out there?”

“I believe so, sir. The geothermic signature is matching patterns I recorded earlier, just before we...”

“Before we went into the Bear’s cave,” Gromyko finished. “Then we’re back. We’ve returned to our own time. That may explain the darkness on those digital screens. It’s the fallout from that damn volcano.”

“Or something else,” said his *Starpom*, Belanov.

“It’s just a little over 400 kilometers east of our present position,” said Chernov. “That is if we’re still in the same place we were when we...”

“When we moved in time,” said Gromyko again. “Get used to saying it aloud, son. It will help all the rest of us believe it. Mister Gorban, did you get a fix on our position?” He looked at the boat’s radar man and navigator.

“No GPS data came in over the mast, but using those initial radar returns I have us right where we were before.”

“Yet still no sign of *Kirov*?” The Captain looked at Chernov on sonar.

“Nothing sir. I would hear them if they were close, even through this background noise.”

“Karenin? Any return on our beacon signal?”

“No sir. The channel is silent.”

“Did you get the signal off?”

“I believe so, Captain.”

“What else do you hear out there?”

Karenin gave him a sallow look. He was a young Junior Lieutenant, and this was his third cruise with Gromyko, a man he admired greatly. He had been in on the wartime channel traffic when *Kazan* had participated in the

general sortie by the Red Banner Fleet under Karpov, and he was thrilled when they had successfully ambushed the American CVBG *Washington* battlegroup. Everyone had heard of this Karpov, and knew he was a hard fighting Captain, a dangerous man. The news that they were now ordered to go after *Kirov*, flagship of the fleet, had shaken him, as it had many others on the crew. The thought that they were going up against Karpov and *Kirov* was scary, but if anyone could, it would be Gromyko, the Matador, as all the men in the silent service called him now. The Captain was a master of undersea warfare, the most experience sub Captain in the whole fleet.

Then came the startling truth of what was really going on. He was still somewhat dazed by it all, even as the ship's equipment seemed dazed, unbelieving, unwilling to admit what was happening. When Gromyko asked him that last question he realized it was another thing that had been bothering him—the *silence*. He could not hear the deep, ominous rumble of the volcano in his headset like Chernov, but the silence on the communications bands was just as dreadful. He should be hearing fleet signals from Vladivostok and Naval Headquarters Fokino. He should be picking up the cold encrypted chatter of the enemy as well, but there was “Nothing sir.” He said it aloud even as he thought it. “I get no signals traffic of any kind.”

Chapter 11

“**Nothing?**” Gromyko thought it must be due to the time shift, as he had been briefed. The boat’s systems might take several hours before they were normal again, or so this Fedorov had told him. But as soon as they could, they were to activate that coded signal beacon and try to make contact with *Kirov*. Ten minutes had passed in that silence. Young Karenin had not heard a whisper back.

That could mean nothing, thought Gromyko. The ship could be out there, adrift in the silence and enfolded in that black soot from the volcano. Then again... It might mean *Kirov* had not made it to this time and place with *Kazan*. Admiral Volsky had warned him this was likely to happen. One ship or another might arrive first—perhaps we’re the first ones home, he thought... or the last. What if *Kirov* appeared here earlier, and the ship and crew were all now a part of that silence out there, all a part of that inky darkness he saw through the periscope cameras? He didn’t want to think of that just then, but he remembered the training he had received in submarine school, so long ago it seemed.

“You men in the undersea boat service will most likely be the only survivors if we ever have to ask you to do your jobs.” He could still hear the warning his instructor had given the class upon graduation. *“So don’t be surprised if you poke your periscope mast up one day and find there is no one else—nothing there—all the world gone to hell while you were chasing other enemy submarines beneath the sea.”*

That thought gave Gromyko a shiver. He looked at the other men, and he could see the same questions in their eyes as they looked back at him. He was the Captain. He was supposed to know, and the decision as to what he would now do with *Kazan* lay with him, feeling leaden in his gut as he mulled it over.

Admiral Volsky had given him a quiet whisper before they parted company. *“We’ve seen the world this war leaves us before, Gromyko. Believe me, you will not want to see it twice. If you should get there, and find Vladivostok a blackened hole at the edge of the sea... Then you will have quite a decision to make. If you don’t hear our beacon call, it may be that we*

are late. But it could also mean we are gone, Gromyko. In that instance, you will be the only man alive with the power to prevent what you see out there—the power to try and keep the world from ending. That’s a great deal to put on your shoulders, but you must know this. You can either sit there and watch the radiation count every time you get near the surface, or you can do something about it. With Rod-25 you have that chance—the chance to go back and change it all one more time—the chance to prevent that damn war from ever happening.”

That reminded him to check his radiation monitors, quietly, with only Belanov noticing and knowing what Gromyko was up to. What he saw convinced him that they were the ones who had arrived here too late. The readings were dangerously high, and he gave Belanov a quiet order. “Take us down below 200 meters,” he said. “Make it look routine.”

“Aye sir.” Belanov waited until Gromyko drifted away again, back to Chernov on sonar. Then he gave the quiet order to the helm. “Ten degree down bubble,” said Belanov. “Ahead one third. Make your depth 200 meters.”

The Captain stood by his sonar man, thinking the answer to their dilemma might be hidden in that darkness and silence out there, and waiting for Chernov’s keen ears to ferret it out. So now the question was before him.

“*What could I do?*” Gromyko had asked of Admiral Volsky, even as he asked it of himself again now. What could I do? He knew the answer. Chief Dobrynin had told him this Rod-25 was very stubborn, aging now, but still set in its ways. It insisted on stopping off at the 1940s every time it was used. How would his own engineers know what to do in the reactor room?

“*Do not worry,*” Dobrynin had told him. “*I have every shift recorded on tape, the exact changes I made to the system, the timing, temperature, all the vibrations.*”

“*But that was on Kirov,*” Gromyko had protested. “What makes you think it will work aboard *Kazan?*”

“*Because it already has worked.*” Dobrynin had given him a wry smile. “*We’ve already visited the 1940s twice!*”

Yes we have, thought Gromyko. Now the only question was whether or not they would be making a third visit there, and it was now his to decide. The choice was before him at that very moment, waiting in the silence, in the darkness out there, and he knew what he was going to do.

“Keep listening, Chernov. You have the bridge. Mister Belanov, walk with me please.”

The Captain was heading aft, to the reactor room where his engineers had been working with two men sent over from *Kirov*, Chief Dobrynin’s minions with recorded digital files and procedures to be used with Rod-25.

“What do you make of this, Belanov?” The Captain wanted to sound out his *Starpom* before he decided their course.

“That radiation count says everything, sir. It’s certainly not all coming from that volcano.”

“Shall we head for Vladivostok?”

“That would be the logical play.”

“And if we find it blown to hell?”

Belanov had to think about that. It was something he had not considered, a reality that now loomed as a certain threat in his mind. What would they do if that were the case? They were a warship of the Russian Navy, pledged to the defense of their homeland.

“Then we could see about getting some payback, Captain,” he said at last.

Gromyko gave him a grim smile. “What good would that do? A little like poking the embers after the house has burned down.”

“Then what else?” Belanov had not gone beyond this point in his mind. They were to try to get home, and that was what he had his thoughts set on. Now they were here, however, home was nowhere to be found.

“You saw the radiation readings,” said Gromyko. “We can’t even get within 50 meters of the surface in that.”

“What do you figure happened, sir?”

“God only knows. Maybe the Chinese wouldn’t back off. Maybe they lobbed one of those ballistic missiles of theirs into the old Fukushima plant. That would be all it would take to finish off Japan. As for the Americans, I think it was coming to blows with them in any case. If Vladivostok is gone, then that was their doing.

And it was gone.

They spent the next hours making a stealthy approach to the place, creeping up on Naval headquarters at Fokino first and risking a close approach to the narrow bay there. No sign of life could be seen, and no signal came in answer to their coded calls. So they headed east, working their way around the islands at the base of the long peninsula. Gromyko would not risk

navigating the narrower waters of the Golden Horn, so they maneuvered to approach the city from the west in Amur Bay.

But the city was not there. Where it once sat glittering on the shore, there was only that darkness and silence now, and the eerie stillness that spoke of death. It was as if the sun had set on the life and world they knew, and would never rise again. Gromyko knew they could spend their days navigating the seas in search of any sign of life.

“Yet we’re just as likely to run into another American boat doing the same thing,” he said to Belanov.

“So what do we do, sir?”

Gromyko gave him a long look, finally telling him what Admiral Volsky had said. “Who knows if they made it back,” he reasoned. “They told me that new control rod was untested. It may not have worked. They could still be right there in 1945 and wondering where the hell we are. Their Chief Engineer was certain that we could at least return there if we ran that procedure again with the reactors.”

“Return? To the 1940s?”

“That seems to be the ticket we’re holding, Belanov.”

“But sir... the men... our wives and families...”

“You think they’re here, alive out there in that radiation?”

Belanov said nothing.

“At least if we do go back, we’ll have clean air and water, and half a chance at life.” Gromyko reasoned it out again, but he knew it was more than that, more than their own fate and the lives of the men aboard *Kazan*. So he said it, the last part of what Admiral Volsky had whispered to him. “And we would have one more chance to prevent what we just saw,” he said with finality. “One more chance to change things.”

“But sir... We’d end up right in the middle of the Japanese Empire here.”

Gromyko smiled. “The Japanese? I can handle them. But we have no missile or torpedo that will do anything against the emptiness out there now. At least if we do go back, we can make a difference... somehow.”

* * *

And so they put it to the crew, explained it all, and sat for a long day and night beneath the sea while Chernov listened and the engineers poured over those digital recordings, huddling in the reactor room to determine what they

might soon be asked to do. One of them was Junior Lieutenant Ilya Garin, a reactor Engineer that had worked with Chief Dobrynin, the devil's apprentice. He had seen how the Chief controlled the use of Rod-25, and had been involved in the mission that sent Fedorov back from the Primorskiy Engineering Center test reactor, and then again when the Chief tool them all back to find him on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. Now he was here, reassigned to *Kazan*, and working in the reactor room to see if he could duplicate the Chief's magic.

He did not have to worry. When the decision was finally made, the crew vote tallied, Rod-25 would do all the work for him. All he had to do was lower it slowly into the reaction, time it, pretend to listen to it like Dobrynin might do. Yet it was mere theater, and he sensed that on some level. Rod-25 was, indeed, a stubborn thing. It would take them back to the 1940s as sure as rain follows the flash of lightning at the edge of a storm. But it was getting old, even as Dobrynin warned. It might have taken them to 1945, to the place they had only just escaped from, but it slipped a bit. The boat kept falling through the hole in time it created, just a little farther into the void.

To the year 1941.

They did not know that at first. They arrived in the green wash of eerie light, the frosty cold and strange static electricity that raised the hackles on the back of Gromyko's neck. But they made it through. All seemed well, until Lieutenant Garin came up to the bridge.

"Captain," he said plaintively. "I think we have a problem."

"You *think* we have a problem?" Gromyko was not accustomed to anything less than precise certainty when it came to the workings of his submarine. "What is it Mister Garin?"

"The control rod sir, Rod-25. Our systems are indicating damage to the rod structure. Radiation level is high. I've retracted it into the Rad-Safe containment and we'll see what we can find after we take some pictures with the inspection camera."

"Is the procedure over? Did it run its course?"

"Yes, sir. This happened right after final retraction, but I don't think we can risk using that control rod again until we get a good look at it, and take some further readings."

"Very well. Carry on, and well done Mister Garin. Now all we have to do is find out where we are."

They went through it all one more time, the quiet wait while the boat's systems seemed to slowly recover their sensibilities, the cautious approach to the surface. Radiation readings were normal, which gave them all some great relief, but what would they find when they raised the sensor mast and periscope again? Just to be on the safe side, Gromyko had returned to the relative safety of the Sea of Okhotsk, cruising off the Kuriles well north of the Demon Volcano. If they did appear in the 1940s again, he wanted to make sure they had some room to maneuver.

Belanov's remark about landing right in the middle of the Japanese Empire was good warning. While he didn't think he had anything to really fear from the Japanese navy of the 1940s, there was always that first woozy hour after they shifted, when he might not have the advantage of his sensory suite or even the functional use of his weapons. And Gromyko was a very cautious man.

So they waited. Chernov listened. Gorband had a look around on radar, and Karenin raised the communications antenna and sent off that coded signal.

Silence followed, a place where every fear might grow if it lingered for very long. Gromyko became uneasy himself, pacing on the bridge, waiting. Soon Karenin began to hear voices in that silence, then pulses on the airwaves and the dot-dash chatter of coded messages from a telegraph system, a faint scratching of the airwaves that were otherwise clean and silent. Only one man on the boat spoke Japanese, a sailor named Genzo Gavrilov, his name a hybrid of Japanese and Russian, as he was born from the marriage of his Russian father to a Japanese woman. The crew called him GG for short, and he was pulled from his duty in the torpedo room and called up to the bridge, a bit intimidated to be in the presence of all the senior officers there.

"Just listen in to any radio traffic," the Captain told him. "Find out what's going on up there."

GG listened, hearing what sounded like routine radio calls, ship to shore, merchantmen at sea. Then news came from Tokyo of the Japanese offensive in China. It was not long before he fished out the day and time from the stream of grandiose propaganda. It was 1941. January of 1941, the 11th day, to be exact.

Gromyko was surprised to hear that. "Are you sure? 1941?"

“It was right in the clear, sir,” said GG. Genzo Gavrilov was certain he had it correct.

“Anything within range on radar or sonar?”

“No traffic within fifty nautical miles in any direction, sir, and our systems seem to be recovering nicely now.” Belanov gave the report, waiting, an expectant look on his face.

“Very well...” Gromyko rubbed the back of his neck. “I need some fresh air. Take us up,” he said quietly to Belanov, who nodded as he seconded the order.

“The boat will surface. Watch Officers stand ready.”

“Surface the boat, aye sir, and ready on main mast watch. Mister Levin, take your men up to the sail hatch.”

“Aye, sir.”

Chapter 12

The air was sweet, so clean and clear, untainted by the anger of that volcano that had been the only living thing in the world they had just fled from. Home was behind them, a cinder grey world of ash and smoke, humming with radiation in the fallout. Everything they ever knew and loved in that world was gone, forever gone, and they all carried that awful sense of loss.

But there was life here, thought Gromyko as he took a deep breath of that cool fresh air. Yes, there was life, and time, and a chance to do something here. But what? That was his dilemma now. What should he do? It was January 11, 1941. Japan was at war on the Chinese mainland, but not out here in the sea. If this history was anything like the story of the Great Patriotic War that he knew, then it would be long months before Japan launched her offensive at sea. Pearl Harbor would not happen for nearly a year. So what should he do with all that time, and where was *Kirov*?

Rod-25 had dragged both *Kirov* and *Kazan* from 1908 and into the middle of 1940 before they made their attempt to each return home on their own. Did the ship actually get back to 2021 as they had? Was it devoured in the holocaust they had found there, or had that new control rod failed to deliver? In that case the ship might still be foundering... *Kirov* might still be here!

Karenin sent his coded message on the special channel they had arranged, using shortwave signals that could propagate over very long ranges, half way around the earth. Then he sat sullenly beneath his headset, still brooding over the loss of his girlfriend, knowing she was gone forever now. Yet here they were in the 1940s, and there seemed to be plenty of fish in this new sea. There might be a life here for them after all, and he did not have long to wait for his answer.

“Captain!” he said, his eyes wide, but Gromyko was up on the weather bridge on the exposed sail, so he toggled his comm system for that station. Watch officers were standing by with headsets for any message he might send, and the news he delivered reeled in Gromyko in short order. The Captain was down from the sail, and onto the main bridge, his boots still wet

and glistening with seawater from a new century.

“Karenin?”

“I have them, sir! I have *Kirov* on shortwave. I just received my green confirmation signal. They got our message and acknowledged. Now I’m negotiating a voice channel.”

Gromyko breathed easy for the first time in hours, exhaling some of that good fresh air he had taken in topside. Karenin worked his system, tuning, filtering, decoding. Then he heard a voice come in over his headset.

“I have Lieutenant Nikolin, sir!”

“Put it on the bridge speakers.”

“Aye sir.”

“*Kazan, Kazan, come in. Nikolin here on the battlecruiser Kirov. Where in God’s name have you been?*”

Gromyko took up a handset and spoke into the microphone. “Ahoy, *Kirov*. Greetings Mister Nikolin. We were just asking ourselves the same question.”

Then came another voice, that of the ship’s young Captain Fedorov. “*Good to finally hear from you,*” said Fedorov, and he explained that their effort to move forward to 2021 had failed. “*We’ve been here since mid June of 1940, listening for you the last six months!*”

There was a brief exchange, where Gromyko briefed them on everything they had experienced. The report concerning Vladivostok was somewhat grim, but not unexpected.

“*We were afraid that might be the case,*” said Fedorov. “*I have Admiral Volsky with me here, and I will turn you over to him. Standby.*”

Gromyko waited, glad to hear the Admiral’s calm reassuring voice again. Everyone on the bridge took heart now, for Volsky’s tone and manner carried a note of home, an anchor to the authority that had send them all to sea in the first place, and a tether on some sense of purpose they might now have here in this new world. Volsky and Fedorov were mariners in time, and had navigated these waters before.

“*Greetings Captain Gromyko, and all the crew of Kazan,*” came Volsky’s deep voice. “*We have been waiting for you. It appears our new control rod is only a distant cousin to the one we lent you, and we were never able to leave here. So we did not have to see the desolation you describe again. We have all seen it before, and now we set our minds on how we can*

prevent it. You come to us at a most critical time, and it is good that you are here."

"Where are you, sir?" asked Gromyko.

"Believe it or not we are now in the Atlantic off Reykjavik, and I think we must now find a way to meet at sea."

"That's a long way off," said Gromyko.

"We will come south to meet you half way off the Cape of Good Hope. Fedorov says it will take you nearly 12 days at 30 knots. Is that a problem?"

"I think we can manage it, sir. The boat is in fine shape.

"Excellent. We cannot discuss matters here, even on this encrypted channel, but there is much to learn. Try to be as discrete as possible. We will sail south to meet you, and then we drink together here in my ready room!"

"Very good sir. We'll get underway at once." Gromyko turned to his navigator now. "Get me an ETA on Cape Town by way of the Singapore Strait."

Two old friends were about to meet.

* * *

The night was black and the sea was uncommonly calm when the sail of *Kazan* broke the surface. The submarine emerged from the dark waters like a behemoth, a fighting Orca the like of which this world had never seen. Above, sailing just a few hundred yards to the east, the battlecruiser *Kirov* waited to greet its comrade in arms. It had been six long months for Volsky and Fedorov, yet only a matter of a few weeks for Gromyko. The Matador was finally back, and he made arrangements to visit *Kirov* in a launch sent over from the battlecruiser.

Admiral Volsky was there at the gunwale when the Captain came aboard with his executive officer Belanov, giving him a hearty handshake.

"We are well met," said Volsky. "The last time we gathered like this was to determined how we would plot the demise of this very ship, and our wayward Captain Karpov. Now we have other matters to decide."

"Well Gromyko," said Fedorov. "I must say that your submarine is a most welcome sight. We have been listening for you all these many months."

That was hard for Gromyko to grasp, as it had only been a few days time from his perspective. The two vessels had decided to meet at sea off the

southern coast of the Cape of Good Hope. Gromyko had surfaced and come aboard *Kirov* for this initial meeting, glad to see the Admiral again and feel the burden he had been carrying on his shoulders lighten a bit.

“This is home now, Gromyko,” said Volsky. “We have sailed here before; fought here to try and prevent what you saw when you returned to our old world. It seems we have more to do.”

“It does, sir.”

“First I must commend you for coming back for us.”

“That was an easy choice, Admiral. The radiation count was very bad. We had to get below 200 meters to feel comfortable.”

Volsky nodded gravely.

“Well this world has not yet suffered the blight of nuclear weapons. They are all busy enough using the conventional ones. This is World War Two, Gromyko, the Great Patriotic War, but things are considerably different now. Our homeland is fractured, and the only part of it that resembles anything I would fight for now belongs to Sergei Kirov, the man this ship is named after.”

“Sergei Kirov?”

“The living man,” Volsky smiled. “We have even met with him. He has agreed to give us a permanent base at Severomorsk, or at least the place where the base was built in our day. It isn’t much yet, but we are working on it. At least we have warm quarters there for shore leave, good food, a taste of home.”

“All of my men will be looking forward to that,” said Gromyko.

“Yes, but there is much we have to discuss. A great deal has happened since we last parted company. Mister Fedorov here can brief you in detail, but the short end of it is that we are stuck here, and so we have decided to stay put for a while and see what we can do to prevent the destruction you have just come from.”

“That was our thought as well, sir, and the reason we tried that control rod again.”

“I am glad you chose this course, Gromyko. I had hoped you would see this as your only option. That said, this is no paradise. As to this war, we have decided we cannot just sail about and try to avoid contact here. This war consumed the entire world, well named, so we have taken sides. I have kept the missiles in the silos of late, but that may soon change.”

He told Gromyko of the meeting with Sergei Kirov, and what was decided there, and the newly formed alliance between Russia and England. The news that their homeland was fragmented and locked in civil war was jarring enough, but then Volsky lowered his voice, his tone dark and serious.

“I must also tell you that we are not the only men from our time at large in this world.” The name Ivan Volkov was soon on his lips, and the Admiral had Fedorov explain the situation concerning Volkov, and how he must have made his way down the stairwell of Ilanskiy to 1908, even as Fedorov had, to find himself a witness to the dreadful Tunguska event. The Orenburg Federation was the result, and now Fedorov also revealed that the man they had stalked together, the former Captain of *Kirov*, was also at large.

“Karpov? Here? He’s alive?”

“Very much alive,” said Volsky. “And true to that man’s nature, he has wormed his way into a position of power in the Free Siberian State. Both of these men are dangerous, and even more so in the positions they now hold. Our only consolation at the moment is that they appear to be squabbling with one another.”

“Amazing,” said Gromyko.

“Indeed. But we are dangerous men as well,” Volsky held up a finger. “Together we can make a real difference here. Fedorov will brief you as to what has happened. The war, Gromyko. That is the issue now. This damn war will lead to the next as sure as winter follows autumn. We thought we could do something about it, and we have undertaken a few operations to prevent the German navy from mischief up north. I must also tell you that we have established a firm alliance with the Royal Navy of England. We fought against them the first time we found ourselves here, largely because they became our enemy after this war ended. Yet if the friendship and alliance between Russia and the west can be preserved, perhaps that is the key to saving that future we have come from. We have made contact with a good man here in the British Admiral Tovey, and we are coordinating with him to see what we can do. But the war, Gromyko. Things have taken a sudden turn for the worse. Fedorov?”

“The British have lost Gibraltar,” said Fedorov. “The Germans launched an operation that had been planned in our history, but never executed. It succeeded. The place is now in German hands. They’ve moved in artillery, placed heavy guns to cover the straits, and they have just moved troops to

Morocco. They will undoubtedly build airfields there. That threat, plus the presence of German U-Boats operating from Gibraltar has effectively closed the Western Mediterranean to British shipping.”

“And what about Russia?”

“Hitler did not invade us until later this year, and so far that history seems to be holding. There is an ongoing buildup on the Polish frontier, but after Gibraltar, the Germans launched operations into the Balkans. They have invaded Yugoslavia, and the Italians have attacked Greece. Under threat of German invasion, Bulgaria has joined the Axis, and there is fighting in Greece. This will open that entire southern front and the enemy will surely deploy there, ready to go into the Ukraine if so ordered later this year.”

“What can we do about it?” Gromyko folded his arms, asking the obvious question.

“That is the dilemma. Our power is redoubled now that you are here. On the sea, we are a force unmatched, but your question points out the other side of that coin. We cannot stop German armies when they move on land, not unless we opt for the final solution with our heavy warheads, and that we have not yet decided. The thought of trying to prevent an all out nuclear war by starting one here is somewhat unpalatable to me.”

“I understand, sir.”

“That said, Hitler must be confronted, somewhere, and we must do what we can to stem the Nazi tide if possible. I have kept a watch on the Atlantic, discretely, as the Soviet Union and Germany are not yet at war and we are not eager to change that just yet. But we have been following the news of the German advance into the Balkans, and we know where it will inevitably lead.”

“Istanbul,” said Fedorov. “The Bosphorus. Ivan Volkov and the Orenburg Federation has all the oil and the resources Hitler needs, and once he is finished in the Balkans only Turkey will stand between him and what he most desires. Germany prevailed in their attack on Gibraltar, and it has had the effect of bottling up the British in the Middle East, with a supply line by sea that now must go all the way around the Cape of Good Hope here, over 12,000 miles long. The war is shifting that way now, at least for the foreseeable future.”

“And so we will shift with it,” said Volsky. “The British are set on relieving our watch on the Atlantic. In fact, they have already done so. The

Germans managed to slip a few heavy ships through—not on my watch—but what does that matter. They now have battleships based in the French Atlantic ports. Fedorov?”

“*Bismarck* at Brest. *Hindenburg* at Saint Nazaire. They broke out some months ago and evaded the British pursuit, but they have sat there for some time now, and have not sortied again. The threat they pose is enough of a danger to the British convoy routes to the Middle East, but they also have help from the French Navy, which is still operating from Casablanca.” He told Gromyko how both France and Spain were now active members of the Axis.

“I thought the Allies took Casablanca during the war,” said Gromyko.

“In 1942, and only with the support and assistance of the United States. As it stands, Great Britain has neither adequate assault shipping, or manpower available to mount an operation like the Torch offensive that knocked Vichy France out of the war.

“Yes, I suppose that’s a tall order for Great Britain,” said Gromyko.

“That it is,” said Admiral Volsky. “Particularly when the Germans hold Gibraltar. There could be no landings at Oran or Algiers, so the old Operation Torch as we knew it will probably never occur in this war.”

“Perhaps the British may launch a limited offensive against French West Africa,” said Fedorov. “But that remains to be seen.”

“We will learn their immediate plans for future war operations soon,” said Volsky. “In the meantime, we must make plans of our own. Germany must not be allowed to build up forces in North Africa that could pose a grave threat to Egypt, and by all means, they must not be allowed to secure the Bosphorus. They may take Istanbul by land, but they must never cross that channel into Turkey, nor will any ships be allowed to carry Ivan Volkov’s oil to the German Reich.”

“Who controls the Crimea?” Gromyko asked. The place had long been a bastion of Russian naval power, one of three kings in the hierarchy of the Russian Navy: Murmansk in the north, Sevastopol in the Crimea, and Vladivostok in the far east.”

“Sergei Kirov and the Soviets still hold all of Ukraine and the Crimea. In fact, he has invaded the Caucasus, and there is fighting at Novorossiysk. Volkov has his hands full there, but the Germans have Bulgaria now, which brings them to the Turkish frontier. They must not be allowed to establish an

overland link with Volkov through Turkey, and I am afraid that the Turkish Army may not be able to prevent that, which is where we come into the picture.”

“How so, sir?”

“You can take your boat into the Mediterranean Sea easily enough. Yes?”

“From here? Through the Suez Canal?”

“That would mean you would have to surface to make that transit, and we feel it essential to keep the knowledge of your presence here a secret at the moment.”

“Agreed,” said Gromyko. “Well I can go by way of Gibraltar, no matter what the Germans have there.”

“Good enough. We will have to part company again, but we will stay in coded communication with you.”

“You will not take that route?”

“We could fight our way through, but at great expense to our SAM inventory if the Germans decide to throw their *Stukas* at us. Thankfully that is not a problem you have with *Kazan*. I see no point in taking that course when we can just as easily sail north from here and go up through Suez. This, after all, is our objective, to protect the British position in Egypt. We will defend the Suez Canal.”

“Alone?”

“With the assistance and support of the British fleet,” said Fedorov. “At present, however, they have little in the way of anti-aircraft defenses, limited air power there, few searchlights, and only one radar. The Germans and Italians are about to finish up in Greece, much sooner than they did in our history. Once Greece falls, then the Germans will have good airfields from which they could strike at Crete, North Africa, Suez, Palestine and the coast of Turkey. With *Kirov* positioned near Suez, we could put our radar and SAM defenses to good use and make sure the canal is kept safe.”

“And once you join us in the Eastern Med, you will hold the Bosphorus closed,” said Volsky with a smile. “Two fat fingers in the dike, and let us hope we can stem the onrushing tide. Come, let us join Director Kamenski for a good meal. Then we toast and I have one more request to make of you before we part.”

That request was for more missiles, which *Kazan* still had in abundance. *Kirov* had fired four of the of the P-900s *Kazan* had given them earlier, and

Volsky was hoping he could have those replaced to bring them up to 27 SSMs.

“We had a full complement of missiles,” said Gromyko. “I’ll send you another group of P-900s and bump you up to 32! That will still leave us the entire Onyx system, and all our torpedoes. Consider it done, Admiral.”

“Good enough,” said Volsky. “Because we may have to use them sooner than we think.”

Part V

Rommel

“Have a bias toward action - let's see something happen now. You can break that big plan into small steps and take the first step right away.”

— Indira Gandhi

Chapter 13

Rommel waited in the outer room, his mind set on the meeting he would soon have with the Führer at the Chancellery, his thoughts on what he might receive—his oak leaves cluster for the Iron Cross! It was long overdue, he thought. I should have had it months ago. What do I have to do, lobby the general staff to get about the appropriate delivery of well earned laurels, just as I did in the last war?

He was a rare holder of the famous Pour le Merite, the blue cross on gold that came to be called the “Blue Max” in the last war. It was a coveted and rare honor, but one he had to ungraciously request of his superiors, believing it was his by entitlement. In spite of the blatant effrontery of his request, he got his medal, joining notable historical figures like Blucher and Moltke who received it for their past glory, and men the great ships of the navy were all now named after: Otto von Bismarck, Paul Hindenburg, Gneisenau, Scharnhorst, Tirpitz and Admiral Scheer. He also joined contemporaries like Hermann Goring, Richtofen, Von Bock, Mackensen and Schörner.

Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel was a driven man, highly decorated from his exploits in the First World War, and flush with his recent mad dash across France, all the way to the Channel Coast. The enemy never knew what hit them. Rommel’s 7th Panzer Division moved like the lightning in the cloud of the German blitzkrieg, appearing with sudden violence on the enemy flank, smashing in to attack, and then vanishing in a column of smoke and dust only to appear somewhere else six hours later. The French came to call it the “Ghost Division,” an apparition of fire and steel that devoured one retreating column after another, leapt over every obstacle, crossing rivers as if magically transported to the other side, and always pressing forward with a steady, relentless attack.

History seldom recorded the means by which he achieved that victory, by pushing his men and tanks to the uttermost extreme, and using every means necessary to sustain his advance, even stealing the bridging equipment of other adjacent divisions to get over the river obstacles first—and then complaining that his confederate divisions were too slow, and always falling behind. That also took a lot of gall and nerve, but it was not beneath a man so

driven to achievement, and the recognition that came with it, that Erwin Rommel seemed to thrive on and crave. So today he would get his oak leaves, he thought, eager to take his meeting with the Führer.

After the capitulation of France that he had so ably helped to engineer, he was delighted to be selected to help create a nice memorial film of those exploits, entitled “Victory in the West,” where he was to re-enact the battles he had fought so brilliantly for the propaganda cameras. After that he had put together a meticulously prepared memoir of his campaign, complete with maps to accompany the narrative, which he sent to Hitler for his review—and the obvious reminder that he was a commander that should not be overlooked.

Well they’ve taken notice now, haven’t they? Rommel smiled, his sapphire eyes alight. My oak leaves are well in order, he thought, but he was soon to learn that he had not been summoned here to receive another medal, but to fight another battle. In spite of his disappointment in not getting his oak leaves that day, he would get something much more than he expected, his first independent command.

“You may come in,” said the staff attendant as he opened the door, and Rommel raised his chin, adjusted the fit of his hat and officer’s coat, and stepped forward. He was a proud man, and every feature spoke to that pride, the high forehead, penetrating blue eyes, prominent nose. And yet, there were lines at the corners of his mouth that betrayed the long work of many smiles. Rommel’s temperament also knew the delight of life, the fruits of love in his marriage to his dear Lucie, and his willful nature accomplished much to keep that smile there, and soften the hard features that reflected his commanding will so artfully.

“Ah, General Rommel,” said the Führer as Rommel saluted. “Look here! Someone else is competing for the headlines and movie picture shows for a change.” Hitler was across the room standing at a thick wooden table, where he set down a magazine, sliding it ignominiously in Rommel’s direction as he came up. There the general saw the image of a white haired British officer, leather straps across his chest, riding crop in hand. Rommel had seen photos of this man before, and he knew he was looking at a cover of the commander of the Western Desert Force, General Richard O’Connor.

“That man is raising hell with the Italians,” said Hitler darkly, “just as Volkov said he would. He will have to be dealt with. In the last weeks he has

thrown them out of Egypt, taken Sidi Barani, Sollum, Bardia and now even Tobruk! This incompetent Italian General—what is his name again?”

“Graziani, my Führer.” It was Keitel who spoke now, standing beside Hitler on the other side of the table, eyeing the magazines with a deplorable look on his face, and giving Rommel an occasional glance, as if sizing the man up.

“Yes, well first they tell us they had no need of German troops in support of their invasion—can we call it that? Invasion? All they did was to cross the Egyptian frontier and set up defensive encampments. Now this man here, this General O’Connor, has raced in behind them and set them running for Tripoli. If he persists he will take Benghazi in short order, and after that, the way to Tripoli will be open, and the British would be fools not to take that prize.”

Hitler shook his head, obviously quite upset about these developments. “The Italians!” he fumed. “They are more trouble than they are worth. Volkov was correct! They sit with their navy in Taranto and La Spezia and do little with all those good ships they have. They have botched this offensive into Egypt, and instead of settling affairs there, they invade Greece! Now they want me to bail them out of the ditch they have dug in the desert, and I am inclined to let them sit there and stew for another month for their incompetent insolence. In fact, I would do so if not for this O’Connor. He moves too fast, moves with determination, and he has just beaten an Italian force three times his size, or so Keitel here tells me.”

“By our best estimates he was outnumbered nine divisions to three,” said Keitel, “if the British even had that many troops in the attack. Yet, as the Führer states, the results cannot be argued with. We have learned he is pushing on from Tobruk, and may cut the Italians off here.” Now Keitel produced a map, placing it on the table and pointing a heavy finger at a spot on the African coast south of Benghazi. “Beda Fomm,” he said. If he gets there first, Graziani’s troops will be trapped in Cyrenaica and invested.”

“So as much as I would like them to stew in their own mess,” said Hitler, “I must do something about this. The British must be kept out of Tripoli at all cost, and all of Tripolitania must be held. This is imperative if we are ever to make use of this desert to get at the British in Egypt. You are the man I have selected for the job.”

At this Rommel raised his chin, eyes bright with the glitter of anticipation.

“I am honored, my Führer.”

“Yes? Well I looked over that battle memoir you sent me on France, and I was quite impressed. Your division has been training for the invasion of England, and you have been making movies, eh? Well I have other work for you now—real work. We’ll make another show of things in the desert soon enough.”

“My Führer, I will show this British General how 7th Panzer Division fights, if that is what you order.”

“I have no doubt that you will,” said Hitler. “But it will not be the 7th Panzer Division. We need them on the continent at the moment. Instead I am giving you another division. Keitel?”

“The 5th Light Division. Hans Funck had it and then Generalmajor Streich, but we do not think either man is well suited to the task.”

“Funck is an aristocrat,” said Hitler, giving Keitel a sidelong glance. “Streich is no more than a regimental commander, his Knight’s Cross aside. I need a man like you, Rommel, someone who knows how to inspire the men under him. Everything I have seen and heard about you tells me that you are just the right man for this assignment, and so our new Afrika Korps will be yours.”

“A single division to start with,” said Keitel. “The 5th Light was just created, a bit of a patchwork quilt at the moment. We took 5th Panzer Regiment from the 3rd Panzer Division, and stitched in a motorized Panzerjager battalion, a little artillery, and some infantry, the 200th Schutzen Rifle Regiment with a pair of machinegun battalions. I have no doubt that you will know how to put them to good use.”

Rommel glowed under the praise, the smile coming easily now, and one of many more he would share with his wife Lucie in his letters home from North Africa in the months ahead. Now Keitel gave him a briefing, and outlined the plan the General Staff had in mind.

“This business in Gibraltar is all but concluded, we have moved an infantry division to Morocco to give the French a little backbone there. Now we need to stiffen up the Italians. With Gibraltar in hand and the French as active belligerents, we have thrown the British out of the Western Mediterranean. Yes, they beat us to the Atlantic Islands, but that is of little concern to us for the moment. They can have the Canary they have caught, but they may soon find that bird in hand is not worth the two in the bush we

now see in Egypt. That is the real prize, Rommel. Egypt and the Suez Canal.”

“Precisely,” said Hitler. “The Italians thought they would have it by now, but this O’Connor has given them a sound beating. Here we are at war with Britain, and yet German troops haven’t seen a Tommy since we showed them how to fight at Dunkirk. Now it is time we teach them another lesson.”

“We have dispatched the 5th Light to Tripoli,” said Keitel. “It will be enough at the outset to form a blocking force here.” He pointed to a spot on the map at the base of the Gulf of Sirte. “Funck does not think it will be enough to stop the British, and OKW will be sending you more but, for now, that is your assignment—stop this General O’Connor and get his picture out of the headlines.”

Rommel’s eyes betrayed the energy of his mind, as he was already writing new headlines of his own. He had every confidence that he could do the job, even with this single division that was not yet completely formed. Hitler set his dark eyes on him, and reinforced his own thinking on the matter. Volkov’s warning was in his mind now, and his admonition to send strong forces to North Africa.

“The British will be at the end of their tether, with both personnel and equipment exhausted by now. They won’t get much farther with those old tanks of theirs. The Italians are one thing, but if they come up against some well equipped German troops it will be another kettle of fish. First—stop them and cover the approach to Sirte and Tripoli, but don’t get pulled in to a pointless battle until you have adequate force in hand. Benghazi is a useful port, which should be taken at your earliest opportunity. From Taranto we can use it to steer clear of British planes on Malta until I determine what to do about that annoyance.”

“Yet, if I turn north to Benghazi,” said Rommel, “then I will expose my right to a potential British counterattack. Two divisions would solve that problem.” He was already angling for more men and material.

“In time,” said Keitel. “If you can pull the Italians already there together, all the better. Mussolini has promised to send two armored divisions, if they can be called as much. We will send you another Panzer Division soon enough.”

“In the meantime,” said Hitler, “stop this man.” The Führer placed his finger heavily upon O’Connor’s cover photo, like the hand of fate and doom itself meting out his judgment.

Rommel smiled, knowing he would be that doom, and that his fate was now to be in his own hands there in North Africa. Stop him I will, he thought. But I will do a good deal more than that if I get the troops and supplies I need. He was aware that there were many, in all three services, that now believed the war was destined to head to the Middle East. Hitler insisted on maintaining and building a large standing army on the Russian frontier, but the fall of Gibraltar had opened exciting new possibilities. With the right force in hand, and adequate supplies, he thought he could go all the way to the Suez Canal in 90 days. That thought was now uppermost in his mind.

“And what about Egypt?” Rommel asked the obvious next question.

“It will take us time to build up the forces necessary for such a drive,” said Keitel. “The desert is a singularly harsh environment. Everything an army needs to fight there must be provided, and I am not simply speaking of tanks and ammunition now. You need food, water, petrol, supplies of every kind, and all of it must move over water to Tripoli and then by truck. The farther you move east, the longer that supply line becomes. It is over 1400 miles from Tripoli to Alexandria, and there is only one good road along the coast. Moving supply trucks that distance will consume fuel, perhaps half of everything we send you for your fighting troops. We will see what the Vichy French might send us from Tunisia and Algeria. After all, we have just given them a nice house warming gift in the 77th Infantry Division, so they owe us a favor or two.”

“Yet we cannot ask the French to do anything substantial,” said Hitler. “You will be lucky to get some trucks, supplies and a single brigade from them. If we go for the Suez Canal, then German troops must do the work.”

“I can take it in 90 days if adequately supported,” said Rommel, nipping himself mentally for revealing his thoughts at this early stage of the planning.

Hitler gave him a discerning look, as if he were seeing something in him that spoke of events yet to come, of victories and new glory for the German Reich, and a final end to the stubborn resistance of the British Empire.

“I like confidence in a man,” said the Führer. “Look what Dietl did up in Narvik. Conditions were harsh there as well, but he managed. I have every confidence that you will do the same. The road to Suez may be a hard one, but we will get there with a steady hand on the tiller and a firm command of the situation. Between your position and Ivan Volkov’s troops and all that oil in Orenburg, there is nothing but the British Colonies in the Middle East. The

French already have Syria, and both Iran and Iraq are leaning our way. The Iraqis are already asking for our support, and I will see to that soon enough. As for Turkey, I will see to them in time as well. At the moment, the British are the only real threat. Until I can make further assignments to your new Afrika Korps, stop O'Connor's advance and await further troops and supplies. I hereby appoint you *Befehlshaber*, Commander in Chief of all German Forces in North Africa—the troops in Morocco excepted. Those will stay in the Western Command. We have plans there as well.”

It was a significant post, and Rommel fully appreciated what he was now being told. *Befehlshaber*, he thought with some excitement. That is better than a Korps Commander! They are giving me the defense of Libya, but I will give them something more than they expect. He saluted again, then offered his hand to Hitler as he made ready to depart.

“I will look forward to your next report,” said Hitler, “and perhaps another good motion picture!”

Chapter 14

His business concluded, Hitler departed with a gaggle of aides and staffers, and Keitel now leaned over the map with Rommel for a more detailed discussion of the operation. “It will be called *Sonnenblume*,” he said, “Operation Sunflower. That is a perfect image of the whole affair, for in order for that flower to bloom, it depends on the long thin stalk rooted to good ground. Tripoli is the closest port we have that can do the job, but even that will permit only five or six ships to unload per day—no more than three to five thousand tons of supplies.”

“That will certainly supply my division, and the brunt of the fighting will be in Cyrenaica, with plentiful water supplies. That said, what about the drive to Egypt?”

“This is the real problem, Rommel.” Keitel seemed to brood now. “Halder believes the most we can possibly support through Tripoli is three divisions. Give us Benghazi and we can support one more. That will give you a single German Korps. The Führer has eyes on Russia. This you should well know. I am trying to dissuade him from attacking there, but he seems determined to do so in time. It is only 600 miles from the Polish frontier to Moscow, and he has fifty divisions there. It is twice that distance from Tripoli to Alexandria, and we will be lucky to give you five divisions when all is said and done.”

“Will we undertake both operations at once?”

“Not at the outset. I do not think the Führer will issue orders for a full fledged invasion of Russia for at least six months. That is all the time you will have to see if this Mediterranean strategy Raeder keeps talking about is viable.”

“Rest assured, Keitel, I will stop O’Connor, and send the British reeling all the way back to the Nile.”

“Stop them first, as the Führer has ordered. Whether we ever get to the Nile remains to be seen.”

“You seem to have considerable doubts about it,” said Rommel.

“That is because I am a realist. They don’t appoint old men to lead cavalry charges, Rommel, but we set up all the horses in nice neat little rows before everything begins—we do the planning, hand out the sabres and

steeds. I have little doubt that you and your men can beat the British, but this campaign will be won or lost by the supply trucks, not your tanks, which will become nothing more than stationary metal pill boxes when they run out of gasoline. Yes? So we must give serious thought as to how we can possibly support a major campaign against Egypt and the other British holdings in the Middle East.”

“That is simple,” said Rommel with a smile. “I’ll capture British supplies as I move forward!”

Keitel returned his smile, realizing he had a real cavalry officer here, and that Rommel was chafing at the bit. Was he really the right man for this assignment? Perhaps we should have appointed someone like Manstein, a sound strategist who also knows how to calculate logistics. Manstein would want us to extend a rail line from Tripoli, as far east as we could push it. How could he communicate the importance of logistics to a man like Rommel? He tapped the Nile river with his pencil.

“If you ever set eyes on the Nile, General, you will find yourself nearly 1500 miles from your primary supply base in Tripoli. Then what will you do? The Nile Delta is a maze of rivers, canals and marshes. Every bridge on the river will be blown up in your face.”

“That didn’t stop me in France.”

“No? Well in France you had friendly forces massed behind you, good rail lines and a road net to move up supplies, and only over a distance of a few hundred miles. Consider that before you plan any offensive east, and remember, your orders now are to fight a defensive battle, nothing more. Stop O’Connor and then let us see what we can do to build up your force for future operations.”

Rommel eyed the map quietly, pointing at a spot near Sicily. “What about Malta?” There it sat, right astride the convoy routes they would need to reach Tripoli with all the troops and supplies that must land there. Keitel raised an eyebrow, not expecting the issue to come up here.

“Yes,” said Keitel. “Malta. It could become a problem. At the moment it is not much of a threat, and the Italians believe they can pound it to dust with their air force.”

“Now they begin to sound like Goring,” said Rommel. “If the British build up strength there, it will choke this supply line you are so concerned about—a nice fat stone in the neck of the goose.”

Keitel was pleasantly surprised to hear such an appraisal from a man like Rommel. “We are considering the matter,” he said. “Student has the 7th Flieger Division itching to do something. We are already knee deep in the Balkans. Some discussion has been going around about opening another route to the Suez Canal from that direction, a nice right pincer to compliment your operations down that long desert road. But to do that we will have to hop from one enemy held island to another—from Greece to Crete, to Cyprus, and then perhaps we can make the final jump into Syria to join the Vichy French. That’s a big operation, and in the meantime, I am trying to interest Student in another plan—Malta.”

Rommel nodded. “Considering that the Italians will be delivering the supplies, I can only find myself hoping their navy does a little better than Graziani. Yet now that we have Gibraltar, what is to stop us from sending our own navy into the Mediterranean? I have heard Admiral Raeder’s arguments about the southern approach across the desert. Will he support me once I get there?”

“I would not count on it,” Keitel admonished, “and we haven’t the merchant shipping in any case. At the moment, we must rely on *Regia Marina*, or perhaps the Vichy French.”

In this Keitel was being deliberately evasive. He knew of secret plans already underway that would indeed see some rather dramatic developments in the Mediterranean, and one of them involved Malta. In fact, Keitel had worked out a plan with ‘Smiling Albert’ Kesselring and Student, taking it to Jodl and Raeder to see what they thought on the matter. What he wanted to know now was what Rommel was thinking. He would be the commander on the ground, and the man most likely to gain or lose on the question of Malta. Was he in favor of such an operation?

“Suppose we forsake Malta, and the British reinforce it with considerable air units. What then? You know damn well that your army cannot live off the desert, nor on captured British supplies.”

Now it was Rommel’s turn to raise an eyebrow, inwardly seeing difficulties in all of this talk of supplies, and wanting nothing whatsoever to do with it. In the history Fedorov knew, he would learn the hard lessons of logistics in the desert, after two long years of bitter struggle there. Only then would he come to write: “*The first essential condition for an army to be able to stand the strain of battle is an adequate stock of weapons, petrol, and*

ammunition. In fact, the battle is fought and decided by the quartermasters before the shooting begins. The bravest men can do nothing without guns, the guns nothing without plenty of ammunition: and neither guns nor ammunition are of much use in mobile warfare unless there are vehicles with sufficient petrol to haul them around."

Now however, all he wanted to do was to get down to the desert and beat the British. Then he would see how long it took before those oak leaves showed up for his Knight's Cross.

He put his hand in his pocket. And his finger found the hole there, the one he had neglected to mend days ago when he first discovered it. Now the pocket was useless, and could hold nothing of value until it was sewn. A stitch in time, he thought. Yes... even he could see the shadow Malta cast on his prospects. He had been opposed to the plan when he first heard about it, thinking it would only draw off supplies and troops he might need himself in the desert. But now he passed a strange moment of inward thought, as if he were seeing the long desert road ahead of him, and hearing the melancholy regret that would later inspire those words on the matter of logistics. It was as if an inner sixth sense was warning him now, whispering of a doom he could not yet see or believe possible, but one that would be his undoing in the months ahead.

He compromised with the inner fear that came with that strange thought, that rising wary feeling within him. Malta was largely undefended at this point in the war. A quick operation to seize it should not cause him any delay or concern in his own planning. So, when the conference concluded, he made one last suggestion to Keitel on the matter, and it fell like a stone in the quiet pool of the other man's thinking on the subject.

"Take Malta as soon as possible," he said. "Take it before the British realize what they already have in hand, and start sending reinforcements there. Then give me everything you can, Keitel. Give me the tanks and supplies, and I promise you—I will give you Egypt in return."

Yes, he thought. I will give them Egypt, and after that, I will carry the war on my shoulders all the way to the Caspian Sea. He could see it all now, and he knew it was more than possible. Then they will have all the oil they might ever need, he thought, but to do that I will need the supplies and fuel Keitel speaks of first. The 5th Light Division is hardly enough to get started, but I will not know that until I am on the ground in Libya. If I find myself begging

for table scraps, starved of men, fuel, and material, then things might not turn out to the Führer's liking. But I do know one thing—Hitler loves a good victory, doesn't he? So that is exactly what he will get.

* * *

Keitel had his answer from Rommel, and now he knew that there would not be objection or difficulties on his end of things if his own plan went forward. He had Jodl and Raeder in his corner, and Kesselring too. Now he wanted to sound out the mind of yet one other key officer before he face the real challenge of trying to persuade Hitler. That man was Franz Halder, the Chief of the OKH General Staff at that time.

Keitel had taken Rommel's advice to heart, at least on one matter, the importance of Malta to any future effort to supply an army in North Africa. So now he sought to raise the matter with Halder, and the two men went round and round with it before a decision was reached.

"Crete would seem to be a more inviting target," said Halder, Chief of the OKH General Staff at that time. He removed his cap, tucking it under his arm as he ran a hand over his short cropped hair, which he wore in Hindenburg style after the famous German Chancellor, a half inch thick brush on top, and shorter on the sides. His eyes played over the map behind the round wire frame spectacles he wore, his face serious as he considered the situation.

"We are not in a position to attack Crete at the moment."

"That will change soon enough. We'll finish up in Greece in another month, and from there we can make the jump easily with Student's 7th Flieger Division and the 22nd Luftland Air Landing Division. Throw in a mountain regiment by sea and that should be all it takes to do the job."

"Yes, yes, I have seen the plans, but we must look at the bigger picture, Halder. We've sent Rommel to Africa with the 5th Light Division, and I have plans to send him at least two more divisions, five if we can find the shipping. How do you propose that we keep them supplied?"

"You've been talking to Raeder?"

Keitel gave him a disparaging look. "What has that to do with anything? I am well aware of his views concerning the Mediterranean strategy, but at the moment this is purely a consideration of logistics—a matter for the army. If we put men in the deserts of Libya and Egypt, then they will have to be

supplied. We have one good port at the moment—Tripoli—and Malta sits right astride the sea lanes we must use to get there.”

“Rommel had no trouble landing his troops,” Halder put in.

“That is because the British have yet to build up their air defenses on Malta, but you know they will, particularly if we do begin a stronger buildup of forces in North Africa.”

Halder folded his arms, not entirely convinced that Rommel should even be there. “You are aware of the Führer’s plans regarding Operation Barbarossa?”

“Of course I am, but that is six months off—perhaps even a year if I can talk some sense into the man. For my part, I believe we would be foolish to attack Russia anytime soon, if at all.”

“You forget the oil, Keitel. Volkov has plenty, but we need a way to get our hands on it. The fields of Ploesti in Romania will only take us so far—and that is another reason we should take Crete. If we leave it to the British they will build up defenses there as well, and from Crete their bombers can reach Ploesti. Yet, if we have that island, we can use it to bomb Alexandria.”

“Volkov?” Keitel darkened at the mention of the man’s name. “Yes, Ivan Volkov, always whispering in the Führer’s ear with those intelligence messages he keeps sending us. If he were not correct so often I would just as soon choke the man. There is something about him that I do not trust.”

Both Halder and Keitel had met the man in a brief session in 1939 just before the war. It was there that Volkov had asserted Germany would easily defeat the British and French in France, and it had happened almost exactly as he said it would. He had warned the Germans that the British would try to intervene in Norway, picking the exact time and place, and he had been correct again. His latest whispers had been warnings to the French concerning the British plans to attack their fleet at Mers-el-Kebir. That intelligence had enabled Admiral Gensoul to put to sea just before the British fleet sortied from Gibraltar. And he had also warned about Operation Menace aimed at Dakar, and the recently concluded Operation Compass.

“Well,” said Keitel. “Now that you mention Volkov, I suppose you are aware of the information he has sent us on this very question.” He reached into his uniform coat pocket and produced a folded paper.

“Listen to this,” he said quietly, “the latest intelligence briefing from the man they call the Prophet. “It is quite startling, all things considered.” He

looked up at Halder, a glint in his eye, like a man who was about to spring a well laid trap. "Tell me, Keitel. Does he agree with your assessment?"

"That and more," said Keitel. He has gone so far as to make a specific request that we do exactly what I now propose." He read from the paper now, eyes alight: "Take Malta no later than the spring of 1941. If you fail to do so your operations in North Africa will be doomed to failure. To facilitate this. I will personally make a request to Hitler that any operation against Soviet Russia is held in abeyance on the precondition that Malta first falls under German control, and you have had time to build up a strong force in North Africa and to consider other measures aimed at the Middle East." He looked up at Halder now, smiling. "That is quite an endorsement of my plan."

"He wants to postpone the invasion of Soviet Russia?" Halder was very surprised. "I find that hard to believe."

"That is because he wants to put his house in order before we deal with Sergei Kirov. He has trouble with the Siberians."

"Karpov? I thought that had been settled at Omsk."

"Apparently not, as we have seen. Volkov launched his eastern offensive right after those talks, so they must have failed to reach an accord, in spite of the news we received earlier." Keitel folded the briefing paper and quietly tucked it away in his pocket.

"Interesting..." said Halder. "Now Sergei Kirov has taken advantage of the situation by attacking across the Don into the Caucasus." He tapped the map with a pencil as he spoke. "The oil, Keitel. That is what these operations are all about."

"Agreed," said Keitel. "So Volkov now has a major offensive to deal with on his southern flank, while he squabbles with this Vladimir Karpov and his Siberians in the east."

"Where did this man come from?" said Halder, voicing the same question in Keitel's mind. He was a mysterious figure that had arisen in the far east, and though he did not know why, Keitel had a strange feeling of presentiment about the man.

Chapter 15

“**This** Karpov seems to have appeared out of thin air. We have little intelligence on him. He certainly was not involved in the early revolution. I have made inquiries and, in spite of some considerable effort to learn more, we have found nothing substantial on the man. In fact, we have found nothing much at all—no birth records, no service history. It is as if the man simply fell from the sky or grew up like a mushroom after a good rain storm.”

“No doubt there are quite a few others like him over there,” said Keitel, “but we must not concern ourselves with that at the moment. Let the Russians have their squabble. We have our own fish to fry here, and the war is heading to the Mediterranean now. If our drive into the Balkans concludes soon, then we will be right on Turkey’s doorstep at the Bosphorus. That leaves only the old remnant of the Ottoman Empire between us and all that oil in the Caucasus. Hitler will soon have an interesting choice to make, and he will want us to do all the planning. From Greece and Bulgaria we can easily stage an operation against Turkey. Such a plan would take us right to the oil we need and come to Volkov’s assistance in the Caucasus at the same time. In fact, I intend to advise the Führer that we do exactly this. If he must attack Soviet Russia, then he should do so on the southern flank, with the principle effort striking through Moldavia into the Ukraine, and right into the Crimea! That is the shortest route to a link up with Volkov’s forces. Attacking in the north with any intention of driving on Moscow or Leningrad will be foolish.”

“In this we find agreement,” said Halder. “This must be our principle operation of the war. If we do make such a move it will encircle the British in the Middle East. Once we have Turkey, then we can move right in to secure Iran and Iraq to link up with the Vichy French in Syria. That takes us right to the doorstep of the Suez from the east.”

“True,” said Keitel. “The eastern offensive is an essential part of our overall war aims. That said, the attack against Russia should be limited to this southern axis, and not aimed at Moscow or Leningrad. Yet that will not be possible for six months to a year. In the meantime what do we do, sit on our duff and twiddle our thumbs? Do we wait for Mussolini to make another bungling attack somewhere for us to rescue him as we have in North Africa

and Greece?”

Halder took a long breath, his eyes on the map again. He knew in his gut that Keitel was correct. Malta should be taken—Crete as well. And he knew that unless they decided on one course or another, the matter would eventually end up in Hitler’s lap. Once there, the General Staff might lose control. If Hitler decided on some cockamamie strategy, they would be forced to take the war in that direction, even if it led them into a thicket. Yet, if they decided things now... If they presented a united front to Hitler and kept a firm hand on the tiller, then they might very well end this war in another long year.

“You are aware of Mussolini’s views regarding Malta,” he said, coming back to the matter of their discussion. “He believes his air force can finish the British with no intervention by ground troops.”

“That is a self-serving opinion,” said Keitel. “The man has no assault shipping worth mentioning, and no real trained paratroopers to do the job. Look, Halder. We cannot expect the Italians to do anything in this war. We had to bail them out of trouble in Greece, and now North Africa. Look what happened to them in Somalia! That said, we have already committed troops to the desert, the western approach to Suez. You have approved the schedule of divisions for that operation, and we have the Führer’s approval as well. If we do this, then we *must* have Malta.” Keitel laid his finger heavily on the map, fingering the tiny island. “We simply must have it, and we should take it now. There is no more than a single Brigade there, and local militias. This message we have received of late from Ivan Volkov has given us the entire British order of battle there, right down to battalion level, and it urges us to do exactly as I now advise—take Malta. We must decide this, Halder. Crete? Yes, in good time. But insofar as Malta is concerned, the time is now. It will be a perfect preliminary operation for Student, and the lessons learned will aid us in the planning for your operation against Crete.”

“The Italians already have such a plan,” said Halder. “They are calling it Operation C3.”

“Yes? Well if we leave things to them you know how they’ll turn out. No. This must be a German plan, and an operation principally undertaken by German forces.”

“We will need the Führer’s approval, and he will need to speak with Mussolini first. Then we must do the staff work.”

“I have already done that,” said Keitel quickly.

“You, Keitel? You mean to say this is why you have been locked up in the back rooms of OKW with Jodl and Raeder?”

“Correct,” said Keitel. “So there you have it. I have been talking to Raeder, and now that we have Gibraltar, with two good battleships at Brest and Saint Nazaire, Raeder has been keen to put them to good use.”

“Whatever for? Is he planning another sortie into the Atlantic? Those battleships are a nuisance, Keitel. They had a little luck with that convoy when they broke out, but mark my words—it will be Doenitz and his U-boats that will make the difference in the Atlantic.”

“But *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* would make quite a difference in the Mediterranean...” Keitel let that dangle for a moment, and Halder gave it some considerable thought before he spoke.

“Raeder wants to do this?”

“He does, and he is of the opinion that we can now decide the issue of naval supremacy in the Mediterranean once and for all. The front door is shut tight and barricaded at Gibraltar. Now the British have to sail 12,000 miles around the Cape of Good Hope to reinforce their Eastern Mediterranean squadrons under Admiral Cunningham. So I discussed this with Raeder in light of this Malta business. He believes that, with the French Fleet at Toulon, the Italians at Taranto, and a little backbone with the arrival of *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*, we will have what it takes to neutralize the one foil the British still have—the Royal Navy. If he leaves those ships in the French Atlantic ports the British will be bombing them night and day. They attacked again last night.”

Halder pursed his lips, his eyes narrowed with thought. “Jodl agrees?”

“He does, and Goering has agreed to provide us with any aircraft we need for the operation. Student’s Fleigerkorps has just been formed and it is operational now. He is eager for an assignment, and Malta is the perfect choice. Malta now, Halder, with Raeder’s battleships to make certain the Royal Navy does not pay us a visit once we get there. Malta now—Crete later, after we finish in the Balkans and move the main army south along the Moldavian frontier. Once that is accomplished, then the final operation of the war begins, as we have discussed. And if we move decisively, we can finish the job before President Roosevelt and the Americans start thinking more seriously about intervention.”

Halder nodded. He could see that Keitel was correct. It was all a question of proper timing, and this next six months were a vacuum that must be filled with something that mattered. He looked at Keitel, placing his cap firmly on his head. "Very well," he said with equal firmness. "You have my support."

* * *

At the end of 1940 Malta was not the hard nut that it would later become by 1942. There was only a single brigade there, with plans to double this in size that had not yet been carried out. Another long time British holding like Gibraltar, it was the former headquarters of the Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet, which had since been moved to Alexandria. Yet even if it was no longer the vital hub of the wheel of British sea power there, it was still a strong outpost at the edge of that power base, and the one means they had of projecting land based air power into the Central Mediterranean. Unfortunately, there were all too few planes there as 1940 ended. Measuring only eleven miles by nine, there simply wasn't room to put very much in the way of men and material on the tiny island. Before the war the British had come to believe the island was indefensible. That said, its principle function as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" was well known, but ill served at the moment.

There were airfields at Takali in the center of the island, and at Luga, Safi and Halfar in the south, with plans to build more if the planes ever came. There had been no more than six old *Gladiator* fighters on the island, with a few more delivered in crates as reserves for a British aircraft carrier. Now, however, in January of 1941, the force had been built up somewhat with the arrival of 36 *Hurricane* fighters, but it was still a very thin shield considering the enemy could bring planes in their hundreds to the attack. The airfields on Sicily were within easy striking distance of the island, and they would soon be crowded with a flock of dangerous new crows as the Germans moved to execute the plan that had been brewing in OKWs kettle along with Operation Felix. It was to be code named Hercules, and it would involve the seizure of the island with thunderclap surprise, primarily an airborne attack led by Kurt Student's elite 7th Flieger Division.

As with every operation of war they seemed to undertake, the Italians had approached the problem of Malta with a plan, but half hearted measures since

the outbreak of the war. They had thought to use their air force as the primary hammer against the island, visiting it with eight air raids in the first day of the war before the British even had time to make their airfields fully operational. By June the British had organized 830 Squadron, comprised of *Swordfish* torpedo bombers to give them a little bite, and the planes demonstrated their utility by raiding Sicily, damaging an Italian cruiser and sinking a destroyer. They were soon joined by the *Hurricane* fighters hastily sent as a reinforcement and organized as 261 Squadron, R.A.F. By year's end, however, a good number of the planes were grounded for lack of spare parts, but the few that had been kept operational had tallied 45 kills against Italian bombers.

Mussolini had dreamed up big plans for an invasion by 40,000 men, but this was a fantasy that would never be carried out, because it relied on the navy to get the troops safely ashore. The Italians had a superb navy, on paper, but without the fuel, experience, and will power to use it, it remained a timid coastal defense force in the first six months of the war. They had sent divers from submarines down to cut undersea telephone cables leading to Malta, but that had been the extent of their naval campaign. A Japanese admiral might have had battleships running out through the straits of Messina to make nightly bombardment raids on the place, just as they had done against Guadalcanal over far greater distances. But *Regia Marina* was not the Japanese Navy. It had fine ships, but lacked the skill and the will to use them effectively, particularly when faced down by an experienced and aggressive force in Cunningham's fleet.

The one brush the Italians had with the Royal Navy had occurred at the Battle of Calabria, called the Battle of Punta Stilo, fought 30 miles east of that point on the toe of Italy's boot. The Italians had a large army to supply and support in Libya, and they had dispatched a heavily escorted convoy to Benghazi just as the British were organizing a similar operation to send supplies to Malta. Each side had a strong mixed force of cruisers and destroyers, backed up by battleships in what would become one of the largest fleet engagements in the Mediterranean conflict. In the end it came down to the three British battleships, *Warspite*, *Malaya* and *Royal Sovereign*, five light cruisers, the carrier *Eagle*, and sixteen destroyers, against an equal Italian fleet composed of two battleships, *Cavour* and *Cesare*, six heavy cruisers, eight light cruisers, and also sixteen destroyers. The British had an

edge in battleships and with the planes aboard HMS *Eagle*, but the Italians had many more cruisers.

The man who might have led the British cruisers, Admiral John Tovey, was not there in this go round, having taken his early appointment to command Home Fleet. The action was scattered and inconclusive on both sides, with *Warspite* scoring the only hit of note, a long shot fired from a range of nearly 26,000 yards in a duel with the two Italian battleships. The round struck the *Cesare* aft, setting off a ready store of 37mm AA gun ammunition, and the resulting fire spread below decks to compromise half the ship's boilers. It was a hit to match the feat of the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* when it encountered HMS *Glorious*, the shot that still troubled the sleep of Captain Christopher Wells on that ship.

After this the Italian destroyers rushed in to lay down a smoke screen, which the British took to be a cover allowing the Italian battleships to break off. They would claim a moral victory in the action, though the Italians would later say those destroyers were setting up a torpedo attack in the thickening smoke. The cruisers continued to exchange fire, and both sides made unsuccessful destroyer rushes, but the action was largely inconclusive. The Italian air force showed up to attack ships on both sides in a fiasco that saw them trying to bomb their own cruisers. Little damage was done, and both sides turned for the safety of friendly ports. Yet the Italian convoy to Benghazi got through, and they would use that fact to claim a pyrrhic victory. The real effect of the battle, however, was to increase the timidity of the Italian Navy when the threat of a confrontation with the Royal Navy was factored into any plan.

The British were confident they could hold their own and eventually dominate the Italian Navy, and they were hatching a plan to make that a certainty as HMS *Hermes* slipped quietly through the Suez Canal to join the fleet on the 12th of January. She would join the *Eagle* for a daring raid against the main Italian base at Taranto, and the Old Stringbags would attempt to torpedo the enemy battleships as they wallowed in port.

Part VI

Sonnenblume

*"We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and, may I say
across the havoc of war, a great general."*

— Winston Churchill

Chapter 16

The plan had been called “Hercules” in the history Fedorov knew, but it had emerged in the minds of the German war planners much earlier in this world, and blossomed here in the same energy that was giving life to Rommel’s movement to North Africa. Now it was seen to bloom like the sunflower Rommel’s operation was named for, and so Keitel’s entire plan was folded into *Sonnenblume*, and would become an essential component of its success. The loss of Gibraltar had indeed put a keen focus on the Mediterranean as the next theater of war. Hitler’s naval liaison officer to the Italians in Rome, Vice Admiral Weichold echoed the sentiment of many others when he wrote his final report on the matter and delivered it directly to the Führer.

“Malta is the stumbling block of Italy’s conduct of the war at sea. If the Italian navy is to fulfill its main function, which is to keep open sea communications with Libya, then—from the purely military standpoint—it must take action immediately and forestall the British by eliminating Malta and capturing Crete. Both of these operations, if carefully prepared and launched without warning, have excellent prospect of success, though the latter would certainly entail a greater degree of risk. I strongly recommend that Malta be given the highest priority, and if not taken by the Italians in December, it should become a primary focus of German military action with the new year.”

The voices and heads were now lining up on the issue of Malta, Raeder, Keitel, Jodl, Halder, Kesselring, and Rommel all in unanimous agreement that it should become the next target, and to this chorus the secret whispers of Ivan Volkov continued urging Hitler to do exactly this were enough to tip the balance. Watch your enemy, Ivan Volkov had whispered. What does he covet? Look how he stubbornly holds on to the island of Malta. He knows the value of that place, even though it is far from Alexandria and can no longer be supported from Gibraltar.

Kesselring was consulted by Hitler and calmly told the Führer that Malta would be far easier to take than Crete, agreeing with Raeder that the opportunity to do so was ripe at this very moment. “Look how easily we took

their precious Rock of Gibraltar,” he said. “Malta will fall like a plum, right into our hands with no trouble.”

As further inducement, he produced an old volume containing Napoleon’s plan for the capture of the island in 1798, an item that Hitler found most interesting and persuasive.

For his part, Rommel could see that if the Luftwaffe pursued the Italian strategy of trying to bomb the island into submission, all those planes that might be supporting him in the desert would be tied up for months. Better now than later, he said of the plan when he finally heard that Keitel had formally proposed the operation to Hitler. He even offered to go and lead the attack himself, but yielded to Student as being more versed in airborne operations. It was now unanimous.

In spite of his worries over the threat Crete posed to the oil fields of Ploesti, Hitler was finally convinced to attack Malta first. “Crete can be taken after we conclude operations in the Baltic,” the generals and Admirals assured him. And with his grudging approval, the history of the war had come to its second major point of divergence.

The Germans planned to introduce their air strength first, with the aim of extending the Italian effort there and neutralizing the air defenses of the island. Once the defense had been suppressed, then Student would get his day in the skies, and his Fallschirmjagers would launch their daring attack. Italy would participate by providing shipping necessary to move one full regiment of German mountain troops, augmented by a battalion of the Italian San Marco Marines, a token force to allow Mussolini a scrap of honor in the situation that again saw the Germans taking the primary role from an otherwise inept Italian military.

The Germans had learned some valuable lessons in watching the British operate with their navy. They had finally come to realize the great value and importance of sea power as a guarantor of the lifeline of supply. This had never been necessary before in German operations, which had always been lines of communication on land. Now, however, with Germany contemplating a significant projection of power into the Eastern Mediterranean, a secure supply line by sea was essential. They were finally beginning to perceive the strong connection and relationship that sea power had to operations by the Luftwaffe. In this, the performance of *Graf Zeppelin* had opened many eyes. If anything, it was lack of adequate shipping that had

forced the cancellation of Operation Seelöwe, that and the fact that Goering had not delivered on his promise of defeating the R.A.F. Without dominating the skies over the English Channel, the Royal Navy then became a dangerous counter to any plan to invade England.

This hard lesson was now applied to the situation in the Med, and even Hitler began to see how things had changed after the capture of Gibraltar. The Germans now understood that to fight here, they had to control the airspace first, and then introduce naval forces of sufficient quality and number to hold the formidable power of the Royal Navy at bay. The war at sea would be an essential prerequisite to winning any battle on land. That was one salient point that arose in all those discussions at OKW with Admiral Raeder.

Admiral Lütjens and Captain Karl Adler aboard the *Hindenburg* would soon have some most interesting orders, and a formidable fleet would be assembled in the west as the naval covering force for *Sonnenblume*. It would be a combined operation, the first of the war between the French Navy and the Kriegsmarine. While there was still little love between the two forces, and much resentment against the Germans, the ill will the French sailors held towards the British after Mers-el Kebir and Dakar was more raw. The Germans proposed to bring two powerful ships, first to Gibraltar where they would briefly enjoy the fruits of the recent German victory there, and then into the Mediterranean itself. The entire German battlegroup that had managed to reach French ports would be involved, but it had to again slip past the watch of Admiral Somerville's Force H.

The German intelligence soon indicated that the British had further designs on Dakar, and that they had even retained forces in Freetown that could be used in another operation there. So the Germans convinced the French that the place was simply too far away to adequately defend, and that Casablanca was a far better location for their Atlantic *Force De Raid*. It was only 180 miles south of Gibraltar, protected by German infantry now crossing into Spanish Morocco, and covered easily by German air power.

In spite of its utility as a knife in the gut of the British convoy routes into the South Atlantic, Dakar was another 1500 miles to the south and would have to be supplied by sea, under the constant threat of interdiction by the Royal Navy. The French finally agreed, moving their big ships out of Dakar, along with all the gold they had hidden away in an operation they called "Terme de l'or," the Gold Run to Casablanca. This left Dakar deliberately

open to British attack, and the forces that had been languishing at Lagos and Freetown were soon put to good use in a second attempt to seize that place. In doing this the Axis traded this valuable port, and the threat it represented, in the interest of furthering their own plans.

Admiral Somerville had moved Force H south of Casablanca to cover the seizure of the Cape Verde Islands, and now Dakar. Churchill was clucking when all these operations went off unopposed by the powerful French Navy, which seemed content to sit in its new nest at Casablanca. The British took The Azores, Madiera, the Canary and Cape Verde Islands, and Dakar was the icing on that cake. But while that operation was underway, Admiral Lütjens got new orders from Raeder.

On a foggy night in mid January, the boilers were fired up on the big German battleship *Hindenburg* at Saint Nazaire. It slipped into the fog, soon to be joined by *Bismarck*, the battlecruiser *Kaiser* and the light escort carrier *Goeben*. While the cat was away with Force H to the south, the mice would play. German intelligence covered the move by deliberately producing false battle orders indicating that the ships were to be recalled to German ports. Bletchley Park picked up the messages, decoded them, and the Germans learned an interesting thing that day. The British were reading their Enigma messages, for their Home Fleet began to immediately work up steam, deploying to the Irish Sea in a good blocking position to intercept any German move into the Atlantic or English Channel.

Ivan Volkov had told the Germans the British had unlocked the secret of their Enigma machine, but they did not believe that possible. Now they began to suspect it was true, and made arrangements to introduce an entirely new code. It was a move that would have dramatic consequences, for the information war was one great conflict the British had won early on, and it led them to many other victories on the ground.

Just as Dakar finally fell into British hands, and Churchill was about to make the announcement in the House of Commons, the news came that one of the three French battleships at Casablanca had put to sea with an escort of cruisers and destroyers, and that both the formidable German battleships had turned south, for Gibraltar, where both forces were soon in a fist of threatening steel. French forces at Toulon were put on short notice that fleet action was imminent, and the Italians were asked to perform a service as well by getting up steam in the battleships they had at Taranto.

This activity had yet another major consequence. The British plan for a surprise raid on Taranto was suddenly foiled by the imminent movement of the Italian fleet. Admiral Cunningham was given the news and told instead that he must make the fleet ready to oppose possible enemy operations at sea. The enemy intent was not yet clear, but one thing was—the Italian battleships would not be found as easy targets at Taranto. They were putting out to sea.

All these naval forces were about to maneuver into the Mediterranean, and they would set up a titanic battle that would decide who controlled those vital sea lanes, and by extension, who controlled the whole coast of North Africa—all the way to Alexandria and Suez beyond. Yet even as the British were trying to sort out these naval maneuvers and determine what to do about them, events were to transpire that would figure prominently in what was now to become one of the largest naval battles in history. And as has been the case so many times before, it would be the fate of a singular ship to find itself at the heart of the matter, the battlecruiser *Kirov*... And *Kirov* was not alone. Another steel gladiator was gliding stealthily through the sea, unseen, unknown, as the Russians concluded their rendezvous off the Cape of Good Hope.

* * *

The Italians moved with more resolve now, the lead tanks of their newly arrived Ariete Division rattling up the weathered paved road of the Via Balbia, intent on reclaiming lost honor as much as any ground yielded in their bitter retreat from Egypt. This time, however, they were not alone to face the whirlwind advance of the British. This time a tough, professional force was on their right flank, screening them from the sudden appearance of O'Connor's tanks, the stolid Matildas that had proven so indomitable in the past. Two battalions of medium tanks were in the van, one with M13/40 tanks, the other with M14/41s.

Five men were huddled inside each tank, three below in the hull where the driver, radio man, and a machine gunner were positioned, with the commander and main gunner in the turret. Together they shared an armored space a little over seven feet wide and just under eight feet long, crowded with levers machine gun belts and over a hundred rounds of ammunition in the desert heat. It was a place of heat, intense noise, and the smell of battle

mixed with the adrenaline of fear. No more than two inches of steel protected them from incoming enemy rounds, and if one penetrated, the explosive fury of the round would set off fuel, ammo and fill the tiny space with choking fumes and fire for any who survived the explosion.

And yet, of all the forces now arrayed in the desert, these men at least had that steel between them and the enemy, and their own heavy weapon in the 47mm main tank gun. An infantryman might have only the bare desert scrub and sand, along with his rifle for protection, so the tankers had a feeling of invulnerability relative to their supporting infantry, and the privilege of having a ride through the desert in their armored chariot, no matter how arduous the venture was.

The force they met on the dark desert road that morning was the British 1st Royal Tank Regiment of the 2nd Armored Division. The regiment was not a strong force that day, largely composed of 18 aging Mark VI light tanks, which were really little more than thinly armored machine gun carriers. There were three Matildas with them, the backbone of the regiment with their heavy armor and much stronger main gun, but only three. The two Italian battalions put 35 tanks each in the field, and behind them the road was crowded with more fighting vehicles as the remainder of the division piled up on the narrow way, an armored snake hissing and snarling its way forward in the pre-dawn light.

The encounter was brief, violent, and then burned out quickly as the Italian 47mm main guns knocked out the three lead Mark VIs. The rest fanned out, rattled out streams of machine gun fire, but were soon withdrawing up the road to a point on a low ridge where the three Matildas waited. They could see they were overmatched, what amounted to a light scout detail against a much stronger armored force. But the odds would soon even up, for there, coming up behind them, was a brigade of the 6th Australian Infantry Division, three battalions ready to dig in and meet the coming onslaught from their sandy slit trenches behind the escarpment. As the men hurried forward, harangued by the yammering calls of their Sergeants, they could also hear the clatter of metal tank treads and the growl of trucks off on their left, out beyond the stony wadis in the desert. Some larger force was moving there, like a panther on the prowl ready to pounce.

It was the opening act of the next phase of what would become a long and bitter struggle in the deserts of Libya and Egypt. O'Connor's men thought

they were renewing the heady offensive that had rudely ejected the Italians from Egypt, and chased them all the way across the wide jutting peninsula of Cyrenaica. The British had taken Tobruk along the way, and reached Benghazi on the west coast of that peninsula, where other troops were fortifying that place. The withdrawal of the 4th Indian Division for duty in Sudan had sapped away all O'Connor's motorized infantry support until the Australians arrived. Now he was ready to move again, with the promise of more troops coming from far off Egypt, as the British gathered men and equipment from every corner of their empire.

What O'Connor did not know was the character and temperament of the man leading this sudden enemy advance. He was well back when the action began, making ready to move forward to 2nd Armored Division and get the lads moving. When the initial reports came in he set aside his maps and clip boards of reports on anticipated supply deliveries, and huddled with his radio operator, listening to the fighting as it began to take shape and form. It was something he would often do—just listen to a battle, as a man might stand in the quiet hush of an oncoming storm, waiting for the thunder. He would hear things in the seemingly routine radio chatter, in the sound of distant gunfire, the movement of troops and trucks. All these sounds would give him subtle clues, the murmur of an army on the move, feeding that inner sense he had about what was happening on the battlefield, and he did not like what he was hearing that morning.

“What’s that?” he said cocking his head, and scratching the back of his neck as he listened.

“1st RTR, sir. It seems they’ve run into something bang off, just as they were moving out to the west.”

O'Connor listened, hearing more in the chatter of the radio traffic than his operator realized. He could pick out the sharp crack of the British 3-inch mortars firing, and then he heard something else, the radio traffic around calls for artillery fire support from a unit further back. It told him the one thing he needed to know just then, and the one thing he did not wish to hear—his attack had stopped, even before it was really underway. The units were on the defense!

The calls for artillery he was hearing were going out to the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade, second in the line of march. If the vanguard wanted supporting fire so soon like this, then they were under attack, no

longer advancing as they should be. Now that feeling of restless anxiety came over him, as he recalled the latest reports he had received from Wavell.

He could sense something on the wind, hear it, feel it, and he had the odd notion in his head that it was more than the fate of the troops he commanded now at stake, or even the nation they served. His own personal fate was somehow rolled into the growing rumble of the battle out there, and it was a haunting, eerie feeling.

Chapter 17

The Germans were here. Rommel. Tanks and infantry had arrived some weeks ago in Tripoli, where Rommel had put on a show for any prying eyes who might want to report on his sudden appearance. As the tanks were off loaded, he set them to march, making a little theater along the broad streets near the bay. Then he had the lead units turn off on a narrow side street, double back, and begin the march anew, a circuitous display meant to fool anyone who might be hidden away in the white adobe buildings counting his tanks. They would get an eyeful that day to be sure.

Rommel. The man had been ordered to take up defensive positions, or so the first reports from Bletchley Park had claimed. The code breakers had listened in on the German General's orders, and were confident he was there to place a screening and delaying force between the British advance and Sirte. But the reports were wrong, and not because of any failure on the part of the code breakers. They were wrong because Rommel himself simply decided to disobey his orders.

He had no intention whatsoever of fighting a defensive battle here. Not Erwin Rommel. Not the man who had dashed across France with his Ghost Division, confounding the French and British at every turn. He had the whole of the 5th Light Division in hand, right next to the Italian Ariete Armored division in the van of his own long column, and he was heading east. He knew it was risky to be so heedless of an order from the Führer, but he was determined to show him he had made the correct choice for this post. By so doing he hoped to not only catch his enemy by surprise, but also snatch a few quick headlines of his own for the newspapers.

He had studied the aerial reconnaissance photos well, in spite of the clever deceptions the British had been erecting in the desert. Planes had overflown what looked to be an unusually large cluster of Bedouin tents just south of the roads near the British outpost airfield at Antelat. They had been sent to bomb the field as a prelude to this attack, but found that their efforts on bombing this site had resulted in little more than a scattering of wood crates over the shifting sands.

Rommel thought the site was perhaps hiding British tanks and vehicles

inside those tents, but the deception was even more devious. The “tanks” were nothing more than clever dummies made of old supply crates. He did not know it then, but they were the clever and innovative work of a man named Dudley Clarke, a charming yet devious man that would become a bit of a magician with his sleight of hand in the desert war.

A master of the art of visual deception and camouflage, Clarke knew that one of the primary tools the enemy might use to glean intelligence was the evidence of their own eyes. Trying to disseminate false information was one thing, but building false information became a special art and craft of Clarke, and he was the undisputed master of deception.

He began by first taking to the air, to look at the marks and tracks that had been left in the desert after the movement of O’Connor’s force in his whirlwind campaign against Graziani. He came to recognize the patterns that tanks and trucks would leave while conducting various operations, the signature of rising columns of dust they would kick up as they moved, and realized that all these things could be mimicked.

The desert, after all, was very much like a great sand sea. In fact, some thought it might have been the exposed remnant of an ancient seabed from eons past. Fighting on this sea of sand was therefore much like a naval battle, where turreted metal tanks stood in for ships and maneuvered in formations like squadrons and flotillas on the sea. And he knew that like ships in an age where radar was still in its infancy, aerial reconnaissance was crucial to obtaining a good overall situational awareness.

Clarke began to develop ways of cleaning up after the movement of tanks and trucks in the desert, a way of minimizing their signature or footprint there. At the same time he would labor to create telltale markings elsewhere, taking a few Bren carriers and trucks and having them run about in a well choreographed series of movements to literally paint a picture in desert sand, as if a brigade had assembled there. Beyond this, he would create elaborate deceptions like the one that had been found and bombed by the Germans south of Antelat.

Clarke was hard at work as O’Connor prepared to move on Tripoli. He had created false headquarters, observation posts, and dummy supply depots, complete with scarecrow figures standing about to mimic the soldiers that should be seen there, and small details that were given the risky duty of loitering about to add added realism. He had even constructed a fake rail spur

leading away from the real railhead, complete with a dummy train that was powered by a slow moving captured Italian truck rigged out to look like a locomotive, with smoke produced by an army kitchen stove!

Yet now he was plying his craft against another magician of sorts, Erwin Rommel. When he received word from the Luftwaffe that they had apparently bombed a cluster of dummy vehicles under those tents, Rommel decided to order a single plane to return and deliver one more bomb—a wooden bomb that fell with a dull thud into the sand, a wry smile to the British to let them know he was on to their game.

Then Rommel had a few games and deceptions of his own to play. Using damaged vehicles that he towed to the scene, he ordered his recon battalion to rig up what looked to be an assembly of armored cars south of the main coastal road, and near enough British positions that it might be discovered by a patrol that night. Befriending the local Arabs, he learned that it had indeed been discovered. Then, knowing his enemy would note it as a fake, he cleverly moved real armored cars to that very spot, and had the dummies towed away. The next British patrol in that sector got a rude surprise, and did not report back that day.

Yet for all their utility, bogus maneuvers would not win wars, Rommel knew, only the real bold strokes on the field of battle aimed at unhinging an enemy position and putting it to rout. In the desert that often meant finding a way to use what was thought of as inhospitable or impassible terrain to go where the enemy did not expect you, and take him by surprise or on the flank. O'Connor had ably demonstrated these tactics against the Italians, and now he learned that he was not alone in his understanding of how to achieve surprise and create shock as an element of his attacks. In this, Erwin Rommel was also a grandmaster.

Two days before his planned offensive, Rommel set up units to create a lot of fake radio traffic, all with the Italians. He also sent bogus messages to Tripoli lamenting the fact that it was taking too long for his division to reach the front, and stating that now he had insufficient forces to stop the British if they moved. The next day he indicated he would be making a reconnaissance in force as a spoiling attack to try and buy time for his division to arrive, and cover his withdrawal to Sirte—all this while the bulk of the 5th Light Division was already there, the units mixed in with those of the Ariete Division, and some even re-painted in Italian colors and divisional markings.

Two could play the game of deception.

The next night the Italians would begin their attack, while the German units peeled off from their column, swinging out on another axis to begin their envelopment, which was the real attack. The Desert Fox was now on the prowl.

Rommel was right in the vanguard with the main body of his division when it moved, making sure that his orders were actually happening on the ground in a well coordinated way. Tonight the dance would begin. He was going to throw a battlegroup of Italian tanks right up the main coastal road at the point of the British column he knew was assembling there for a move west. At the same time he was going to take his own division south, then east in a wide envelopment maneuver, and turn north to cut the British lines of supply.

Even this simple maneuver was something that had never been successfully executed by the Italians before, and therefore it carried an inherent element of surprise. The key was speed and well coordinated movement, and Rommel would ride about to assure proper deployment of the units in the dark, and round up any stragglers or misdirected columns. When he came up on a unit of armored cars parked by the narrow road he got out of his vehicle and angrily asked the Leutnant why he was stopping. The men were squinting at a map, their eye goggles high on their foreheads, and Rommel simply pointed.

“There!” he said firmly. “That way. Don’t bother with the maps, follow your nose! Find the edge of the battle out there and get round its flank. Now move!”

He was pushing his men and machines hard, like a rider giving the horse the whip at the opening bell, and he was out in a fast armored car, racing from unit to unit to make certain the division was finding its stride and working up a good lather. In this he was very much like his British counterpart, circulating on the battlefield to make his presence felt, and galvanizing any unit he found that was not making a purposeful advance.

But even though O’Connor could not see the Germans coming in the darkness, he could hear them. The longer O’Connor listened to the battle, the more he realized it was something much more than a chance meeting in the desert. No. This was a well planned enemy advance, and he could hear it spilling out to the southern flank, as columns of armored cars, motorcycle

infantry, tanks and trucks began to raise dust that soon caught the early rising sunlight and cast a strange red hue over the whole scene. He ran to his own armored car, an older Marmon Herrington that he had taken a fancy to, and rapped loudly on the steel siding with his riding crop as he leapt up onto the sideboard.

“South!” he yelled. O’Connor was doing the one thing any good cavalry officer could do by instinct—ride to the sound of the guns.

It did not take long for him to realize what he now had on his hands. The sounds of the battle seemed to stretch out for miles from his position at an insignificant crossing of barren desert tracks called Gieuf el Matar, and all the way west to the coast where his column had been set to advance, over forty kilometers away.

The tactics of his adversary had shaped the battlefield. Rommel had the bit between his teeth and, after throwing the Ariete Armor division right up the Via Balbia at the point of the British column, he had taken his own 5th Light Division on his flanking maneuver, where they now surged north to try and surprise the British.

Instinctively, or perhaps more by necessity, the brigades of the 6th Australian Division behind the leading armored units had begun to break out of their road columns, dismount their infantry, and deploy in a series of hastily established positions to cover that long, exposed flank. A battalion driven by a more aggressive Lieutenant would get to some decent ground, perhaps no more than a series of undulations in the terrain, dappled with scattered scrub, and the companies would begin to dig in. One by one, the other battalions of its brigade would come up to one side or another and do the same. A Staff Sergeant would wrangle away a 6-pounder anti-tank gun and post it any place that offered reasonable cover to support the infantry.

The troops were digging in the dry earth and sand, their kit shovels battling with the parched stony ground in places, and mortar teams were setting up their tubes, fixing sights, now that they finally had them, and firing a few test rounds for range. Little by little the line of men and guns extended east behind what was once the point of O’Connor’s column. The men could sense that this was something more than a chance engagement as well, and they were getting ready for it, like men sand-bagging before a storm.

It was not long before that storm turned to find them, and one column after another in the German flanking move began to probe north. The British

line kept extending east, and the instant O'Connor realized what was happening he sent up orders that the armored point of the column should disengage and fall back through the defensive positions of the Australian 16th Brigade astride the main coastal road.

In truth, his armor was not the sharp tip of the spear that it had once been. The bulk of the 7th Armored division had been sent east a week ago to refit near Alexandria. In their place was a makeshift "Brigade" of the 2nd Armored Division. Even this replacement unit was cobbled together with whatever he could still keep running. The tanks were short of petrol, and the regiments even shorter on tanks. One unit was completely equipped with Italian M13/40 tanks that had been taken by storm in the lightning advance weeks earlier. There were no British tanks to replace those that had been lost or broken down in the chaos of that battle. Another unit, the 4th Hussars, had no tanks at all.

At dawn, air units were up over the battlefield to see what they had on their hands. O'Connor was soon listening to the bad news they had for him. The column of enemy troops and trucks extended in a long line for miles, all the way back to Sirte, but they were not pointed west, but east. This was no mere probe, or even a spoiling attack aimed at unhinging the British advance. It was a major counteroffensive.

This was no good. His own column was now being flanked and was deploying defensively to a position that only increased its vulnerability. Quick to act, the British General gave orders that all units equipped with faster cruiser tanks should pull off the line and gather at Agadabia, well behind the thickening front. He wanted some fast, mobile reserve in hand, a foil to counter the swift armored jabs of his daring opponent. As for the Australian infantry, he knew he had to get it north as fast as possible. They could not stand and fight here. If there was any place for the infantry, Benghazi would be the only location worth holding.

There was one thing that Rommel did not know that day, and that was that a young officer aboard a mysterious Russian battlecruiser had been in contact with a very important man at Bletchley Park. Admiral Tovey had confided that Alan Turing was "in the know" and the only other man to be so privileged as to the true nature and origin of their ship. Fedorov and Volsky had decided that Turing would provide them with the perfect conduit to feed information about the present and future course of the war, information that

they now assumed was already coming to the Germans from Ivan Volkov.

It was tit for tat. Fedorov knew that the sudden massive reinforcement of Greece was one thing he had hoped to prevent. It would later be noted in history as Churchill's blunder, a reinforcement undertaken for political reasons that would leave the Western Desert open to the attack that was now underway. Wavell had been ordered to send off 30,000 troops, including much needed armor, in a fruitless defense of Greece, and Fedorov hoped he might forestall that mistake. If he could, Erwin Rommel would find himself attacking into a much stronger defense, and all that was about to be tried now in this new iteration within the crucible of war.

The British Terrier and the Desert Fox were going head to head, but events about to get underway just under 500 miles to the northwest would have more to do with deciding the outcome of the battle than any of the tank battalions now churning forward in the sand.

Chapter 18

The vapor war. That was what Rommel would come to call it. The advance went off without a hitch. His columns swung out just as he had devised, and raced east to out flank the enemy column of march. Yet, as units probed north, particularly from the Italian Trieste Division on Rommel's immediate left, they were encountering surprisingly light resistance.

The Ariete Division had run into a few tanks on the main road, pushed them aside, and was astounded and delighted to see there was nothing but the dust of retreating British forces behind them. It was a much needed boost to the flagging morale of the Italians, and they charged boldly on, heedless of the possibility that they might be running into a trap. The same thing happened to German troops as Rommel's envelopment extended itself eastward. Units assigned to flank security turned north at their assigned milestone intervals, but they found very little defense in opposition. There was a brief firefight where a section of three British anti-tank guns had deployed on good ground to engage the oncoming forces, but it was no more than a bone thrown to the dogs, a simple delaying action.

The vapor war... Rommel pressed on for another day, and then decided to get into his Storch reconnaissance aircraft and go up to have a better look at what was happening on the ground. To his surprise, he soon determined that the British were in full retreat. The infantry that had been shaking itself out into defensive positions had been ordered to get back to their lorries and head north to Benghazi at all speed. As for the tanks of the 2nd Armored, O'Connor had moved them east along the very same track that had been used to unhinge the Italian control of Cyrenaica. Rommel's troops were pressing forward, but he was basically attacking into thin air.

The British Terrier had decided to fence, and his first move was to lean back and away from the bold thrust of his enemy. O'Connor had heard all he wanted to know when he listened to the attack—the Ariete Division, the Trieste Motorized Division, the 5th Light Division, and behind it something even more ominous, what looked to be an even stronger German formation that was later identified as the 15th Panzer Division. There he was, all set to probe up the road towards Sirte with a single armored brigade and the tired

Australian 6th infantry. Now he thanked his lucky stars that he had the foresight to insist that every loose truck he could get running, much of the equipment captured from the Italians, was given to the Aussies to motorize that division. Those trucks would save it now from almost certain destruction.

Behind these four mobile units in the vanguard of the enemy attack, there were at least six leg infantry divisions, all Italian, but enough fodder to throw on any fire Rommel could get started if he could find and grapple with his enemy. Knowing that he was outnumbered this badly, O'Connor radioed the situation to Wavell at Alexandria, and the information came in at a most opportune time, right in the middle of a meeting that had been arranged to decide future operations in the Med. Wavell ordered O'Connor to get on a plane and fly to Alexandria, and that simple order was going to change a good many things.

* * *

They watched as the ship moved slowly through the canal, starkly silhouetted by the bare desert backdrop and clear blue sky. A thousand eyes were on the tall battlements and strange rounded domes, transfixed by the sleek, powerful lines, yet mystified, as so many others have been, by the lack of any heavy armament to speak of. *Kirov* looked like the world's largest and most threatening destroyer, but nothing more, and many shook their heads wondering why in the world the Russians would waste so much metal and effort to build a destroyer of that size, carrying only three small twin gun turrets and an even smaller single barrel bow gun.

Then the crowds stirred again, seeing the next ship coming through, just as big, just as threatening, yet proudly flying the flag of Great Britain, HMS *Invincible*.

"Now there's a battleship if I've ever seen one," said a Lieutenant from one of the Canal Zone garrisons. "Those are guns! I reckon she'd make short work of that Russian ship, eh?"

"That she would," said a nearby Sergeant, "and short work of anything else that crosses her bow, sir. Just you let the Italians get word the fleet flagship is here, and watch them get to scurrying back to port."

"The Russian ship has a fine cut," the Lieutenant conceded. "Sharp crew as well."

Admiral Volsky had turned out the ship's personnel in dress whites, and they lined the decks in smart ranks, the men standing tall and proud, unborn souls each and every one in this day and year, phantoms from a distant time, refugees from a holocaust whose roots were fixed in the soil tilled by the iron spades of war.

Volsky was on the bridge with Fedorov, smiling as he heard the crowds cheer the arrival of the fleet flagship. The distant strains of a military band struck out with "God Save the King," which was suddenly interrupted on the bridge with a furtive look towards Rodenko by the young watchstander at the main radar station.

The *Starpom* eased over, inclining his head to take a brief look at the screen, and immediately noting what was happening. "Mister Chernov," he admonished quietly. "I don't care if we are all sitting at a table dressed out in white linen and about to toast Admiral Volsky on his birthday. When you see a contact on that screen, you damn well sing out and report it."

Chernov swallowed hard, then did exactly that. "Con, Radar. Airborne contact at seventy kilometers, Bearing 280. Fifteen aircraft, sir. Elevation low, at 8,000 feet."

Volsky looked over, seeing the half smile on Rodenko's face. "Well," he said. "Someone seems eager to greet us here. Mister Nikolin, kindly inform Admiral Tovey that we are about to have uninvited guests."

"Aye sir."

"Mister Samsonov, *Klinok* system please. What is our remaining inventory?"

"Ninety-seven missiles, sir."

"Very well, salvo of three, please. Track and be ready to fire on my command."

"Here sir?" Fedorov gave the Admiral a look.

"Wherever we find this ship under threat, Mister Fedorov. We obviously cannot maneuver while we're in this narrow channel, and I will take no chances that one of those planes gets through the British air defenses, in spite of the display a missile firing will make here. Radar will call out the range interval at twenty kilometers."

That mark was just minutes away, for the contact was a squadron of Italian SM-79 bombers that had been based on the island of Leros, a little over 500 miles away. The Italians had indeed, gotten word the fleet flagship

was arriving, and they thought they would make it a nice fat target. With over 1500 miles range, the planes were attempting to sneak in and make a raid on the canal, possibly warned of this ship's arrival by prying eyes still lingering in Somalia when the formation entered the Red Sea. It was to be a well timed surprise attack and, in spite of the early warning given by *Kirov*, the British were slow to respond.

Eventually they heard the distant drone of air raid sirens, and a restless murmur stirred the crowds lining the shore, eyes now searching the skies above for any signs of enemy planes. Three *Hurricanes* scrambled from the nearby airfield at Ismailia, and climbed into the clear blue skies, heading north. The officers on the bridge of *Kirov* noted their progress, and had Nikolin relay the exact coordinates of the enemy bomber formation to Admiral Tovey, who in turn passed it in to the R.A.F. Air Defense Officer for the Canal Zone. It was a most unusual message, as the thought that one could even have information that precise was most unusual, but the British radio officers sent it out to the fighters anyway.

There ensued a brief battle, wherein two of the SM-79s were downed by the fighters, and four others damaged enough to force them to turn back, but the remaining planes continued to press on with uncharacteristic determination. These were the same plane type that *Kirov* had faced when it found itself cruising in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the *Sparrowhawk*, an outstanding medium bomber used by Italy throughout the war.

Inside twenty kilometers Volsky pursed his lips, waiting to see if the fighters could turn the enemy planes back, but it appeared that at least nine were going to get through.

"Three fighters seems a fairly thin fighter defense here," he said to Fedorov. "Mister Samsonov, sound air alert one. Target the enemy formation and fire at ten kilometers."

"Aye sir, locked on targets."

The warning claxon for air alert sent the crews in their dress whites in motion, as the missiles would come from the long forward deck where many had assembled. They cleared the area in little time, many now donning bright orange life preservers and blue helmets. Fire parties assembled in the unlikely event the ship might be hit, and a minute later, Samsonov was ready.

The thronging crowds had already begun to dissipate, but now the Lieutenant and Sergeant, and many others who had been shaking their heads

at the Russian ship, were stunned to see what looked like an explosion on the forward deck, but it was only the launch and ignition of the first missile. It roared up, a brilliant white streak in the sky that arced up, adjusted heading, and then bored in relentlessly in on the enemy bomber formation.

“What in God’s name?” The Lieutenant looked at the Sergeant.

“A bloody rocket of sorts, sir.”

“Quite so...”

Then there came the bright flash and sound of a distant explosion, and the second and third missiles fired. The astonished reaction of the crowds brought a smile to Volsky’s face.

“I realize we have let the cat out of the bag in this defensive fire, but it could not be helped. Stand ready on close in defense systems in the event any of those planes persist.”

Only two did, for three had been destroyed outright by the *Klinok* missiles, and three others damaged by shrapnel, turning away in shock and dismay. Had it been an S-400 salvo the damage would have been even more severe, but there were only 25 of those missiles left in *Kirov*’s magazines, and Volsky did not want to use them unless absolutely necessary.

Of the nine planes that got through the *Hurricane* defense, only two were bold enough to press their attack home. One dropped its bombs early in a badly aimed attack that served honor but posed no threat to the ships. The plane then banked swiftly away as its bombs missed the target and fell in the desert east of the canal. The pilot wanted nothing more to do with this attack. The last was more determined, and Admiral Volsky ordered the AR-602 system to swat it from the sky three kilometers out with a flash of lethal 30mm fire.

This, too, slackened the jaw of the Lieutenant as he clearly saw the single, brief burst of rattling fire, and noted how the tracer rounds found the plane with a precision that was astounding. One burst of fire—one plane down with a shattering explosion as the central nose engine on the three engine craft was blown apart with over thirty hits. Then it was over, and the light desert breeze slowly elongated the missile trails, smudging them into the azure blue sky as if nothing had happened.

The crews of HMS *Invincible* had also rushed to battle stations, but the guns barely had time to be manned and sighted before *Kirov* had settled the matter. The Lieutenant gave the Sergeant a wide eyed look, but was

speechless.

An hour later *Kirov* was back in the Mediterranean, the Cauldron of Fire where they had fought the very same navy that now welcomed and embraced them. That had been in 1942, at a time when the British were desperately trying to sustain their embattled outpost in the Central Mediterranean at Malta. *Kirov* had tried to skirt the edge of Operation Pedestal, but was inevitably drawn into the battle as the ship tried to race for the bottleneck of the Alboran Sea near Gibraltar.

It was here that Volsky had been wounded just as the ship appeared in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and Fedorov had been so suddenly thrust into the position of command, the only man Volsky could trust at the time. It was here that Vladimir Karpov had tried to redeem himself while serving as Tactical Officer and *Starpom* under Fedorov when they were forced to fight their way out in a duel with the battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson*. And it was here that Admiral Volsky had made the surprising move to seek a parley with Admiral Tovey, the meeting that had spawned those haunting images that somehow found their way into this world, well before that time ever came in the war, even as they seemed to leave a subtle impression on Tovey himself—an unaccountable feeling of *déjà vu*, blooming in the strands of his memory.

That was a mystery that had not yet been explained, and Fedorov was still thinking about it, and what it might mean. Now, however, they were soon thrust into the important meeting being convened here with the Theater Commanders, General Wavell, and Admiral Cunningham of the Eastern Mediterranean Squadron.

They reached Alexandria, with more cheers and fanfare as the ships entered the harbor, this time with a gaggle of *Hurricanes* up on overwatch in the event the Italians had any more surprises planned. Volsky could have told them to save their fuel, for his radars would see any planes long before they could become a threat.

The meeting was to be held aboard HMS *Invincible*, at Admiral Tovey's request, and when Admiral Volsky, Fedorov and Nikolin returned to that ship, they were escorted first to the officer's ward room. There they found Admiral Tovey waiting to have a private chat before Wavell and Cunningham arrived.

"Well that certainly opened a few eyes," said Tovey.

"It could not be avoided," said Volsky. "Yet, the rumors of our weapons

and capabilities may stand as a shield here now. I think the Italians will be more cautious should they contemplate another attack.”

“I understand,” said Tovey. “A most convincing display. I should dearly like to have a few of those rockets at hand myself.”

Volsky smiled. “Though we cannot give you missiles and bombs, we do have one other weapon that we are willing to freely share with you now, Admiral—information.”

Tovey nodded. “That would be most welcome.”

“Mister Fedorov here has a particular concern at the moment, as he believes that events are now coming to a head in North Africa. Fedorov?”

“Yes sir. It concerns the planned reinforcement of Greece. I must tell you that in our history this was seen as a great blunder that almost cost you the loss of Egypt. The campaign in Greece is a foregone conclusion. The Germans will apply overwhelming force there and defeat any effort to save the country. Anything you send will be evacuating within 30 days, and this also radically weakens your defense here to a point where Rommel will drive all the way to El Alamein within weeks.”

Tovey raised an eyebrow. “I’m told the Germans have already begun an offensive, but do not have any details.”

“We must find a way to convince General Wavell that Egypt should now be your primary concern, because we fear your enemies have already heard this same advice, and from another man who knows the full outcome of this war as it was once fought—Ivan Volkov.”

“Don’t worry,” said Tovey. “I hold some cards as well, and I have a lead that will likely convince Wavell to follow suit. The Germans led right into it by playing those two trump cards in *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*. They slipped them into French ports, but things have changed, gentlemen, and I have a plan that I think will convince General Wavell to stand fast in the Western Desert.”

Tovey smiled. “That said, it is a rather dangerous plan, and I am grateful that you, and that fine fighting ship of yours out there, are with us.”

Part VII

Sky Hunters

*" Trid toqtol il-brimba
biex tnehhi l-ghanqbuta."*

*"You must kill the spider
to get rid of the web."*

— Maltese Proverb

Chapter 19

The Germans were pounding Malta from the air. In the weeks while Rommel was gathering up his 5th Light Division and making the long journey south from Tripoli, smiling Albert Kesselring was quietly setting up Luftwaffe liaison officer groups on key bases in Italy and Sicily. Squadrons of Bf-109s, Ju-87 *Stukas*, Ju-88s and He-111s were being moved by night from airfields in Germany and France to these new fields, and setting up for action under Fliegerkorps XI. Meanwhile, the trains had quietly transported companies of tough, hardened men in grey camo fatigues, the battalions and regiments that Kurt Student had been assembling under his 7th Flieger Division. They would soon be joined by flocks of Ju-52 transports, the three engine workhorse of the Luftwaffe that was affectionately called “Tante Ju” or “Aunt Ju.”

Aerial reconnaissance and photography had been ongoing for the last two weeks, always using Italian planes. The Germans were closely watching the airfields for any sign of fighter buildup there, and also waiting to pounce on any Royal Navy convoy that appeared to be bound for Malta from the east.

None came.

British air power was still rather lean in the Middle East, and now Greece was calling on her for additional support. The political necessity of supporting an ally had already forced Wavell to make some very hard decisions. He had already taken half the wind out of O'Connor's sails when he withdrew the 4th Indian Division weeks ago and sent it to Sudan. Now divisions that had been earmarked as reinforcements for O'Connor were being rescheduled for movement to Greece.

O'Connor had gladly accepted the 6th Australian when he lost the Indian division, and he had put it to good use, fighting all the way across Cyrenaica to the Gulf of Sirte. He was all set to continue his drive when Wavell again intimated that the now veteran 6th Australian Division may have to go to Greece, along with the newly arriving 2nd New Zealand Division, and a brigade of armor taken from the 2nd Armor Division. In return he would get the 9th Australian Division, but O'Connor had argued that to move that division from Cairo all the way out west while the 6th was making the same

journey east would be a terrible waste of time and petrol. Eventually Wavell agreed and decided to send the Greeks the 9th Australian, and the necessary shipping was being gathered at Alexandria just when Rommel started his counteroffensive.

Cyrenaica had been relegated to the status of a buffer zone in Wavell's mind, though he continued to encourage O'Connor's plans. That said, he did not believe that he could possibly reach Tripoli with German troops landing there, and told O'Connor to wait until they could sort out the Greek mess before planning any real move. Until then, he was free to probe along the southern coast of the Gulf of Sirte to determine enemy intentions, and seek the best defensive ground in that sector. Mersa Brega and El Agheila were desirable for the water available there, and an airfield. O'Connor had taken the former, and was preparing to drive on the latter when Rommel struck with his own Operation *Sonnenblume*.

The instant O'Connor reported on what was happening, Wavell knew there would be no further offensive to the west for some time. "We are in no position to reinforce you," he had said. "All you can do now is fall back. Preserve your force as much as possible, particularly the armor. Even Benghazi is to be considered expendable and held only insofar as it seems practical to cover the retreat of the garrison there."

O'Connor had agreed, even though it meant he would now be handing back all the hard won ground he had taken from the Italian 10th Army in his lighting dash west. And so he pulled back, moving the 6th Australian Division north through Benghazi, while he gathered up what was left of his armor and back-tracked east. Rommel ended up striking nothing, reporting to Keitel that he had been sent there to stop O'Connor, but there was nothing to stop! His counteroffensive had turned into little more than a brisk reoccupation of the ground lost by Graziani, with surprisingly little fighting.

It was what came next that was the real bolt from the blue. The grim faced Falschirmtruppen were lining up on the airstrips near Taranto, Naples, and at Comiso and Gerbini on Sicily after a week of intense air duels and bombing over Malta.

Squadron Leader A.C. 'Jock' Martin, the Commanding Officer of R.A.F. Luqa, had limped out to his plane for the twenty-fifth time that week, but there were all too few left. He had lost some very good men, including Flight Lieutenant Peter Keeble and his Flag Officer William Woods, old 'Timber'

as he was called by the men. The German 109s had cut down his *Gladiator*, which was no match for the faster, more modern fighter. Now he wondered how long they would have to wait for help from Alexandria, and he feared it would be a very long time indeed.

Now he was patrolling in a *Hurricane* when tower control radioed the heading of yet another incoming formation of enemy planes. There was no one else up on CAP, and so he decided he would have to go in alone. What he found was a formation of twenty S-79s of the 34^o Stormo intending to strike the airfield at Luqa. Martin knew he could not possibly stop a formation of that size, but he could raise hell and try to break them up as they approached the field. He got in one good pass, like a hawk falling on a formation of geese flying south, and managed to down one plane, wheel about and take a second from beneath, starting an engine fire. Then he had company with the arrival of Italian Sergente Abramo Lanzarini of the 72nd Squadriglia in an MC-200 fighter.

The two pilots maneuvered for advantage, each one skilled enough to send hot tracers zipping perilously close to the other. Then Martin hit his flaps, radically altering his speed to allow the Italian fighter to sweep by. He kicked the plane over to follow, poured on power with his guns blazing and ended the duel as the MC-200 went into an dive, smoke trailing from the tail.

Martin saw the Italian pilot had managed to leap from the plane, a loose strap from his seat harness sheared off as he did so, but to his horror, he saw no parachute open. The equipment had failed in the one task it was made for, and Sergente Abramo Lanzarini plummeted to his death.

It was difficult to witness such an event, but Martin tried to remind himself that he was shooting at planes, not the men inside them. It was a thin emotional barrier he surrounded himself with, knowing inherently that Lanzarini's death could have been his own fate, as every pilot had an inbred kinship with the men he faced in the sky.

Lanzarini's death had not been in vain, for his brave intervention had at least drawn Martin from his attack on the bombers. Now they were over the airfield at Luqa, and trying to hit the hangers where the work crews were fitfully struggling to get another *Hurricane* engine operational to give the hard pressed Squadron Leader some help.

The other main airfield at Hal Far had been hit very hard the previous

day, and several *Hurricanes* had been lost on the ground. Lieutenants John Waters and Peter Hartley had been out from that station in their *Swordfish* when they got word that a naval flotilla was heading for the island. What they saw was more than they could deal with given the few planes they had. The Italian Navy was coming out to fight. All the battleships that had been at Taranto had sortied days before the long planned carrier raid by Admiral Cunningham's fleet. Now they were gathering ominously in the Central Mediterranean, and the increased air activity over Malta began to take on the darker prospect of imminent invasion.

Then word came that the French Navy was at sea, getting up steam from their major base at Toulon. There were no details as to what had sailed, but the movement of "several large capital ships" was deemed most disturbing.

* * *

Now the meeting was being held to determine what to do about the impending crisis on Malta. Yet the allies did not yet know the full scope of the plans their enemy had for the island, or that even as they spoke, the engines were turning over on the German Ju-52s at four airfields to the north.

Wavell and Cunningham entered, all the men standing to greet them, and then Wavell came right up to Admiral Volsky and extended a hand in a hearty greeting.

"That was quite a display just now, Admiral," he said in perfect Russian, for Wavell had mastered the language when he served as a military observer with the Russian Army in 1911, and was eager to have a chance to use that tool. "We have seen the smoke, and I have no doubt that there is more fire behind it than meets the eye."

Volsky smiled, glancing at Fedorov to make the introductions. "You speak Russian—a very pleasant surprise. Our Mister Nikolin here is adept in English, but now he will not have to carry so much water from the well."

"Indeed," said Wavell, shaking Fedorov's hand as he was introduced. Then to Admiral Tovey he said: "General O'Connor was supposed to be joining us, flying in from Tobruk this morning. It appears he's running late, so we may as well begin. Gentlemen, we have a good deal to sort out here. The wolves are on the move in the desert again, and they will soon be on our doorstep. I also regret to inform you that Malta is again under heavy air

attack. Things are heating up. I must admit I did not expect the Germans to reinforce the Italians here in North Africa this quickly.”

Fedorov was not surprised to hear this news for he knew the Germans would intensify their air attacks against Malta. He also knew they had developed a plan to invade the island, though it was not until 1942 that this came anywhere close to fruition, and the operation had been cancelled.

Wavell continued his briefing. “I have ordered General O’Connor to withdraw to Tobruk, as there is no way we can hope to hold on to Cyrenaica with so many troops earmarked for Greece.”

Fedorov gave Admiral Volsky a sidelong glance, but Tovey spoke next.

“If I may, general, I have some information to convey from Bletchley Park.”

This was the plan that Fedorov had arranged. He had prepared intelligence on Rommel’s true intentions to try and demonstrate the real threat to Egypt. Now Tovey handed Wavell a thin report showing the planned German buildup in North Africa. It listed every unit that had been sent in the history Fedorov knew, 5th Light Division, later reinforced to become the 21st Panzer Division, the 15th Panzers, 90th Light, 164th Light and eventually 10th Panzer Division.

“My goodness,” said Wavell. “We knew about the plans to move their new 15th Panzer Division, but not these others. Five divisions?”

“BP isn’t sure of the timetable, but they believe these units will eventually form for service in North Africa given present intelligence. Some are new formations, others don’t exist yet. And as for this present action now underway, your intelligence characterizing Rommel’s move as being merely defensive in nature is mistaken. Bletchley Park now believes he intends to drive all the way to Alexandria, and may bloody well do so if we let him.”

Tovey was stretching the matter here, but he knew he could rely on the ingenuity of Alan Turing at BP to generate any intelligence required to make his assertions ring true. This had been the plan they agreed upon at their crucial Faeroes conference, that Fedorov would feed intelligence to BP through Turing as they all struggled to steer the unwieldy ship of war.

“I see...” Wavell folded his arms, obviously concerned, yet taking the news with calm professionalism. “And how certain is Bletchley Park on this? Haven’t they informed Mister Eden and the Prime Minister?”

“At the moment it seems Mister Churchill has politics in mind concerning

any movement to support Greece, and not military matters,” said Tovey, “which brings us to the heart of this business. Our Russian friends here also have an intelligence arm, and good men on the ground throughout the Balkans. Here is the German plan to take Yugoslavia and Greece—Operation Marita—and they believe this information is quite sound.”

Now Cunningham’s face truly darkened. “My God,” he said. “This is certainly not a force we can hope to hold for very long.”

“Thirty six divisions in all, including reserves,” said Tovey, “and note the heavy concentration in armor, a full ten Panzer Divisions will be committed. In this light, you may wish to reconsider your present plans to reinforce Greece.”

Wavell scratched his head, clearly surprised by the intelligence, yet experienced enough to realize that was all it was, the best guess of a web like network of men, with information gleaned from brothels, bars, and hotels as much as through signals intelligence or any real reading of enemy plans and orders. Intelligence was a shadowy cloak and dagger world of whispers, rumors, and elaborate deceptions, so he took the information with a grain of salt, while giving it thoughtful consideration at the same time.

“I’ve scraped the bottom of the barrel as it stands,” he said. “If I send anything more to Greece there will be nothing but the sand and sky between Alexandria and this General Rommel.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Tovey. “I am a naval officer, General, but given this intelligence it would be my conclusion that any effort to reinforce Greece at all would be foolhardy.”

Wavell smiled. “I have thought as much, but you must realize these dispositions were not entirely of my own making. In my last meeting with the Prime Minister, the man questioned me on the posting of each and every battalion at my disposal. Churchill can be somewhat insufferable, with all due respect, and he is rather insistent that Greece be strongly reinforced. I informed Mister Dill and others in London that the real danger here would not occur until the Germans sent motorized units and armor to North Africa. Now that whirlwind is upon us, and our own General O’Connor is in full retreat, trying to save what little armor we have left there while I send half the cupboard off to Greece.”

“Well General,” said Tovey. “I am aware that the First Sea Lord met with Churchill and determined that Egypt would be Germany’s next move should

they fail to break us with the Luftwaffe. The loss of Gibraltar has made that threat even more perilous for us and possible for the enemy.”

“Agreed,” said Wavell. “Yet the Prime Minister seems adamant on the matter of Greece.”

“I am well aware of his determination,” said Tovey, but HMS *Invincible* is here for a reason, which I must now disclose.”

There came a knock on the cabin door and an adjutant appeared with a rush of urgency, bearing a single page message from the W/T room.

“Please excuse me, sir” The man came in and quietly handed Wavell a message, saluting and withdrawing as he had come.

Wavell took a long breath as he read the paper, then fixed them all with a steady gaze. “Well gentlemen, we have yet another problem. The Germans are landing paratroops on Malta.”

Chapter 20

They came out of the grey pre-dawn sky, the lines of planes seeming endless to Squadron Leader Jock Martin, at R.A.F. Luqa. He was up in a *Hurricane* with Squadron mate George Burges. They had the only two serviceable planes at the field that morning, and they were going to be quite busy.

The island was simply not ready for the storm blowing in on the cold morning air. It was led by another formation of eighteen S-79s of the 34th Stormo, only this time there were twelve C200 fighters in escort. They were coming out of the northeast, and in so doing they pulled the two British *Hurricanes* off in that direction, a deliberate ploy to draw off any resources from the main attack. Over 150 Ju-52s transports carrying the leading waves of enemy troops.

34th Stormo was just one of six formations assigned to the bombing that day. They would hit the Grand Harbor, the seaplane base at Kalafrana, the airfields at Ta'Qali, Luqa and Hal Far and targets of opportunity all over the island. The air raid sirens droned mournfully as weary crews of the 7th AA Regiment ran to man their batteries. It was the tenth consecutive day that had begun like this, and in spite of some success in shooting down fifteen enemy planes, the bombers were getting through the relatively thin defense and doing a good deal of damage on the ground.

Malta was not ready, not the island fortress that Lieutenant General Dobbie called it in his address to rally the troops. In his Order of the Day he announced that the Germans had landed paratroops on the northern island of Gozo twenty minutes earlier, and the fight was on. "The decision of His Majesty's Government to fight until our enemies are defeated will be heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the Garrison of Malta," the order began. While they might finally get a crack at their tormentors face to face on the ground, the hard truth of the matter was that the troops would have little satisfaction in that.

"It may be that hard times lie ahead for us, but I know that however hard they may be, the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter, and that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress." Dobbie's

order was an understatement, as the troops were going to need God's help if they had any chance to weather the storm that was coming.

By 1942 the British garrison would triple in size, with a hundred aircraft ready to oppose an attack. Yet now, it was a pathetic shadow of that force. Before the war, the British thought the island would be indefensible. The Italian Regia Aeronautica could count 5400 aircraft in Italy and North Africa. Malta received only a few old fighters in packing crates, the famous *Gladiators* that had been left there as spares for the British aircraft carriers. They would take the names "Faith, Hope and Charity" before the *Hurricanes* arrived, but after ten days of steady air attacks, the old *Gladiators* were long gone.

The Island itself was commanded by a throwback from the First World War, Lieutenant General Dobbie. He had been ordered to retire, but made an appeal to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Edmund Ironside, who managed to get him a serving command as Governor of Malta. Old gladiators, in the air and on the ground, held the "fortress" in the early going, and little help had arrived by the end of 1940. It was going to take the heavenly intervention that Dobbie was counting on to stop the German attack. Malta had no more of a chance than the Rock of Gibraltar had, and it would not last long in spite of a dogged defense.

When the skies over the main island darkened with parachutes, the weary defenders saw the leading edge of what they would be up against. The planes had come in from airfields all over southern Italy and Sicily, Brindisi, Lecce, Foggia, Palermo, Comiso, and Trapani. The troops landing on Gozo were those of the Italian Folgore Parachute Division, who had claimed the honor of putting men on the ground first. They would secure Victoria and seize the small fishing port and ferry site at Mgarr harbor on the southern tip of that island. Lightly defended, largely by local militias, Gozo would become a reserve staging area for supplies, and a place to get wounded off the main island where field hospitals would be established.

The main attack would be a German operation, and their first targets would be the airfields at Ta'Qali, Luga, and Safi. There were several open areas where aircraft dispersal fields had been sited at Mqabba and Qrendi. They were not as heavily defended as the main fields, and made excellent landing sites for the Fallschirmjagers. Tante Ju came in very low that morning, with the flights of Ju-52s at no more than 500 feet to achieve a tight

concentration of troops on the target area. Student had been training his men for these low level “Sturm” jumps for months.

The troops were preceded by a company of Brandenburger commandos, the first lightning in the storm, just as they had been in the attack against Gibraltar. These men came in on agile Storch reconnaissance aircraft, capable of landing on very short airstrips, roads, or even fields. They would put down what amounted to a company of men, who would spread out to cut telephone and telegraph wires and sow discord all over the island. A platoon size force was able to seize one of the secondary airfields to silence the four AA batteries there, and the Ju-52s came in ten minutes later.

All the paratroops dropped with weapons, K98 rifles, MP40 MGs and extra ammunition in canisters that fell with the troops by parachute. They would be ready to fight the moment they hit the ground, though the low altitude jump saw many with sprained ankles and other injuries. Yet the bulk of the troops weathered the drop, and soon a regimental sized force was building up near Ta’Qali. A Luftwaffe forward air controller was assigned to every company to call in the lavish air support that was just fifty to sixty kilometers away in Sicily. Soon the morning skies would hear the scream of *Stuka* close support squadrons that were already in the air to loiter on call for the troops on the ground.

The entire 7th Fleiger Division, three regiments, would be augmented by a special Sturm Regiment in the attack. The reserve force would be the 22nd Luftland Air Landing Division, flown in to Italian airfields from Romania in the days prior to the attack. A full regiment of German mountain infantry was also staged at Syracuse and Catania on Sicily, with all the assault shipping and transport that the Italians could provide. They would be sent only if the Italian Navy could first assure the Germans that they could achieve naval superiority.

Adding in the Folgore Regiment, the Axis forces available came to nine full regiments. Against this, the Malta Garrison at this time was no bigger than the one that had defended Gibraltar. Lieutenant General Dobbie commanded 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment, 2nd Battalion of the Queen’s Own Royal West Kent Regiment, 1st Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment and the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers. The 8th Battalion Manchester Regiment had been the only reinforcement sent to the island after the outbreak of the war, making five British battalions in all, and one Maltese

battalion. They would be outnumbered twelve battalions to six in the crucial first six hours of the assault, and if the Germans could quickly seize one of the key airfields, the 22nd Luftland could fly in directly there to rapidly build up troop strength on the ground.

At sea the Italians would initiate the first stage of the naval operation. The battleships *Veneto*, *Roma* and *Littorio* were staged from Naples with a strong escort of cruisers and destroyers. Their mission was to provide close artillery support and directly engage the harbor shore batteries. The distant covering force was staged from Taranto, and it was comprised of the battleships *Cesare*, *Doria* and *Duilio* with an equal escort force. It's mission was to fend off the expected sortie of the British Navy from Alexandria, and the Admirals meeting to discuss the matter would not disappoint.

* * *

“**We** simply must get the navy out in support of Malta,” said Cunningham. “I see no other course. We were damn well chased out of Gibraltar when the Germans hit us there, and to let them pound Malta from the sea unchallenged is simply intolerable. My ships are ready. We were all set to have a go at Taranto, and now the Italians have put to sea. We should be right in their faces, and let them know who they are dealing with.”

“They won’t be alone,” said Tovey with a guarded edge in his voice. “I was just about to disclose the latest Enigma decrypts we received from Bletchley Park.”

At this Wavell raised an eyebrow, waiting patiently.

“As you may have heard, gentlemen, the Germans lately managed to slip two warships past our guard to French ports. When this conference was proposed I met with Admiral Somerville of Force H to aid in the planning of the occupation of the Atlantic islands, operations which we have lately concluded, all while keeping a watchful eye on the German ships at Brest and Saint Nazaire. Well, the foxes have slipped out of their dens. We were led to believe they were being recalled to Germany. Instead they turned south for Gibraltar, and with Somerville covering the operation in the Cape Verde Islands, there was nothing we could do about it. I departed for this conference, and the Germans were kind enough to sit tight at Gibraltar. Now I’m afraid the Germans are on the move again.”

“In the Atlantic?”

“No sir, in the Mediterranean...” Tovey let that sit there, allowing Wavell and Cunningham to appreciate the implications. I’ve Admiral Holland back with the Battlecruiser Squadron to look after the North Atlantic. Now, however, we have a new problem on our hands. The French pulled out of Dakar and reestablished their Atlantic *Force de Raid* at Casablanca—absent one ship, the battleship *Normandie*. It has moved into the Mediterranean as well, along with the German ships from Gibraltar, the *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*. I must now report that these ships are moving east. Something is afoot, gentlemen, and this news of the attack on Malta is the root of it all. The reinforcement of your fleet is timely with the arrival of *Invincible* here.”

“Indeed,” said Admiral Cunningham. “This news, coupled with movement out of Toulon by the French squadron there, and movement by the Italians out of Taranto—well I’m afraid we have a real nightmare on our hands at the moment.”

“Correct,” said Tovey. “We now know that the battlecruisers *Strasbourg* and *Dunkerque* have sailed with that squadron from Toulon, and the Italians have sortied with at least three of the five battleships they had at Taranto. Simply counting the capital ships, we now find ourselves outnumbered two to one, even with *Invincible* thrown on the scales.”

“Welcome to the party, gentlemen,” said Wavell. “Our situation at sea is as precarious as our prospects for reinforcing Greece while trying to hold off the Germans in the Western Desert.”

“Precisely,” said Tovey. “You have not yet started moving troops to Greece, though I see the shipping gathered here in the harbor to do exactly that. I must tell you, General Wavell, that given these movements on the part of the enemy at sea, I do not believe the navy can dispose to cover your planned reinforcement operation for Greece until we can achieve at least parity with the enemy. Admiral Cunningham’s plan to catch them napping at Taranto was our bid to go one up on the Italians. Now, however, with the French and Germans weighing in, the whole balance of the war at sea in the Mediterranean is now on the fire. Naval supremacy would be much preferred for your movement to Greece, but being outnumbered eight to four in capital ships at the moment, we cannot give you that luxury, nor any assurance that your divisions will ever reach Greece safely.”

Tovey had played his hand, and Wavell listened, realizing that naval

operations were at the heart of the matter, in spite of what Churchill wanted now, or what he had determined to do himself. If he could not move his divisions safely, then they would simply have to stay where they were.

“Well,” he said quietly. “These developments will force me to wait. Mister Churchill won’t like it, but I shall have to hold the ANZAC divisions here in Egypt for the time being. Yet given that order of battle you have just handed me on the German strength in the Balkans, it appears we will not have much time at all. As to the movement of the Italian ships, I must leave that to the Royal Navy. I’ll have enough to deal with on the ground in Libya.”

“We’ll deal with the Italians easily enough,” said Cunningham, his confidence unbowed.

“We must also consider the French and German squadrons,” Said Tovey.

“Yes, but at the moment those ships are still well west of Sicily. If we make a hard run at Malta now, the Italians will have to cover this German parachute operation, and come looking for us.”

“That they will,” Tovey shrugged. “They’ll have six battleships at sea now from this latest report. *Duilio* and *Andria Doria* have just left Taranto.”

“And we’ll have four. Good enough.” Cunningham was ready for a fight, though he knew the odds were against them now, an unusual situation for the powerful Royal Navy.

Tovey was more cautious. “Now we see the hardship imposed on us with the loss of Gibraltar,” he said grimly. “Somerville would normally be in the Western Mediterranean with three more battleships in Force H, and we always had two good arms when we thought to spar with the Italians. Now we’re fighting with one arm tied behind our backs., and two other fellows have jumped in the ring! There is no way we can expect help from Force H. Even if Somerville could run the Straits of Gibraltar and survive the thickets of U-boats and *Stukas* there, he would soon find himself facing the entire French Squadron at Toulon, lately reinforced by the battleship *Normandie* from Casablanca. Throw *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg* into the mix and any sortie on his part would be suicidal. So we’re in this fight alone here, gentlemen, and as I count it now, we will be outnumbered eleven capital ships to four adding in both *Strasbourg* and *Dunkerque*, and two to one in cruisers and destroyers.”

There was a long silence and Cunningham folded his arms, looking at the map. The second knock on the cabin door seemed loud when the adjutant

came again with another message. Wavell took it and read quietly, expecting it was an update on the situation on Malta, but seeing more bad news instead. He cleared his throat, and the other men looked up from the map, waiting.

“Well,” he began. “It seems we have lost our General O’Connor.”

Nikolin had been quietly translating all this, whispering near Fedorov, who shrugged when he heard this news. He knew that O’Connor had been captured during Rommel’s advance, just as he was about to turn operations over to General Neame. He had hoped to prevent that at this meeting, but it seemed fate had a way of keeping its hand on the back of a man’s neck, no matter what world he served in. Yet this time the news was different.

“O’Connor’s plane ran afoul of a German fighter and was damaged,” said Wavell. “They ran south into the desert to evade and were forced to make an emergency landing somewhere north of the oasis country near Giarabub and Siwa. The Italians still have troops at Giarabub, and we have a few patrols operating out of Siwa. We got one radio message, then lost contact. The good news is that O’Connor is alive, but given his circumstances surviving out there in the desert is no easy matter. The Italians might be also out looking for the plane if they saw it go down. I would hate to lose a man like O’Connor, but his chances may be very slim.”

Fedorov’s eyes brightened at this, a quiet fire there, and he whispered in Admiral Volsky’s ear, an urgent tone in his voice that even Wavell could pick up from where he stood across the table. On the spur of the moment, he had come up with another of his crazy ideas.

Chapter 21

“**This** news seems to have your interest,” Wavell said in Russian, catching Fedorov’s eye.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Fedorov. “After such a brilliant campaign against the Italians it would seem a cruel fate to lose General O’Connor at a time like this.”

“That it would,” said Wavell. “I shall have to make arrangements to see that General Neame hangs on to what is left of the Western Desert Force. This General Rommel has moved like quicksilver, and stolen back everything O’Connor had in hand after his operation out west. Losing O’Connor will be salt in the wound, but we may be deprived of his services for some good while.”

Now Admiral Volsky cleared his throat, speaking up.

“Well, he said quietly. “Then we must do something about this situation. Yes? I have some very good men aboard my ship, and the means to get them anywhere in the desert in a matter of hours.”

“A matter of hours?” Wavell smiled politely. “The desert is quite extensive out west, Admiral. It is well over 250 miles to Giarabub from Alexandria, and given the terrain and lack of useful roads, that is a journey of many days.”

“I can put men on the ground there today if you wish. We can go by aircraft.”

“By air? I suppose you could fly into Siwa, but we have a patrol there from our Long Range Desert Group. Perhaps they could handle the matter and spare you the trouble. The Italians have a few fighters at Giarabub that could cause problems for any air search we attempt. That said, it could take days or weeks for desert patrols to locate O’Connor’s plane.”

Volsky smiled. “We can find it by nightfall. We have some special equipment we can use to conduct a search for this aircraft. It will stand out as a heat source in the desert, will it not? We have equipment that can find it, even at night. As for the Italian fighter planes, they will pose no threat. Our aircraft can make use of the rockets we demonstrated earlier, and defend itself quite easily.”

Wavell raised an eyebrow at this, somewhat surprised. “Well... if you’d care to have a go at it, I can send word to my people at Siwa to expect company. I don’t wish to sound discouraging, but it may be more difficult to locate this plane than you believe, Admiral.”

“We have a way of overcoming such difficulties, General Wavell. I will give the order for the search and rescue operation to proceed at once. Mister Fedorov? You seem very eager to see General O’Connor safely returned to the fold here. This sounds like a good job for our Sergeant Troyak and the KA-40. Please handle the matter for me.”

“Thank you, sir. I would be honored.”

“And as to your other problem,” Volsky now turned to Admiral Tovey where he was still consulting the map with Cunningham. “It would seem that my ship is available to help you even those odds.”

Tovey looked over his shoulder, then turned to face the Russians with a grateful nod. “I thank you for the offer,” he said. “Yet we still have that delicate political issue to consider—a Russian ship pulled into the conflict when your own country has not yet openly declared war on Germany, let alone Italy. If you were to become an active combatant here that could cause... difficulties.”

“True,” said Volsky, “but I have given this some thought since our last discussion when you informed me of your Admiralty’s decision to relieve our watch on the Denmark Strait. It seems the whole question comes down to the flag flying from our main mast out there, and it occurred to me that is something that can be easily changed.”

Wavell needed no translation to realize what Volsky was suggesting now. His instincts were as good as his Russian, and he immediately knew that Volsky was offering to re-flag his ship under British colors.

“Your government would permit this?” he said directly to Volsky.

“This may come as a surprise to you and others here,” said Volsky, “but while I am empowered to represent the interests of Sergei Kirov’s Soviet Russia, I also remain an independent *force de jure*, as the French might put things. I can act on my own accord, and exercise my own judgment here. It was my intention to attend this meeting as an observer and advisor, yet the situation you describe seems quite dire. How can I claim to stand with you as an ally, and yet stand aside when it comes to battle, particularly in a situation like this?”

“Your government makes the claim of alliance with Great Britain,” said Wavell directly in Russian. “Are you saying they have empowered you to assume the role of an active combatant?”

Volsky knew this question would arise, and he had informed Sergei Kirov that it might be necessary to take a more active stance in the war. Kirov had simply replied: “Do what you must. We stand ready, and if the Germans want to do anything about it, let them try.” Volsky knew that he could not tell Wavell he was operating independently of the Soviet government without raising suspicions and questions he would rather not answer here, so he and Sergei Kirov had determined what he might do—re-flag the ship.

“The Americans have lately sold you a number of destroyers for use in the Atlantic, have they not?” Volsky smiled. “Consider this an offer to lend the Royal Navy the support of my ship—all authorized by my government. Think of it as a kind of lend lease. The only condition I impose will be that my vessel remains under my direct command, crewed by my men as it stands. Otherwise, I am willing to re-flag and fight in cooperation with your Royal Navy, and I think I can even the odds considerably in this grave hour.”

“A very generous offer,” said Cunningham. “Yet that makes it eleven to five in capital ships. You realize what you now propose, Admiral Volsky? If we choose to fight here, we do so with the intention of placing our entire force at considerable risk. I assume the Admiralty has no qualms about that?” Now he looked to Tovey, lately dispatched by their Lordships at Whitehall.

“If they had any hesitation, our Mister Churchill has beaten that out of them by now.” At this they all smiled, for they knew, without any doubt, that Churchill would be the first to demand the Royal Navy now beat to quarters and come to the defense of Malta.

“Yes,” said Cunningham. “Churchill will raise the flag high and sound the trumpets in the House of Commons, but it will be our ships and guns on the line, and our crews at battle stations here. I remain assured that every man will do his utmost, but I am a realist as well. Even with your ship thrown in, odds are that we may face certain defeat, no matter what we do.”

“Which leads us to the question of whether we should spend the coin we have in hand now on Malta, or save it for a darker hour that may yet come.” Wavell raised the one question that had not yet been considered. “You have just informed me that we haven’t the strength to guarantee the safety of our planned reinforcement of Greece. Remember also that my force here relies on

a supply line stretching over 12,000 miles by sea. And we also have troops on Crete and Cyprus that will need to be supported. If we lose what naval power we now have, those islands will be in jeopardy as well.”

“True,” said Tovey. “If the Germans are now planning to move on the Middle East, then we must preserve a strong naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. We must have the means of preventing the Germans from projecting power against Egypt and Palestine, and the islands you mention, General Wavell. The navy is the one tool for that job. If we use it now in defense of Malta we must be resolute, but ever mindful of the consequences should we lose our battle. I remind you that things have not gone as well for the Royal Navy as we might have expected. Our initial encounter with the Germans in the North set us back for some months. We only now have the services of the Battlecruiser Squadron and Admiral Holland on that watch, and thank God for *King George V* and *Prince of Wales*, now that we have those ships at sea. Yet we remain spread very thin. Somerville needs all of Force H just to keep an eye on the two French battleships still at Casablanca. We will need everything we have here to save Egypt and Palestine. So I put it to you all—should we fight now? The consequences of a defeat here will have dramatic repercussions.”

Tovey left that in the silence as each man considered the situation. The Royal Navy had always been the master of the seas, and could presume to back down any other navy in a one on one conflict. Yet the actions against the new Kriegsmarine, and off Dakar against the French, had exposed a weakness in the fleet that was of some concern.

The Royal Navy was aging, with 80% of its ships still dating from the last war, many which had seen service with Jellicoe and Beatty at Jutland. Where it had the speed to catch its foe at sea, the armor was thin, except on HMS *Invincible*. Where it had the guns and armor to stand in any good fight, the battleships were slow, and could be easily out maneuvered by the fast new ships of their enemies. There were too few ships combining the speed and power necessary to prevail in the new war at sea, and the *Invincible* could not be everywhere.

“Well,” said Admiral Volsky. “The consequences of a defeat would be too severe to contemplate. So the solution is a simple one. We will win. Yes. I have an answer for you, Admiral Tovey. We will not be defeated. I will give orders that my ship be made ready for action immediately, and if you

would be so kind as to entrust me with your naval ensign, I will proudly raise it and stand with you, here and now. We will fight and we will win. Of this I have no doubt.”

Tovey was the only other man in the room who knew that Admiral Volsky’s words were no idle boast. “That’s the spirit,” he said quickly. Cunningham nodded his approval.

“We thank you for your offer,” said Tovey, “and I will accept it and be grateful if you would receive my own naval standard as a way of welcoming you to the fleet. It is no ordinary ensign. In fact, it was flown by our very own Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar, and I have been privileged to raise it on my mainmast aboard *Invincible*. Now I am honored to offer it to you in trade for your able services, and I know it will be in good hands.”

Volsky fully appreciated the significance of this offer, and knew the history that had been sewn into that flag over many centuries. “The honor is mine,” he said. “And whenever you see that ensign raised on my mainmast, you will be looking at *HMS Kirov*.” He smiled, extending his hand, which Tovey shook with eager warmth.

“There we are,” said Wavell. “A rescue operation for General O’Connor, and a new ship for His Majesty’s Fleet. I’d say that is a favorable turn of affairs given all this bad news of late. As for this search and rescue operation, I have a man I should like you to meet, Admiral Volsky, a man named Vladimir Peniakoff. We call him Popski, as most have trouble with his real name. He’s a bit of a self styled soul, expert in special operations in the desert, and he has a private little army of like minded fellows that may come in very handy during this mission you are planning.”

“Excellent,” said Volsky. “We would be honored to operate with him, and it will serve to solve the communication issue between our people and yours. Our Mister Nikolin here will be needed aboard my ship, so perhaps this man of yours can accompany our team and serve as a guide and liaison with your own forces.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Wavell. “Popski is fluent in English, and a very useful man. I know your people must be very capable, but there are many hazards in the desert that can trip the best of men up if they are not aware of them. Popski knows the desert very well, and I would feel much better to have a man like that on your team. I will make the arrangements. Might I have him sent aboard your ship?”

“Certainly,” said Volsky, and the matter was settled.

“Now all we have to worry about are those damnable Fallschirmjagers over Malta.”

“Fallschirmjagers?” Admiral Volsky tried to repeat the word, though he mangled it a bit as he did so

“The German word for Paratroops,” said Fedorov. “It loosely translates as ‘Parachute Hunters,’ but I have always called them the Hunters from the Sky. They are elite troops, and the garrison on Malta will have a hard time if the Germans throw their entire 7th Flieger Division at the island. Malta had only one Brigade in defense in late 1940...” He stopped himself, realizing he was rambling on, and referring to present events as past history. Wavell could not help overhearing him, picking up the Russian easily.

“You seem to be very well versed in military matters and up to date on current intelligence,” he said to Fedorov. “We’ve only just confirmed that the German 7th Flieger Division went operational. Now I’m afraid they’ve gone and done exactly as you suggest and thrown the whole division at Malta. We have some good men there, but only four or five battalions and too few fighters and anti-aircraft guns to hold off the Luftwaffe. This is the second time Jerry has surprised us, and caught us unprepared to make a good showing. I know our boys will fight, but frankly, I give them no more than a week, and until we settle this naval business, there is no hope of sending them any reinforcements.”

“Agreed sir,” said Fedorov. “Yet in one respect, we may look at this as a bit of a godsend. Had you sent the 2nd New Zealand and 6th Australian Divisions off to Greece, your situation now in Libya would be very much in jeopardy.”

“I’m inclined to believe things hang in the balance even with those good divisions still in hand.”

“Might I ask what your plan is, General?” Fedorov knew he was being presumptuous. Here he was, a Captain in the Russian Navy trying to stir the borscht with the Theater Commander of the entire Middle East. Yet Wavell was most gracious in responding.

“To be frank about it, we won’t stop this General Rommel in Libya. I’ve ordered the entire Western Desert force to withdraw to Tobruk. If we can’t hold there, then it’s back to our positions near Bardia and Sollum on the Egyptian border.”

“Then you’ll abandon Tobruk?” Fedorov knew the British held on to that key fortress in the withdrawal.

“Not bloody likely. We’ll hold it as long as we can. It will be a difficult decision should it come to a siege. I’ll have to leave the 6th Australian Division there. The Aussies were a leg division, and we had them well to the west when this German counteroffensive began. Thank God for the Italian trucks and fuel we captured on the way over, or we would have never been able to get those boys back to Tobruk. The 6th Division would have had to foot it over a hundred miles from their present position, and with enemy tanks nipping at them like a pack of wolves the whole way. So I pulled them into Tobruk. Now, however, most of those trucks have empty fuel tanks or broken axles after the mad dash to the east. If need be, we can get them out by sea, but it is my preference that they hold on there as long as possible. We’ll cover their desert flank, if feasible.”

“Tobruk is certainly a port of great strategic value,” said Fedorov. “That and the best airfield in North Africa at El Adem make it a prize worth holding, and it will tie down an entire Italian Infantry Corps if Rommel wants to move east towards Egypt.”

“Precisely,” said Wavell. “My, you are well versed in military matters. May I ask if you have served in the Russian Army?”

“No sir, I was always a navy man, a navigator by trade when I signed on, so I can read a map, and I have studied military history all my life.”

“I see. Well, Captain Fedorov, what do you make of our chances in this fight? We’ve had a fairly rough ride since things started last September.”

“Germany is, and will be, a formidable foe, sir.” Fedorov knew he had to speak carefully here, and not sound as if he knew the outcome of these events. In truth, he did not know, for the German Malta operation was now another major point of divergence in the overall course of the war. “Something tells me the British Empire has a good bit of fight left in her. This is far from over.”

Admiral Volsky had been listening in, with some pleasure, seeing the delight Fedorov had in speaking to Wavell, as if he had leapt into the pages of the history he so loved, to interact with these towering historical figures. In fact, he had done just that, and now they were all about to write a new chapter of that history together.

“Well,” he said. “I think we had best get our own Sky Hunters on the

move, Mister Fedorov. Your General O'Connor is out there somewhere, so let us not keep him waiting."

Part VIII

The Devil's Teardrop

“When the stars threw down their spears, and watered heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see?”

— William Blake

Chapter 22

Admiral Cunningham's fleet was well out to sea, a long column of four battleships, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Malaya*, *Warspite*, and finally Admiral Tovey in HMS *Invincible*. They were accompanied by the heavy cruisers *Kent*, *Berwick* and *York*, light cruisers *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, *Orion* and *Ajax* along with twelve destroyers. *Kirov* was ten kilometers off the starboard bow, her radars sweeping the sea for signs of enemy activity. This left only a few cruisers and destroyers in the cupboard to cover Alexandria and Suez, but it was a risk they thought acceptable given the probable locations of the Italian fleet. There were also two aircraft carriers at sea to provide fleet air defense, though both were aging warriors by 1941.

Hermes had been laid down 22 years earlier, in 1918, a design built on a light cruiser hull. A light escort carrier, she would carry no more than 18 to 20 planes, mostly fighters. But the ship had managed to get in on a few choice assignments, hunting both *Graf Spee* and *Admiral Scheer* in the South Atlantic, and then participating in the watch on Dakar before that place was finally taken. She had been slated to go to the Persian Gulf to harass the German effort to reinforce the incipient rebellion in Iraq, but the loss of Gibraltar prompted the Admiralty to re-assign her to Admiral Cunningham's fleet for the planned raid on Taranto. Now that was frustrated, but her Captain, Richard Onslow, was eager to get in the action again as part of the fleet covering force for this operation.

HMS *Eagle* was the same age, a larger ship that was first planned as a dreadnaught for Chile, designed as an *Almirante Latorre* class Battleship at about 28,000 tons, with ten 14-inch guns. She was later purchased by the British for conversion to an aircraft carrier. The guns were removed, lightening her displacement to 22,000 tons by 1924. The ship spent the first nine months of the war in the Indian Ocean, hunting German commerce raiders before joining Cunningham's fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. With mostly *Swordfish*, she managed to sink three Italian destroyers and a submarine in raids off Tobruk along the North African coast. She also had three old *Gladiators* that had been found crated up in Dekhelia, the only fighters available to the FAA at Alexandria before new squadrons arrived.

Now she had the new Fairy *Fulmars* assigned to 803 Squadron, planes that had been transferred from HMS *Furious*.

The two carriers, *Eagle* and *Hermes*, would be going in 'light,' with a preponderance of fighter aircraft. *Eagle* would embark 12 *Fulmar* fighters of the 803 Squadron, and six new *Martlets*. She would also retain her 12 *Swordfish* in 824 Squadron, 30 planes in all. *Hermes* would carry 800 Squadron with 12 *Skua* fighters, and a small flight of 6 *Swordfish* that were waiting for her at Alexandria.

It was a strong sortie on paper, 4 battleships, 8 cruisers and twelve destroyers covered by 48 planes, and the addition of the battlecruiser *Kirov* was the icing on the cake. That said, the fleet would now face its greatest challenge of the war.

Prior to this time the Royal Navy had sparred with the Italians at inconsequential engagements off Crete and Cape Spade and Passero, which had decided nothing in the balance of power in the Mediterranean. Now however, the enemy was sending out a well coordinated fleet. The Italians had the battleships *Roma*, *Venetto* and *Littorio* near Messina, sailing to join *Andria Doria*, *Duilio* and *Conte Cavour* from Taranto, with four heavy cruisers, six light cruisers and fourteen destroyers.

The Vichy French would contribute another powerful fleet led by the pride of their navy, the battleship *Normandie*, battlecruisers *Strasbourg* and *Dunkerque*, with two heavy and four light cruisers, and ten destroyers. And arriving from Gibraltar the Germans were sending the formidable *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*, escorted by their light carrier *Goeben* and the new fast battlecruiser *Kaiser*, which the British did not even know about, mistaking it for a heavy cruiser in the *Hipper* class when it was first spotted. They now outnumbered the British 12 to 5 in capital ships, 6 to 3 in heavy cruisers, 10 to 5 in light cruisers and 24 to 12 in destroyers, almost a solid two to one advantage in every category... almost.

Those odds were about to round off almost perfectly as an ominous storm cloud began to form in the Aegean that day. It was a wholly unaccountable moment, yet strangely one that had been planned by Admiral John Tovey himself... in another life...

* * *

Admiral Volsky was glad to be at sea again, a maneuver that served two purposes. First, they would soon join the British fleet that had just sortied from Alexandria in the hunt for the Italian Navy. Second, he could launch his special services rescue mission more discretely at sea, far from the many eyes who might see the KA-40 rise from the aft helo deck. The missile fire was one thing, yet it merely confirmed rumors that the Russians had been able to develop advanced rocketry on this prototype vessel. The sight of KA-40 naval helicopter might start another new rumor chain, and he wanted to keep evidence of the ship's capabilities quiet for as long as possible.

Once aloft Fedorov was going to move discretely out in front of the British fleet and do a quick long range radar scan to test the *Oko* panel installation while searching for the Italian fleet. Then the helo would swing south over Mersa Matruh and make the journey south to begin the search for General O'Connor's downed Blenheim. They had a fairly good idea where he might be, but the desert was a very big place.

It was to be a fateful mission, like so many other conceived in the fertile mind of Anton Fedorov. And in a strange echo of those earlier missions, another man would have a great deal to do with what happened that day.

Orlov stuck his nose around the hatch opening to the engineering section, looking to find Chief Dobrynin. He had something in his pocket he was still wondering about, and thought the Chief might be able to make some sense of it. He was greeted by the sound of system alerts and the rush of reactor engineers. Another man squeezed past him at the open hatch even as he stepped inside.

"Move, move, move!" he heard Dobrynin shouting inside the engineering section. "Norin—check those water feed levels. Osiniov—get on the reactor flux monitor. Tell me the instant you get any reading beyond yellow."

Orlov stepped inside, aware that something was amiss, and soon seeing he would not be able to get the Reactor Chief's attention. Yet he was ship's Chief Operations Officer, so he stuck his thumb in the pie in any case.

"What's going on here? Some kind of problem, Dobrynin?"

"Not now, Chief. Can't you see that we have a flux event underway?"

Orlov looked at the monitors, but they made no sense to him at all, just as the radar and sonar stations made no sense to him on the bridge when he was lingering there. He shook his head. "Flux event? Someone had a bad egg for breakfast?" Even as he said that he was fingering the strange metallic egg he

had in his pocket, the Devil's Teardrop, as Troyak might call it.

Dobrynin was too busy to answer him, adjusting dials, looking at readings on the monitors, tapping a young engineer on the shoulder and pointing to a digital display. "Let me know the instant you see anything above thirty three on that monitor. Watch that thermal neutron flux very closely. See it rising? That had better settle down soon or we'll have to insert another control rod."

Orlov didn't know it at the time, but if Dobrynin was forced to use one of his emergency control rods, the ship and crew might have other problems no one had counted on then. Both rods were the two new controls that had been shipped in, each from the same batch and field that spawned Rod-25. If he had to insert one now...

Seeing he was as useless here as legs on a snake, Orlov shrugged and edged out through the hatch, thinking he might need to get to the bridge and inform Rodenko of the problem. Then he realized that Dobrynin would simply use his intercom, which would save him that long climb all the way up to the citadel, so he started off towards the mess hall instead.

Every step he took was a benefit to Dobrynin and his badly spooked reactor crews. Every step he took carried that thing in his pocket just a little farther aft, another few feet away from the tempestuous fire of the nuclear core of the ship, and when he took a ladder up, entering the helo bay level, the thick reinforced bulkhead there designed to protect the ship from fuel explosions made things even better. He was outside the armored core of the ship surrounding the engineering section, and Chief Dobrynin's morning would begin to settle down almost immediately.

Orlov thought he might go up yet another level and grab a sweet bun with raisins and a nice black tea for his mid-morning snack, but when he got to the mess hall he saw that a *mishman* had eaten the last bun. History would never record a moment like that, when a young man's appetite for sweet rolls, or Orlov's appetite for something to cure his boredom, would suddenly change everything again. When the ship's bakery chef spread the last bit of icing on that roll, he could not know that he was sculpting the contours of the history of World War II from that moment forward.

The simple fact was that Pavel Gavlik took a second roll that morning, the last roll, and Orlov found nothing left but the empty bakery bin. So he wandered one deck higher, soon finding himself near the helo bay when he might have stayed right there in the mess hall, munching his roll and drinking

black tea for the next half an hour—and that made all the difference. Was it the roll, or the Chief's restless curiosity when he saw the elevated energy level in the aft helo bay that morning?

"Hey, Zykov, what's going on? Why is everyone suiting up?" He could see a group of Marines donning special light camo-suits, and the weapons lockers were all open. Machine guns, grenade launchers, ammo canisters and other equipment were being pulled out and checked by the men. Off in the distance he heard the gruff voice of Sergeant Troyak riding someone for a sloppy rifle cleaning procedure, and the whole scene brought back memories of those first hours when he had been busted in rank and dumped here in the helo bay to join the Marine contingent.

"Orlov!" Zykov seemed eager to see him. "Just the man we need right now. Hey, Big K, the Chief is here!"

Troyak was Big K, at least to Zykov, who called him that instead of using his rank as an easy handle, or his real first name, Kandemir. The Sergeant stuck his head around the open door of a weapons locker and gave Orlov a scowl.

"Orlov. Good man on the job! I need you to get an *Oko* panel installed on the KA-40, with an infrared sensor suite. Can you do it? Kymkov is in sick bay and nobody else knows what they're doing here." He glared at his Marines, who shirked away, tending to their weapons and packs.

Orlov had been wandering below decks all morning, listless, brooding, thinking about that silly ride he had taken in the zeppelin and musing on the fact that Karpov was still out there somewhere doing the same thing. It seemed comical to him, that the once mighty Captain of the world's most powerful ship was now relegated to the status of an airship commandant. Serves him right, he had thought.

Everyone on the ship seemed busy that morning, except Orlov. All he had to do was roam about and kibitz with one section Chief after another until his Bridge watch would come up in another six hours. He was bored, but now he finally had something to do.

"*Oko* panel? You going somewhere?"

"Never mind where we're going, Orlov. Can you mount the damn radar panel or do I have to collar a *matoc* to get the job done?"

"Vse zayebalo!" said Orlov, swearing as he often did. "Of course I can mount a stupid *Oko* panel. Just let me grab a few men to fetch it from the

bay.”

“I’ve already done that, but they can’t sort out the damn cable connections. It’s over by the KA-40. See about it, will you Chief?”

Orlov nodded. What the fuck, he thought, sick of Troyak’s bluster. Where did he get off ordering me around, eh? But it really doesn’t matter. I need something to do, and now I’ve finally got something to keep my hands busy for the next twenty minutes. Who knows, maybe I can work my way aboard and have some more fun with Troyak and his damn Marines.

Zykov grinned at him as he went to the helo, and Orlov was sick of him too. But what were the Marines up to? Why was everyone getting rigged out as if they were about to storm the barricades? That was an idle curiosity that would soon change the lives of millions... a man with a sweet tooth, a missing roll, and Orlov.

The Chief got to the helicopter and he could see that it was already set up with a long range reserve fuel tank, and two air-to air weapons pods on the short outer pylons. The KA-40 was much bigger than its younger brother, the old KA-27 naval helicopter that had been used for so many years. It could be rigged out for ASW combat with torpedoes and sonar buoys, and also had the ability to mount short range air-to-air missile pods. There it was, the fat blue pig, as Orlov often referred to the KA-40 with its pale blue paint scheme. It wasn’t the sleek fighting airframe that was used on the faster KA-50/52 series helos, but it had twice the range, 1200 kilometers with those extra fuel stores, and it was a very capable platform for many roles: transport, search and rescue, AEW, ASW and more. The Chief wasted little time getting to the cables and configuring the infrared sensor suite for the unit hookups.

Troyak came over to check on things a minute later, frowning at the medusa cable clutter and shaking his head. “Six cables for one damn radar panel?”

“And two more for infrared,” said Orlov with a grin, glad that he could lord it over Troyak now, as he could install an *Oko* panel in his sleep, while the gritty Sergeant did not have the slightest idea what he was doing. The Chief fussed and cursed with the last cable, remembering he had to attach a special data feed link under the main cabin panels as a last step.

“What’s going on, Troyak. Why the radar?”

“Mission.” The Sergeant was characteristically curt. He had wasted too many words that morning trying to get that panel mounted, and was just glad

the job was finally done.

“Desert safari!” said Zykov as he came up with a grin, his short cropped blonde hair soon disappearing under his beret. “We have a search and rescue operation, or so I hear.”

“To the desert? What the fuck are we doing on this ship? First we go floating off in that damn zeppelin, now it’s Lawrence of Arabia.”

“Yes? Well we need a sensor suite operator. You want the job, Orlov?” Zykov winked at Troyak. He was joking, but Orlov obviously took him seriously. He thought for two seconds, realizing all he would be doing here is wandering about with nothing to do, looking at reports on stupid clip boards, nodding his head when a *mishman* requested shift leave, rousting the *matoc* out of their bunks for the next shift. He could leave that crap to the section Chiefs and have some real adventure here. In fact, even though he deprecated the zeppelin mission, he had been thrilled to get off the ship, and the ride he had taken in the sub-cloud car was more fun than anything he had done since he decided to jump ship, long ago, or so it seemed now. Here was another opportunity to get out into the world and do something different, and he didn’t think long.

“Sensor man? Sure! I can read these systems easily enough. It’s simple. One small screen, two digital readouts—not like that stuff on the bridge Rodenko fusses over.”

“I was only kidding, Chief,” said Zykov.

“Who’s kidding? You want a good man on the radar? I can take that watch. It will give me a chance to keep an eye on you two bilge rats and make sure the job gets done, eh? Where we going?”

Troyak gave Zykov a hard nudge in the ribs. “Nobody knows yet,” he said. “And look, we can only take ten men, so—”

Orlov was quick enough to see that Troyak was trying to give him the brush off, but at that moment a most unusual man came into the helo bay with Fedorov, and the distraction was just what he needed to worm his way aboard the KA-40.

Chapter 23

At that moment Fedorov came up, talking with a heavy set, middle aged man in an odd looking uniform, with a black fleece beret on his otherwise balding head. He wore baggy battle dress trousers with wide thigh pockets, a thick canvass belt, and black dragoon ammo boots. Orlov caught a flash of silver on his cap, where an odd looking badge was affixed. It looked like a complex silver globe mounted on a stand, but it was actually an astrolabe, the ancient instrument used for navigation that Chaucer wrote about as early as 1391 in his treatise on the subject. Ancient mariners would use it ‘to know justly the four quarters of the world, as East, West, North, and South.’

“There you are, Sergeant,” said Fedorov. “Allow me to introduce a most remarkable man here. This is Major Vladimir Peniakoff.”

In spite of his Russian name, the man was actually a Belgian, born of Russian parents in 1897, which made him nearly 44 years old at that time. His unit was set up in Cairo in 1942 as Fedorov had learned in his research. Yet here he was, already thick as thieves with Wavell, who had a penchant for special operations types, and seemed to find this man very useful.

Fedorov learned that “Popski,” as Peniakoff was called, would associate with the famous John “Shan” Hackett, who would fight in Syria, North Africa, and later raise and command the British 4th Parachute Brigade for the big operation at Arnhem that would one day be called “Market-Garden.” It was Hackett who would be instrumental in the formation of the special unit designated Number 1 Demolition Squadron, PPA, and that last bit would stand for “Popski’s Private Army.” It served well as a long range reconnaissance and raiding group behind enemy lines in Libya, and though it was not presently functioning in that role, Wavell had encouraged Popski to “get some sand on his boots” and see what was happening in the lower desert.

While much of the real military action would be anchored to the main coastal road, both sides were always sending out long range patrols to scout the endless desert to the south. Some ranged as far as Bayhira and Fafra Oasis, and the Italians had a small force still garrisoning the oasis at Giarabub northwest of Siwa. The British had scouted Siwa itself, and Popski already had men there with the Berber tribesmen, finding them useful sources of

information on the local desert conditions, hazards, and the activities of enemy troops in the region. Wavell had suggested Siwa as the natural place to take O'Connor if they could possibly find his downed plane. It was well watered, with stores of fuel, ammunition and food that were kept there for use by the British raiders.

Whether he ever spoke Russian in the world Fedorov came from was a moot point now, for Popski spoke it fluently in this world, as he also spoke Arabic and English, and he was apparently getting an early start on his career as a special forces raider in the Long Range Desert Group for Wavell in this retelling of his colorful tale.

He had come to Egypt in 1924 to operate a sugar mill, and there he learned to pilot a plane and navigate the Nile on his boat, named the *Astrolabe*. He also acquired an old Model-A Ford, which he called his 'Pisspot,' and he used it to learn to navigate in the desert with nothing more than a sun compass, a good timepiece, and the stars. When his marriage to an Egyptian born Belgian woman finally faltered at the outbreak of the war, Popski was a bit of a derelict for a time. The marriage broke up back in England, his two daughters shipped overseas to South Africa, and he walked into the Bank of England one day and deposited nearly every shilling to his name, but not to his account. It was a gift to the Crown.

He was a man burning his bridges after that, and like so many other lost souls, he immediately thought to sign up with the military. The R.A.F. and Royal Navy would have nothing to do with him at this age, even though he had learned to pilot aircraft. So he signed on with the Army, and soon found himself in Egypt again. Frequenting the bars in Cairo, he heard a great deal in the seedy warrens of that place, and he began to pass information to the British on things the Italian Army was up to in the desert, hoping to prove himself useful.

Aging for any real military work, Peniakoff bent the ear of a medical officer after he joined the British Army in Cairo. He convinced the man to certify him as fit for duty, in A1 condition, even though he had a gimpy leg that often bothered him on his long desert hikes. He eventually ended up in the 3rd Battalion of the Libyan Arab Force (L.A.F.) where he got his promotion to Major, though he soon realized the L.A.F. wasn't destined to do much of anything in the war. So he thought to try a foray behind enemy lines to gather intelligence or blow up a supply depot or two, and this gave him his

start in the special operations he would become famous for.

It was there that he met up with Major Jock Cameron, who would become his steady right hand man and companion on many raids. It was there also, that he assumed the nickname history would know him by, Popski. It was actually the name of a dog, the sidekick of a Russian character in an old comic strip, and his mates found it easier to code for signals transmission than the name Peniakoff.

Fate had an odd way of weaving the fortunes of all these men together that day. Peniakoff would one day come to know and operate with another British commando of some note, Lieutenant Colonel John Haselden, the very same man that had led the small raid to find and capture Chief Orlov on the shores of the Caspian Sea. He would find himself mixed up in another rescue operation, the elaborate raid that had been planned by Fedorov using the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, and Troyak's dogged defense against the encroaching German Panzer troops as they desperately searched for Orlov. And here was the burly, irascible Chief yet again, right in the thick of things, as if some inexorable gravity was gathering all these souls into the same well of fate and time.

"The British call him Popski," said Fedorov, and he made the introductions, surprised to see Orlov inside the KA-40, as he had not selected him for this mission.

Troyak smiled at the name, but his discerning eye saw more in this man than he seemed on the surface. There was a weathered texture on the man, the product of long days and nights in the desert, and his features were well sculpted by time for his age, his face browned by the sun. Yet his eyes held a warmth that seemed very engaging when he looked at you, a softer soul behind that wrinkled face. He seemed to be taking everything in, the men, their equipment, the activity in the helo bay, and of course, the KA-40 where it sat beneath those long, drooping counter rotating props. There was just a touch of amazement in his expression, though he said nothing. Simply offering a firm handshake. Then Fedorov briefed them on the mission.

"A plane carrying an important British General has gone down in the desert—General O'Connor. We have every reason to believe that he has survived the crash landing, and that the Italians might be out looking for the crash site even as we speak. Our mission is to locate the plane and find this man. He must not be captured. In ten minutes I want to be airborne in that

helicopter with this man here, Sergeant Troyak, and a select squad of his choosing.”

“And what about me,” said Orlov from the back of the helo where he was still fussing with the *Oko* panel cables. “Someone has to sort out this mess on the *Oko* panel. I’ve only just got the damn thing cabled. We’ll need to test it once we get airborne and then initialize the infrared module.”

“You know this equipment, Orlov?”

“Sure, it’s the one thing I studied well enough to actually learn in the Tech school. Then I decided it was easier to just become Chief of Operations.”

The Marines laughed at this, and Fedorov smiled.

“Besides,” said Orlov. “I can fly this thing too. An extra pilot is always handy. Yes?”

Fedorov had read Orlov’s report from the Zeppelin mission, and he had been pleased with the results. Yes, another man who could pilot the KA-40 would be a good idea, so why not, he thought.

“Very well, I’ll clear it with Admiral Volsky. It’s one thing to have the ship’s Captain on an away team. The Admiral can fill my shoes easily enough, but who’s going to knock heads together if you come along, Chief?”

It was soon decided that Orlov could be spared, and so the team was set and the men were mounting up minutes later. The quiet, pudgy man with the black beret entered the main cabin with the pilot and co-pilot in the front seats; Orlov and Fedorov were on the three seats just behind them. Troyak selected nine other Marines for the security detail, which made for fifteen passengers. Much bigger than the older KA-27, this helo could carry up to 24 men in total, though this was the typical mission load. Troyak’s squad was “heavy” this time, as they did not know what sort of opposition they might encounter on the ground. The men had assault rifles, two machine guns, a mortar, grenade launcher and a *Ilga* hand held SAM. Two men carried lighter RPGs instead of the heavier anti-armor weapons they had taken to Siberia, but they were more than capable of defeating any armor they might encounter. Fedorov explained that if they did encounter anything, there would be no real armor to speak of at this time in the war, and the light shoulder fired RPG-30 could blast through 600mm of armor with its shaped tandem charge.

Popski took a keen interest in the weapons the Marines were carrying,

particularly the machine guns, which he eyed with a look approaching envy on his face.

“That looks to be one fine weapon there,” he said, pointing at Zykov’s assault rifle, which gave the corporal just the perfect opportunity to expound on its virtues.

“Bizon-2 SMG,” he said handing the gun to Popski. “High impulse Makarov rounds in a helical sixty-four round magazine—”

“Very good in a firefight,” Troyak had heard the litany many times before, and he finished it off for Zykov. “Particularly at close quarters.”

Yet Zykov was not deterred. He could see the light in Popski’s eyes as he looked at the machine guns, which were really the only weapons he ever respected in the work he did in the desert. “That one there is good for ranged suppressive fire—*Pecheneg* Bullpup 7.62mm.”

“Yes? And what about the rest? What’s that slung off the back of that pack?”

“Auto-grenade launcher. Great area denial weapon. It’ll pop off these little cherries thirty at a time.” He held up a small grenade, a wry grin on his face. He was obviously enjoying his little session with the visitor, a bit smug in his thinking that no weapon of this era could ever match his own.

As they took off, Popski smiled with delight. “Amazing,” he said to Fedorov. “Where can I get one of these? It beats my old Pisspot Model-A for getting around, and then some.”

“Where are we headed?” Orlov looked to the ex-navigator as the helo rose from *Kirov*’s aft flight deck and angled away in a heavy wash of churning rotors.

“South,” said Fedorov quietly. “South into the greatest desert on earth, the Egyptian Sahara. You’ll see things there that we’d never find in Mother Russia,” he said. “And this man Popski is our expert guide.”

At this Popski doffed his cap with a smile. Now it was his time to deliver a little lecture. “Scorpions and snakes are the least of it, sun and sand the worst you’ll ever find. The Western Desert is the most dangerous place on this earth, riddled with tombs and ancient grave sites, and haunted by the souls of the dead since the time of the Pharos, and ages past.”

“And will we get to ride a camel?” Orlov gave him a grin.

“Not likely,” said Popski, “but I’ve a squadron of nice rugged jeeps at Siwa if we need to move on the ground, all rigged out with some good 50-

caliber machine guns. There's also a detachment of the Aussie 6th Divisional Cavalry out here watching Giarabub, and they could be handy in a pinch if we need some help. We'll be right on the edge of the real desert, the deep desert, the Great Sand Sea. Dunes there get to be a thousand feet high, star dunes, rumbling dunes, wind and sand storms that will take the skin right off your face if you don't have protection." He gestured to the yellow dyed cloth that he wore around his neck. "Not for decoration mates," he said, his roots as a long time Anglophile steeped in British culture very evident, even though he was speaking Russian and he used the word 'comrades' in that language.

"Egyptians call the Western Desert the 'Land of the Dead,' the gateway to the underworld, and most anything you run across built by human hands out there is a temple, to some evil god, a cemetery or a tomb. Think of it as a border zone, a hot desert twilight zone between this world and the next, and believe me, many a man has slipped across that frontier, never to be seen again. You'll need to keep your wits about you out there, and you'll need good equipment too."

He eyed the satchels and backpacks the men had assembled, and the arsenal of weapons. "And you'll need more than guns and ammunition to survive out here. The heat can be unbearable, unless you have a good source of water. Even the hills are scorched black in places, as if burned by some great fire long ago. The only humans you'll find where we're headed will be black clad Berbers, drifting about the landscape like ghouls, and looking for trouble. Some say they're all in the service of demons, but I've managed to persuade a few to work for me instead. They aren't much good at night, however. Berbers get spooked at night. They say the witches come, digging up the graves of the newly buried dead, and there's plenty of them in that damn desert. Dig them up they will, and they'll tear the bodies right apart, making off with a fellow's head dangling from their mouth like a rabid dog. That's just Berber talk, mind you, but no sir, you don't want to get lost out here unless you know what you're about. God help this General O'Connor if he's wandered away from his aircraft, and God help him even more if he hasn't. It will attract Italian patrols like flies on shit."

All the men were listening, but no one said anything.

Chapter 24

When Rommel moved east after his lightning swift advance from Agheila, Wavell had to make the uncomfortable decision to leave one of his best divisions behind, the Australian 6th. He had meant to recall it to Alexandria for shipment to Greece, but O'Connor had convinced him that replacing it with the 9th Division, already in the Nile Delta, would be a waste of time and much needed fuel. So the 6th stayed on the line, with a Brigade at Benghazi and to others reorganizing as motorized units by trying to get as many captured Italian trucks as possible in good working order.

Two brigades of the division had been part of O'Connor's column pointed west to Sirte when Rommel struck, and the instant the General realized what was happening, he had given orders for a withdrawal to Tobruk. Thanks to those Italian trucks, the 16th and 17th Brigades made the long journey back across the thin desert tracks to reach the fortress safely. The 19th Brigade had been at Benghazi, and though it had better roads through the mountainous Jebel country, it had to go on foot, barely managing to retreat through Derna to Tobruk before the Axis columns could cut it off. It joined the other two brigades and took up defensive positions in Tobruk, only to learn that Wavell was ordering a further withdrawal to Bardia and the Egyptian border—but the 6th Division would not be moving. Instead they would be assigned to hold out at Tobruk for as long as possible, supplied by sea, and to be evacuated by that route should their position become untenable.

The Australian 6th Divisional Cavalry Regiment was the one unit that had managed to escape the onerous garrison duty. Being well motorized, it was sent south to keep watch on the long frontier wire, and particularly on the Italian outposts at Garn el Grein south of Fort Maddalena, and at the Oasis of Giarabub. Along the way, Captain Brown's Squadron of motorized Infantry fought a sharp engagement with the Italians at Garn El Grein, cutting through the wire to try and take the place by surprise, but finding the enemy defense alert and vigorous. Brown soon found his column under artillery fire, and the Italians had also managed to call on the services of three C200 fighters from Giarabub, which were strafing his men and trucks until they finally ran out of ammunition.

Captain Brown withdrew his column to the British held outpost at Siwa, where he joined the Regiment HQ under Colonel Fergusson and the 2nd Squadron commanded by Major Abbot. Even together, the force comprised no more than 300 men in trucks, mostly armed with Vickers machine guns and a few light mortars beyond the rifles carried by the troopers. Yet Fergusson soon was given the task of trying to lever the Italians out of their oasis outpost at Giarabub.

“It was one thing to go after them while we were heading west,” said Fergusson as he gathered his officers together to try and come up with a plan. “Now, with Rommel heading east, we aren’t likely to get any of the reinforcements I requested.” Fergusson had asked for two more infantry companies and an armored squadron, with supporting artillery and a platoon of engineers. He would get only the artillery and engineers, four 25 pounders, two 40mm Bofors and 32 engineers under Captain O’Grady. The Italians at Giarabub were now thought to number at least 1200 men, with six MG companies, engineers and artillery under Colonel Costiana. The British therefore found themselves outnumbered four to one.

Brigadier General Morshead’s 18th Australian Brigade was supposed to reinforce the desert force at Siwa and capture the Italian outpost at Giarabub, but it would not be coming in this history. Hard pressed by at least five Italian Infantry divisions, Wavell had sent it to Tobruk by sea to reinforce that garrison to four brigades. So Colonel Fergusson was alone at Siwa with his 300 man motorized cavalry unit, and a few hardened souls belonging to the Long Range Desert Group that were watering there, Popski’s confederates.

The ‘diggers’ in the tough Australian cavalry unit nonetheless set to aggressive patrolling and probing of the enemy’s positions, always answered by plenty of enemy artillery and machinegun fire. Unable to live with the tortuous names on the maps they had of the area, they began to rename prominent terrain features with easier handles. A depression where Captain O’Grady had been forced to dismount his men to push his 25 pounders along on foot soon became “O’Grady’s Dell.” A narrow wadi covered by a small Italian 44mm gun the Aussies called “Pipsqueak” was summarily named “Pipsqueak Valley.” A stony outcrop known as El Hamra became “Brown’s Hill.”

The heat wasn’t as bad in December, though it was bitterly cold at night

under the cloudless, star sewn sky. The pristine, rugged beauty of the desert was the only consolation the Aussies had. When word came that they could count on no further reinforcements for some time, Colonel Fergusson resigned himself to a cautious watch on Giarabub, still mounting regular patrols, largely in an effort to convince the Italians he had far more troops than he actually did.

“Keep nipping at them like an angry terrier,” he told his men. “If they find out we’re no more than battalion strength, then the tables will turn bang away, and we’ll be the ones sitting at Siwa with the Degos at the perimeter trying to get in.”

A day later he got even more disheartening news. General O’Connor’s plane had gone down in the desert somewhere northeast of Giarabub. The Blenheim twin engine light bomber, once the fastest plan in the air force, was now well behind the aeronautical engineering curve, and it had been no match for the Me-109 that found it that day. The German fighter got off one good pass, striking the left wing with MG fire as it flashed away, apparently out of ammunition.

In the effort to evade, the Blenheim had turned south and dove. Before the plane could recover altitude, the winds kicked up into a sudden, fierce sandstorm, blowing heavily out of the northwest. They tried to climb above it, but that single pass by the Me-109 had nicked the left engine and it caught fire under the strain. Unable to climb, they knew they would have no chance in that sandstorm, so the General told the pilot to run south away from the storm and towards Siwa. They were still well north of the oasis when the engine gave out, and so they wisely elected to attempt a crash landing.

Lieutenant Cory, of B Troop 1/6th Australian Cav, thought he saw something through the gloomy silted sky that evening, a strange glow in the sky, but he and his men had to hunker down for the storm as well. They were out on point, up beyond a gully they had dubbed “Davidson’s Pass” after the first scout section that went through. Their position was right near the Libyan border at Ayn Melfa, which they had taken from a small Italian patrol the previous day. Giarabub was 35 kilometers due west of his post, and much farther to the east, on a high rocky outcrop, there was a lonesome, haunted plateau that would soon be visited by spirits and demons from another world.

* * *

The KA-40 with Fedorov's rescue team was very close, well south over the dread Qattara Depression, at the trailing edge of that storm as it swept south. The depression was the lowest place in Egypt, descending from impassible craggy escarpments to a depth of 80 meters below sea level. There were endless miles of soft wet 'sebkha,' a silty soil that made the area impassible to all vehicles and even camels if they were loaded with any cargo. All around it lay a maze of parched dry lake beds fed by gnarled, dry wadis. Other places were dotted with shallow sand and salt marshes, fringed by parched stony ground that had been baked in the hot sun and scoured by the harsh desert winds for ages. It was no place for any man to be, if he wanted to live very long, and O'Connor's Blenheim was fortunate to have avoided it on his run south.

Fedorov was stooped over a good map of the region, checking signal coordinates from O'Connor's last known position just before the plane went down. He squinted out through the forward view panes on the helo, seeing the dull brown silt in the air, and knowing that if they found themselves in the thick of it, the engine filters could clog up and they would be in the same position as O'Connor. At the moment, they were in a void between two great arms of brown blowing sand and silt, and Fedorov thought they had better look for a safe place to land. Even technology from his future time would have to bow before the wrath of Mother Nature, and so he began to look over the map for a suitable spot where they could ride out the last of the storm.

"This feature looks interesting," he said, fingering a high plateau surrounded by sheer escarpments. "Come to 170 southeast, and we can set down on that plateau. The map indicates firm ground, some gravel and scattered sand over hard stone. It should take the weight of the helo easily enough." He showed Popski the map, indicating the spot he had in mind in case he had any advice.

"Put down here," said Popski. "Bir Basúre. There's a water cairn there that feeds from an underground artesian spring. It's not much, but better than nothing. There's a road that passes close by that place, and runs here, all the way down to Siwa. These other roads shown on that map of yours don't even exist, as far as I know, and that's a good deal when it comes to this desert. But what's this bit here?" He pointed to a shaded zone on the map sitting square atop the escarpment fringed plateau, a large triangle spanning some 50

kilometers.

“Old map,” said Fedorov, quickly folding it and putting it away. In fact it was a very new map, printed in 2021, and the features Popski had asked him about were new developments northwest of Siwa, and the roads that serviced them. Fedorov reminded himself to keep that map under wraps in the future. Popski was not aware of their true origins and identity. He had only been told that they were ‘allies,’ a catchall category that would hang on the citizens and soldiers of many nations before this war was over.

“The desert shifts and changes every day,” said Popski. “At least the bugger got Bir Basúre right when he drew that map. There’s three hills north of the place. If you get down low it should be easy to spot. That will put us about 70 kilometers northwest of Siwa. I can radio the lads there and have them come out with a few jeeps.”

“Well the storm can’t last forever,” said Fedorov. “We’ll be conducting the search with the helicopter.”

“No, it won’t last forever,” said Popski, “but it may damn well come to feel that way once it sweeps in. I’ve seen these storms bury field phone wire six feet deep in an hour. That’s stony ground where we’re landing, well up on the plateau, so we’re safe from sand drifts. But if it’s no bother to you, I’d feel better with some vehicles at hand. Just in case.” He gave Fedorov a wink and a nod, and the young Captain could see no reason why he shouldn’t make the call.

As they made their approach, Fedorov spotted the angular plateau ahead, recognizing it from an article he had read the previous year... so long ago it seemed now, in the year 2020. That was the place where BP made that great breakthrough. He was not thinking of Bletchley Park this time, but of another BP, British Petroleum. Yes, that was the place that was supposed to save the Western world for the next twenty to fifty years with flows of light sweet crude that must be hidden there even now, deep beneath the forbidding terrain. What was the name? He remembered it now, a strange handle for the world’s newest superfield in 2020. It was called Sultan Apache.

* * *

“Troyak calls it the Devil’s Teardrop,” said Orlov.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Zykov. “The Devil never weeps. He’s too busy

laughing.”

The other men chuckled at that as they huddled near their field tents. The helo was down, safely landed with the engines capped off and secured from blowing sand, which wasn't bad yet. The men had established a camp to wait for Popski's comrades and their jeeps. Popski thought it might be wise to have a look around while they were on the ground, and Fedorov agreed. If the Italians had patrols out, they might stumble on them by surprise.

Popski assisted the Marines in getting 'desertized' as he called it. He had them tuck their trouser cuffs into the top of their boots, and made sure each man had a good pair of goggles and a scarf. Thankfully they had brought these things at his request, and they now proved their worth when the sand started blowing. The Marines then set up tents that could be well sealed off, but Troyak knew they would have to mount a security watch, and he took the post himself, along with Popski, who seemed restless and ill at ease the moment they were on the ground again.

“You expecting the night witches any time soon?” Zykov asked their guide, ribbing him a bit.

“If they come, they'll be in an Autoblinda-40 armored car with a pair of nasty 8mm machine guns mounted in the turret.”

“Oh?” Zykov smiled. “If they do, they'll get a nice little RPG-30 for their trouble, and I'll blow them half way to hell.”

Popski gave him a stolid grin. “You men might be well armed, and I can see you've been well trained, but understand one thing here. You're never safe in the desert. Never. Look around, we already *are* half way to hell. If any place on this earth could be called that, it's right under your ass as we speak. Your Sergeant Troyak knows as much. I can see it in the way he took his post the moment we landed.” Popski nodded to Troyak, who was standing off a ways out from the helicopter, his assault rifle unshouldered and at the ready.

“Hey Popski,” said Orlov. “What do you make of this?”

He tossed their guide the strange object he had found in Siberia.

“One of your grenades?” Popski gave it an odd look.

“Naw, just something I happened across on another mission. Troyak calls it the Devil's Teardrop. Ever seen anything like it?”

“Can't say as I have. Damn thing is smooth as silk, so it is not any kind of rock I've ever seen. Good name for it, given its shape. Where'd you come by it?”

“Siberia, another kind of desert. Dangerous there too.”

“Scared the shit out of Orlov,” said Zykov. “That’s for sure.”

“Zavali yebalo!” Orlov swore in protest, but Zykov just gave him a wink.

“Maybe I’ll get there one day and we’ll see,” said Popski. And he tossed the object back to Orlov, who held it in his hand, fiddling with it like a man might play with a marble. Then he suddenly had a strange look on his face, his eyes widening, hand opening quickly as he dropped the object to the stony ground.

“Yob!” he said loudly, shaking his hand. “What did you do to the damn thing ? It’s hot as hell!”

They all stared at the object, amazed to see that it was glowing with a strange luminescence, a phosphorescent green. Then there came a roar that sounded like a peal of distant thunder, and Popski looked over his shoulder, his weathered eyes laden with concern.

He reached for his submachine gun where it rode easily on his broad round shoulder. The other Marines acted on sheer instinct, weapons ready and up on their feet at once. A second crack of thunder was heard, then eerie green lightning scored the darkening reddish brown sky, which was suddenly alight, backlit with a bright glow.

Any explosion in the desert could mean only one thing, thought Popski. They had been found. It had to be artillery. They were under attack.

Part IX

The Brigade

“Our fate is not frightful because it is unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and ironclad. Time is the thing I am made of. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that tears me apart, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.”

— Jorge Luis Borges

Chapter 25

The British position on the Egyptian Frontier was far from secure. The 6th Australian Division was now penned up in Tobruk, and the 9th division held a wide defensive arc that stretched from Bardia through Sidi Azzeiz to Hafid Ridge, but it wasn't staying. A German General in Rommel's Afrika Korps had looked at his map and made a telling pronouncement on the position around Bardia and Sollum. "It was a tactician's dream and a logistician's nightmare," he had said, and that was now proving true.

With O'Connor's plane down and the General lost in the desert somewhere north of Siwa, Brigadier General Neame was in command of the withdrawal. He took a look at the map as well, and concluded the same thing. Bardia could not be held as it was north of Sollum, where a steep escarpment finally reached the coast again from positions well inland to the east. Largely impassible to armor or vehicles, there were only a few narrow defiles that permitted motorized traffic to pass the barrier of that escarpment. The best of these was Halfaya Pass, very near the small coastal town of Sollum itself.

With only the 9th Australian division in hand, and the scattered remnants of his 2nd Armored division, he realized there was no way he could hold off the enemy advance. So he determined to withdraw the 9th Australian division from its defensive perimeter around Bardia and through Sollum, to a safe position behind that imposing escarpment. It was like a king falling back to the safety of a hard stone castle. Now his badly outnumbered troops only had to defend the few passes at Sollum, Halfaya and further south at a place the British called "Halfway House" near hill 617, a pass about half way down the length of the long escarpment, 30 kilometers east of Sollum.

It was a wise move, for now it would force Rommel to continue east for another 70 to 80 kilometers if he wanted to get beyond the escarpment where any flanking move would again have a chance to cut the vital main coastal road. The tactician's dream was that escarpment, and the natural castle in the desert it formed, well supplied by that coastal road running up to Sollum. The Logistician's nightmare was the fact that in making a further move east to try and isolate that position, Rommel had only thin secondary roads through increasingly rough terrain in front of him. The ground became more stony, with deeper sand in small pockets, and occasional depressions to dry lake

beds that would impede vehicular traffic.

Yet what Brigadier Neame did not know was the real strength of the force that the wily German General now had in his Afrika Korps. What had started as a blocking force and reconnaissance in force over a month ago had now become a full fledged offensive that OKW had been feeding with new units as fast as the ships could get them to Tripoli.

General Keitel had been busy those last weeks, and he delivered on his promise to Rommel in spades. Not only was Malta being targeted for Axis occupation, the 5th Light Division had been rapidly reinforced with additional armor and halftracks, and re-designated "21st Panzer Division." More than this, a second Panzer Division, the 15th was quickly moved to Tripoli, much sooner than it had arrived in the history Fedorov knew. Keitel had also put together a new motorized Schnell Division, designated the 90th Light, again formed early in this retelling of events, and though it did not yet have its trucks, the Germans leaned on their new found friends in Vichy North Africa and politely asked them to sell them 1500 trucks from Tunisia and Algeria. They could move them by rail into Tunisia, and from there they could make their way to Tripoli. When the troops of the 90th Light arrived by sea, they would find their vehicles waiting for them.

Rommel's daring advance in December of 1940 had recovered all of Cyrenaica and drawn Hitler's attention. At first he was surprised, as he had given Rommel orders to simply stop O'Connor and wait for reserves. But the Führer did not waste any anger over the fact that Rommel had pressed on under his own initiative, much to the chagrin and frustration of the Italians, who thought they were still in overall command in North Africa.

"He has certainly stopped the British," said Keitel. "Yet it is clear that Rommel has made true the old maxim first espoused by Napoleon: the best defense is a good offence. He's driven O'Connor off, taken Benghazi, which will augment our supply deliveries by over 1200 tons per day. In this light, we can supply three divisions now, possibly even four. He's taken Derna, another minor port, and invested the British fortress of Tobruk."

"He has not taken it?" Hitler gave Keitel a sharp glance, his dark eyes playing over the map.

"He's bypassed it for the time being, and pushed the British all the way back to Bardia, here my Führer." Keitel indicated the place on the map. "The Italians have invested Tobruk with five infantry divisions."

“Then they will take it?”

“Perhaps, but Rommel is making sure that the British will not be able to reinforce it by land.”

“And what about Malta?”

“That operation is well underway. Student has two regiments on the island now, and he is presently landing the third. Resistance is much lighter than we expected. I do not think we will need to commit the 1st Mountain Division as planned. Apparently the British had only a single brigade defending the island, and not the two brigades Canaris said he had identified. In another day we will have four regiments of Fallschirmjagers on Malta, and the entire 22nd Luftland Air Landing division in reserve.”

“And the 1st Mountain Division? They performed admirably at Gibraltar. What do we do with them?”

“We could send them over to the operation in Greece. These are experienced mountain troops.”

“We have over 20 divisions there,” Hitler waved his hand, his eyes still fixed on the map, with that strange inner fire burning from a well of blackness. “The Greek Army won’t last another two weeks. Is that Rommel’s present position?”

“Yes, my Führer. The British have not been able to stop him. He is now thinking he might kick them out of Bardia and Sollum, and possibly continue east. It appears OKW cannot stop him either.”

Hitler smiled. The lines of the battle were advancing into Egypt now, well ahead of schedule. “I heard that man said he would give me the Suez canal in 90 days. I told him to take up a blocking position, but I did not think he would choose one so close to the Egyptian Border! He’s taken back all of Cyrenaica! Well, he has sixty days left to deliver on that promise about the canal. Can he do this, Keitel?”

“Supplies must be wearing thin after a his long advance. Note how he has kept his troops well inland, away from the coast where the Royal Navy could become a factor.”

“What of Operation Anvil?” That was the code name for the air/naval maneuvers now underway. Malta was the anvil, and the heavy squadrons of planes and ships were the hammers.

“The Italians believe they can finish the job, though our Western Task Force out of Gibraltar has just rendezvoused with the French fleet from

Toulon. The Royal Navy is coming out to challenge the Italians, just as we thought they would. They can match the Italians, and their experience at naval warfare may make all the difference, but we will make sure they do not succeed. Admiral Raeder has assured me of this. Lütjens is on the *Hindenburg*, moving east at this very moment. With any luck, we will soon find and destroy the last of the Royal Navy, and then you may have the pleasure of getting the good news that *Hindenburg* is shelling Alexandria!”

Hitler laughed at that, clearly pleased. “I like this man, Rommel. And Raeder’s advice has proven well taken.” And Volkov’s advice as well, he thought. That man told me to send strong forces to North Africa... And why not? I have divisions sitting in Spain that are not needed there, strong troops that could be put to better use in Rommel’s able hands. Then he made one of those snap decisions taken in a moment of jubilation that would have dramatic effects on the outcome of the desert war in North Africa.

“Give Rommel anything he needs, supplies, tanks, anything. In fact, you may send him the 1st Mountain Division if it is not needed on Malta. And start putting together more motorized infantry at once.”

“We are presently forming a new division, the 90th Schnell. The French made good on their promise and they will deliver the trucks to Tripoli as planned.

“Then they are good for something after all,” Hitler jibed. “One new motorized division will not be sufficient. What about the Grossdeutschland Regiment that was used at Gibraltar?”

“It has been reforming as a full motorized division in Spain, my Führer.”

“Yes, I was also going to order it to the buildup on the new front we will form near the Ukraine frontier, but this battle in North Africa is looking very interesting now. Once we finish off Greece, only Turkey separates our forces from those of Ivan Volkov. Can our armies in the Balkans subdue Turkey?”

“We are presently war gaming that very question, my Führer.”

“If the results are satisfactory, then move Grossdeutschland to Italy. From there we can send it to Rommel as another strong motorized reinforcement. Feed a good fire, Keitel. I am not yet ready to smash Sergei Kirov’s Soviet Russia. All things in time. If we can link up with Volkov and the Orenburg Federation, that will make Kirov think twice about his advance into the Caucasus. In the meantime, feed a fire. Support Rommel with everything you have. Send someone over there to see what he needs. Who is a good man for

the job?”

“General Paulus is available.”

“Good. Send Paulus. Tell him to report on Rommel’s condition, intentions, and timetable. Have him work up a list of everything needed to take the Suez canal in sixty days time. That is the real prize. If we take the canal we have all but knocked the British right out of this war. And at the moment, there is nothing but a few demoralized Commonwealth divisions and the empty desert between Rommel and Cairo! Raeder was correct. I would have to commit over fifty divisions in Russia to get this far, and here this Rommel has brought us to a place where we have the English on the ropes, and with what, two divisions? Send him more! Build that force up to a full Korps, as quickly as possible, Keitel. Fan those flames.”

Hitler’s assessment was largely correct, and he might be forgiven for having overlooked one other odd report that had found its way into the intelligence stream that day. It was from the Italian garrison at Giarabub, and they seemed to be concerned that the British were sending heavy reinforcements to the Siwa Oasis, perhaps intending to attack their own position, or execute a deep flanking maneuver to surprise Rommel. Keitel mentioned it in passing, but Hitler brushed the matter off.

“The Italians,” he said shaking his head. “They are afraid of their own shadow. What could the British possibly have to send that far south to Siwa? It is 230 kilometers from their positions near Bardia and Sollum. Why would they do this when they can barely hold the main coastal road?”

“The report indicated that troops bearing the insignia of the British 7th Armored had been spotted, mostly artillery supporting the light Australian patrols snooping around Giarabub.”

“7th Armored?”

“That was the division the British used to make their bold offensive last month. It almost single handedly destroyed the entire Italian 10th Army. Yet all our intelligence indicates it is still reforming at Alexandria. The British are also bringing up the 2nd New Zealand Division. Apparently they have decided not to attempt a reinforcement of Greece.”

“In that they are very wise,” said Hitler. “They would have simply thrown those troops away.” Now Hitler’s eyes darkened, a cloud of worry there. “I was told that we have intercepted a message indicating General O’Connor is no longer commanding the British withdrawal.”

“That is correct.”

“So the rat has fled the sinking ship, eh? What will the newspapers say about the man now that our Rommel is stealing the headlines?” He thought again. “Well, could this 7th Armored Division possibly be ready this soon? Might this man, O’Connor be planning another of his bold offensives?”

“Highly unlikely, my Führer. Not from that deep southern flank. And if he did throw the 7th Armored Division that far south, how could the British keep it supplied?”

Hitler nodded. “Very well,” he said. “But move those units to North Africa as soon as possible. Move Grossdeutschland to Italy, no matter what your war games tell you about Turkey. Cut the orders today.”

It was one of those impulsive decisions that Hitler was noted for over the course of the war. He never concerned himself with logistics, except in the grandest scheme of things as he set his mind on getting control of oil and resources. How his armies would actually extract and use those resources was not his concern.

Keitel might explain the difficulties of supplying troops in the desert, the limits of daily tonnage they might get through the few good ports they had at Tripoli and Benghazi, but Hitler did not wish to hear any of that. He simply wanted divisions moved about, and what the Führer wanted, he almost always got. In this case, however, Hitler’s impulsive order to reinforce Rommel was to prove very timely, for the Western Desert was about to have visitors, with weapons and capabilities the Führer could only dream about now.

The Italians had been both right and wrong with their report from Giarabub. There was a small detachment from the 7th Royal Horse Artillery that had just arrived at Siwa, the artillery that had been requested by Colonel Fergusson for his attack on Giarabub. He had also requested tanks, but what he would actually get was beyond his wildest imagining. Something was blowing in from the heart of the sandstorm that had bedeviled the area the last 24 hours. Something wholly unexpected even now slipping through a crack in this broken world to arrive at this fateful hour in the lonesome, wild deserts of a forsaken land.

The instant Troyak saw that odd glow in the sky his instincts for battle served him well. “Marines! Battle order!” He shouted, and his men reacted with the same ardor, weapons in hand, with troops fanning out in a wide

perimeter forward of the KA-40. One man was setting up an 82mm mortar to the rear, another lowering the auto grenade launcher to its tripod mount. Still others had taken up positions behind any cover they could find, with riflemen darting behind some large rocks while other men with the RPG-30s looked for a depression where they could get a good field of fire on anything advancing on their position.

Popski stood there for a brief moment, eyes puckered, hearing a strange growl coming from the south, out of the heart of the high plateau they were on. There was a sudden, foreboding wind, blowing opposite the direction of the storm, and it gave him a shiver, a cold wind that raised his hackles, as though he were standing at the edge of infinity and about to slip over.

Who could be up here, he wondered? Could the Italians have patrols this far out? Now he clearly heard the sound of advancing vehicles, but they did not sound like anything he had heard before. They were certainly not those jeeps from the Long Range Desert Patrol he had talked about, and the Aussie Cavalry unit had forsaken its light tanks and reorganized in trucks for this deployment.

There was a heavy growl to the engine sound, deep and menacing. Might this be the armor that Fergusson and his Aussie detachment had requested? Perhaps the Desert Rats had managed to get a battalion of tanks fit for duty, but how would they get them here so soon? They would have had to go by rail out past the rocky hill country beyond Al Fayum and Birkat Karun. From there they could have taken the long desert road through Aweina and Zabu. He had scouted it himself on his last trip out to Siwa, but why would they climb up here? The oasis country was well south and west, in the low depression. Were they lost?

Yet there was no mistaking the sound now. The telltale rattle of tank tracks could be heard above the low growl, and he could see dark shapes emerging from the chilling wind. Something big was out there, something with power behind it, and now instinct compelled him to move, joining the Russian Marines in a desperate search for any cover he could find.

Chapter 26

In the year 2020, with the energy crisis deepening after renewed fighting in the Ukraine had severed natural gas pipelines feeding a hungry Europe, oil prospecting efforts reached a fever pitch. All the world's great fields had already edged over the top of the oil peak depletion curve and now were in steady decline. The United States had been blasting and squeezing shale oil and gas from the Green River and Bakken shales in the US, but the oil was deep underground, embedded in the rock and difficult and expensive to extract. Aside from the new superfield at Kashagan in the Caspian Basin, there had been little in the way of good old fashioned light sweet crude found for many decades.... until the year 2020.

An oil man on a safari road trip from Mersa Matruh to Siwa had stopped and wandered off the desert road in an isolated area at the southern tip of the dreadful Qattara Depression, and he saw something in the rocks there that prompted him to return with a survey team to take another look. British Petroleum soon followed up on his survey by quietly negotiating further exploration rights in the region, promising a cash starved Egypt a substantial royalty on any significant finds. The discovery that would be known as the "Great Sultan of the Desert" would rock the oil world when BP finally announced that they had used new deep lateral drilling techniques to locate a massive field of both oil and gas, with reserves expected to exceed 70 billion barrels, the size and scale of Saudi Arabia's renowned Ghawar field, now fitfully soaked by water infusion to force out its remaining oil, and in rapid depletion.

The new BP concern promised a much needed boon to energy reserves for the West, and a reinvigoration of the tired Old Man of the Middle East, Egypt. The initial development phase, designated Sultan-A, or Sultan Apache, proved very promising. Yet once again, the oil and gas the developed West so desperately needed, was lost in the heartland of a desolate and forbidding desert, and a land populated by resentful Arabic cultures that had been radicalized over many years of dissention and conflict. Situated half way between the Oasis of Siwa and the smaller Qara Oasis to the northwest, high atop a prominent rocky outcrop, the oil engineers of British Petroleum

staked out their claim and began intensive development. Soon there was a thriving encampment in the midst of nowhere, with barracks and facilities to support several hundred oil workers, engineers and some of their families.

When Berber militias near Siwa became a problem for Egypt, the Egyptian Army deployed a mechanized force to the area, but the tactic soon backfired. With the central government weak, and power falling to the Army, the forces sent to Siwa simply joined the rebel forces, compounding their mischief now that they had heavy AFVs and tanks. The BP oil men watched nervously from behind the miles of chain link fences surrounding the site, topped with barbed wire, but it was a thin defense.

Then, in October of 2020, the renegade force launched a daring raid on the site. It resulted in the massacre of over fifty oil workers, with many more taken as hostages, and the wanton destruction of valuable drilling rigs and other equipment. Great Britain appealed to the Egyptians to intervene with troops loyal to the government, but the on again off again 'revolution' in Egypt saw the current central authority collapse as it had done so many times before.

It was then that Great Britain decided to take matters into its own hands, in true American fashion, and dispatched its formidable 7th Armored Brigade to Egypt to secure the Sultan Apache oil concern and protect the lives of British citizens and property of the Crown.

No strangers to the desert, the Brigade still bore the insignia that had become world famous under the banner of the British 7th Armored Division. The unit had fought in the bitter conflicts in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan, all other operations aimed at securing the safety of oil reserves, and was well experienced in the art and trial of desert warfare. After military reforms it had lightened up considerably in its force structure, becoming largely a motorized infantry brigade when serving in Afghanistan. While there it patrolled in light armored trucks like the Mastiff, Wolfhound and Husky, but for this deployment the British Army wisely decided to return the unit to its former glory as a fully armored force.

There had been much debate and budget wrangling over how to equip a new mechanized force for the Army 2020 program. Many vehicles had been tested and considered, Germany's Boxer, The Swiss built Piranha V, and finally the French VCBI Armored Infantry Combat Vehicle, which eventually was purchased by the British until they could come up with something better.

It could serve well as an infantry AFV with a modular “DRAGAR” turret, mounting a 25mm NATO autocannon and a coaxial 7.62mm machinegun. An eight wheeled vehicle, the VCBI had decent armor for its class at 14.5mm, a speed of 100KPH and a range of 750 kilometers. It was perfect for a fast scouting role.

The British renamed it the “Dragon” after its turret design, and purchased enough to outfit a squadron of the 12th Royal Lancers as a Recce unit. Two older infantry units that had served in the 7th Brigade in the past were recalled, the 3rd Mercian Battalion and the Highlanders Battalion. They were both still using the well tried upgraded Desert Warrior IFV, a tracked vehicle that was designed to keep up with the best British tanks at 75KPH. These units had been upgraded to the new 40mm main gun, and had a little more secondary armament with two 7.62mm guns, one a chain gun, and the other a standard MG. Some were fitted with the deadly American made TOW anti-tank missile for added defense against enemy tanks.

The real power of the brigade was in the tank battalion sent to deal with the armor in the renegade Egyptian unit. The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards were called, fielding 45 of the superb Challenger 2 main battle tanks. The unit had been slated to be gelded and down scaled to a light cavalry force in the Army 2020 plan, but this had not yet happened, and thankfully so. Britain needed some muscle now, and the Dragoons were still there to provide it.

One of the most heavily armored tanks in the world, it used 2nd generation Chobham armor, known as “Dorchester” armor in the service, with twice the strength of steel systems. The sloping armor was designed to deflect AT rounds away from vital areas, and the protection could be further enhanced by mounting Explosive Reactive Armor kits.

When the tank hit back, it used a formidable 120mm main gun, with the same 7.62 chain and machine gun systems on the lighter vehicles, and provisions for a grenade launcher and larger 12.7 MG.

All these formations were grouped under the banner of the 7th Armored Brigade. Now, after 80 long years away, the Desert Rats were returning to their old stomping ground in Egypt, where their forefathers had once hallowed the battlefields like Beda Fomm, Tobruk, Sidi Rezegh, El Alamein, and the pursuit of the German Afrika Korps to Tunisia. Now it would face a wild and wily foe in the Berber tribes of middle Egypt, functioning as a heavy security contingent, largely within the border zone of the Sultan

Apache fields, a rough equilateral triangle measuring 50 kilometers per side.

The British press made good mileage from the motto of the heavy Royal Scots Dragoons Battalion: “No one provokes me with impunity.” British units in Challenger tanks had destroyed a total of 300 enemy fighting vehicles in the Gulf War, without losing a single tank to enemy fire. There were no further attacks on BP facilities after the Desert Rats arrived, and Britain was soon busy again with the business of extracting oil from the deep depressions when the threat of growing war loomed heavily in 2021.

The 7th Brigade was still in Egypt when hostilities opened in the Pacific, and over nine bitter days of increasing escalation, the flames of war burned ever closer as all the world’s energy centers became prime targets of opportunity. The fighting had started over an isolated rock in the East China Sea, the Senkaku Islands to Japan, the Diaoyutai Islands to mainland China. It had soon spread to Nigeria, the Gulf of Mexico, the Persian Gulf, and the Kashagan fields of the Caspian Basin.

Too isolated to be threatened by land, the 7th Brigade stood its watch with its air defense units on high alert. Only an air strike could really do any harm.... Or a missile. All was quiet over those first eight days in the desert. The soldiers manned their patrols, the desert heat remained relentless and the cold nights equally unforgiving. Then the ire of man became a fire of wrath and doom on that ninth day, the last day that humanity and civilization itself would have any need for oil and gas on planet earth. The 9th day was the day the first missiles fired and, as might be expected, Sultan Apache was high on the target list.

When they got the brief emergency flash message indicating a missile was inbound, the 7th Brigade rushed to activate its Aster-30 Block III Ballistic Missile Defense Battery, the only one in the unit capable of responding. It fired at dusk that day, the thin trails streaking up through the sky as the Berbers watched from the nearby oasis settlement at Siwa. They had seen the heavy British armored units, the tough, professional soldiers that manned the Brigade, and they wanted nothing more to do with their war on Western oil men. Now they wondered what the British were firing at, as news travels slow in the desert, even news of the impending end of the world...

Brigadier General Jacob “Jake” Kinlan was in his command vehicle when it came, high up in the desert sky, three explosions as the Aster missiles hungrily sought out their targets. They got two of the three warheads from the

incoming missile, a mini MIRV re-entry vehicle with three 15 kiloton bombs. The third was jarred enough by the explosions that it was sent careening off target, falling wide of the mark over the desolation of the Qattara Depression and exploding in a massive aerial fireball, about a thousand meters above ground. It was meant to fall just a little lower, and ignite its awful nuclear fire directly over the Sultan Apache site, but fate or good luck had intervened in the tip of that third Aster missile, and the Desert Rats would be spared.

The Brigade was “buttoned up” when the attack came in, their desertized, air conditioned fighting vehicles on full NBC alert, many already hull down in revetments dug into the chalky yellow loam of the desert soil. They would survive the blast to a man, with not a single casualty, but they would never fight for the government that had sent them to Egypt again... at least not for the government that died that day when the missiles fell on London in the year 2021.

Yet strangely, the battle history of the Desert Rats would not end that day, the 9th day, the final day of the long escalation that brought hell to earth and ended human civilization. It was the day that left behind little more than the blighted, charred remains of cities all across the globe, places seen only by the living eyes of a very few, and most of those aboard one brave Russian ship that had disappeared a month before the fighting began—the battlecruiser *Kirov*.

* * *

“Pony up!” Major Reeves gave the order to his Recce Troop, 1st Squadron, 12th Lancers, well outside the brigade perimeter that night, and with orders to scout the way north. The brigade had been hunkered down in NBC mode, all buttoned up with filters running and snorkels sipping and cleaning the air. The men had just completed air samples for radiation levels, tapping their touch screen digital panels in the new Dragon IFVs, which formed the bulk of this squadron. To their great surprise and relief, everything was green and clean. The Russians had thrown an ICBM at them, with a MIRVed warhead. They got two of the three bombs that meant to destroy this vital unit in the British Army where it stood its security watch over the even more vital oil facilities at BP Sultan Apache. That third warhead had gone off, but it was well wide of the target zone, and 7th

Brigade would live to fight another day... but not in the year 2021.

One man had inadvertently seen to that, though history would never record his name. Was he the hungry young *mishman* who had taken that last sweet roll in the bakery bins of Kirov's mess hall? It did not matter. The only thing that did matter was that Gennadi Orlov found himself at Bir Basúre that night, about seven kilometers from the place that would one day mark the northern border of Sultan Apache oil field. And Gennadi Orlov had brought something with him in his pocket, though he did not know what it was.

Major Reeves was leading his troop, as he often did. He was a self described "desert loving Englishman," a line he filched from his favorite movie, Lawrence of Arabia. He had signed on for Army service as soon as he was of age, and specifically requested service in the 7th Brigade, the Desert Rats, his Great Grandfather's old unit. The stories he had heard as a boy had stayed with him all his life, from the sand boxes where he once played them out with his toy soldiers, to the real deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. He was a Desert Rat, through and through, and knew the proud history of his Brigade chapter and verse.

They were going to use infrared and night vision sensors to advance, their lights dark as the sleek new eight wheeled IFVs rolled forward over the tough ground. He had orders to move out and scout the road north through Bir Basúre. The Brigade wasn't sticking around for the Russians to drop another egg on them, and he would lead the way out.

"Well where's the bloody road?" said Reeves, tapping his digital terrain map. GPS was down, most likely the result of the EMP effects from that big air burst they had just ridden out. They still had their map available, but it failed to locate their present position, or that of any other vehicles in the brigade. The satellites are probably gone as well, he thought. Communications had been spotty all evening before the missile alert came in. Things were heating up in the war, and now it had finally come to the desert.

"Can't see a thing," said Cobb, the driver. "We should be right smack on the road, sir. In fact we *were* right on the road when that alert came in, and we've only moved a few yards to the hull down revetment. It should be right under our noses."

"Well it's *not* under our noses, Cobber. You must have canted off into another bloody salt pan of something."

"No sir," Cobb protested. "I'd feel that bang away. We've got good wheel

traction, the ground is firm, but the road... well it's just not there any longer, sir."

"Probably buried under a foot of sand by now with this wind, Move us out. I'm signaling the column to follow. The damn thing can't all be under sand, and we'll find it soon enough."

Reeves was going to get his job done, road or no road. Frustrated, he opened his top hatch and stuck his head out, wanting to put his human senses to the test where the digital sensors had failed. The smell and sting of blowing sand was all he got for his trouble. Yet the column was ready to move out, and he was the tip of the spear, fearless, because right behind his squadron was a Sabre of heavy Challenger 2 tanks from the Royal Scots Dragoons. The deep growl of those big tank engines could be heard over the whine of the restless desert wind, and that had a way of giving a man confidence in his job.

Reeves looked over his shoulder, squinting through his protective goggles, and could barely see the tanks behind his column, though he could hear them even better now. It was pitch black, and the wind was bitter cold. He could not even see the lights from the perimeter towers back at the Sultan Apache facility, which seemed odd, in spite of the obscuring sand storm.

He was a scout, and it was his job to lead the tanks forward, but here they had gone and blundered right off the road, and it was nowhere to be seen. Good enough. He was back through the hatch, shutting it tight as he pull off his protective eye goggles.

"Off you go, Cobber, ahead one third. Gunners ready! I don't want to be surprised by one of those bloody Egyptian T-72s. Watch that infrared, boys, the night vision is all dodgy in this blowing sand."

The surprise he hoped to avoid was out there, just a few hundred yards ahead, but it was not a T-72—far from it. He was about to run up on a heavy squad of Russian Marines who had just landed here in a helicopter, and he would get the surprise of his life soon after.

Chapter 27

Popski had seen the cool precision of the Russian Marines, and his opinion of the men ticked up a notch when they deployed. Zykov's humor was well stowed, and he was all business now, seeing to the proper sighting of the squad's machine guns. He had a Bullpup on each flank, satisfied that they had good overlapping fields of fire. So Popski found Fedorov near the KA-40, and waved him away.

"You won't want to be anywhere near that thing," he said in a low, urgent voice. "Get over here. Quickly!"

Fedorov ran for the covered position where Popski huddled behind a large boulder. "I hope your men don't get trigger happy," said Popski. "We don't know what's in front of us yet."

"Troyak!" Fedorov hissed. "Weapons tight. We fire only if fired upon."

The Sergeant signaled he understood, and then passed the word to his men, though he didn't like the order. He knew how vulnerable they were now on the ground, and he had taken everything Popski had said about the dangers of the desert to heart. The KA-40 was sitting there like a fat cow, an easy target if this was enemy armor. Like a good sonar man, he had filed away his own inner recollection of various vehicle sounds, and this one gave him a shiver. There were tanks out there, and they sounded like heavy tanks, something he had not expected he would encounter here. So now he knelt by the mortar team and waited, the tension building with every second.

The wind... it was cold and biting now, and the blowing sand seemed strangely luminescent. Troyak had a very bad feeling about it, and then he heard the higher whine of wheeled vehicles, closer, wafting over the deep growl of the tank engines. He enable the grenade launching function on his assault rifle, his finger at the ready near the trigger.

"Nobody fires a single round until I do," he rasped. And they waited.

* * *

Reeves could see it clearly now on his infrared screen, a massive heat signature on the ground, dead ahead. "Something big out there, he said aloud,

and began tuning his image to get a better picture. It looked for all the world like...

"We've got company. Anyone hear about a helo scheduled in tonight?"

Nobody said anything. "I didn't think so. Well that's one fat helicopter sitting about 300 yards out, or I'm a Leprechaun." He was on his radio set at once, speaking through his headset microphone.

"1/12 Lancers on point. We have a helicopter on the ground out here, about seven kilometers outside the perimeter, over."

There was some wait, and nothing came back, so he tried again.

"1/12 Lancers on point. Lieutenant Reeves reporting. Please respond, over."

"HQ Staff. Say again, 1/12. What's that about a helo?"

"1/12 on point, sir." And he repeated his report, hearing a lot of talk in the background when the HQ Staff returned.

"Sorry 1/12, there's a bit of confusion here. Bloody sand storm is thick as pea soup. Can't see three feet here, but we copy on your helo report. Nothing scheduled. Proceed with caution and ID contact, over."

"Copy that, HQ, advancing to point of contact. Over."

Reeves tapped his driver on the shoulder. "Ease us on up to that contact," he said. "Nice and slow." He was reaching for his external megaphone to broadcast a warning. "Helicopter on the ground, please identify. This is the British Army." His voice boomed out on the external speaker.

It was a well rehearsed procedure the unit had developed in their dealings with the locals here. They would ID themselves as British Army, which was usually enough to quell any trouble or disturbance they might come upon during a patrol. By day it didn't matter, for their vehicles and insignia were now well known to the local Berbers. By night they used the megaphone to warn anything they came upon, and if they didn't get a satisfactory answer he would fire a warning shot and repeat his challenge. That was usually enough to settle the matter, but this was a hair-trigger situation now with a squad of Russian Naval Marines training every weapon they possessed in his direction.

"British Army?" Popski heard the challenge and had his wits about him. "Anyone have a lantern handy?"

"In the helo," said Fedorov, and he led their guide back to the KA-40 to fetch a beacon lantern from the side supply compartment. "Now you tell your boys to just lay low and keep cool while I flash our recognition signal."

He stepped well away from the helo, and flashed out some light signals, simple Morse Code for L.R.D.G., the Long Range Desert Group. Anyone in the British Army should know what that meant.

Reeves saw it, looking from his driver to his gunner with a frown. “Recognition flash,” he said in a low voice. “Anybody read that?”

“I think it’s Morse code, Lieutenant. Yes sir... that’s dot, dash, dot, dot... dot, dash, dot... I think they’re sending L.R.D.G., and it just repeats again.”

Reeves ran that through his head until it rang a very loud bell there—L.R.D.G.... “Someone playing games tonight?” he said.

“What’s it mean, sir?”

“Can’t mean what I think it does. That’s the old Long Range Desert Group from the last war, the big war here in North Africa.” So he thought this was most likely someone getting cheeky from a supply helo that had run in from Mersa Matruh. Anyone who knew about the L.R.D. G. was most likely British out here, but it wasn’t very smart to play word games in a situation like this. And why hadn’t they heard about this helo run? Nothing had been scheduled. Perhaps they were going somewhere else, and just set down here because of the storm. He had it exactly right, though he wasn’t quite sure of himself just yet. So he got on the external speaker system again.

“Come forward and identify yourself. Nice and slow, please.” Then he took a risk and had his driver flash the headlights on his vehicle. It would give his position away, but the growl of those tanks behind him had his dander up, and he was willing to take the chance. Otherwise he was going to have to dismount a squad and have them advance on foot, which he now ordered anyway.

“Number three,” he said quickly in his headset command mike. “Dismount and advance.”

“Aye sir,” it was Sergeant Williams, and he had his men out the back exit ramp of his Dragon IFV, a squad of five fanning out, with two men to either side of the column and the Sergeant leading on point.

“I’d best handle this,” said Popski. “Have your men lie low.”

“I’ll come with you,” Fedorov insisted.

“Better you wait here, Captain.”

“No, I think I should come along. Lead the way, Major.”

A Major ranked a Captain in the army, but this man was navy—the bloody Russian Navy at that. A Captain was a bit of a demigod in the Navy,

and this man had the ear of General Wavell himself, so Popski relented.

He stood up, still holding the signal lantern, and started off on foot, fearless. If this was the British Army then he should have nothing to fear, but he kept his right hand on his sidearm where it rode on his hip just the same.

Shadows loomed ahead in the blowing sand, like ghosts materializing on the wind. Then they became the more familiar shape and form of men... soldiers... weapons at the ready. He waited, confident and eager to see who was coming for dinner. When the squad came up they were well forward of Troyak's Marines, which was just what Popski wanted. One false move here and the whole scene could erupt in a firefight that nobody wanted.

He saluted to the Sergeant, not headstrong enough to wait for him to do so first. He wanted to defuse the situation as quickly as possible.

"Major Peniakoff, Long Range Desert Group," he said, noting the Sergeant's shoulder patch and the black beret he wore. He was a Desert Rat, he knew at once, but what was the 7th Armored doing out here? These had to be the reinforcements that the Aussies had been hoping for.

The Sergeant returned his salute. "Major," he said. "May I ask what you're doing out here?"

"I've the same question, mate," said Popski. "I suppose you lads are here for the Aussies and Giarabub. Well, you've come too far north. Siwa is off that way, well south of here. It's to be expected in these damn sandstorms. Can't see a bloody thing."

He heard a tinny voice that sounded like it was coming over a radio, and the Sergeant pinched a spot on his field jacket collar and spoke quietly.

"A Major Peniakoff, sir. But he says he's with the Long Range Desert Group."

"That's rather handy," said Popski. There was something odd about this man and his equipment, though he could see he was of good British stock, and clearly a soldier in the 7th Division by his insignia. The uniform looked new, and unlike any he had seen, and the radio was a first. He could not see how this man could possibly have a wireless stowed in his field jacket.

"Chaps call me Popski," he said. "Maybe you've heard the name? In any case, we're out here on a search and rescue. The General's plane has gone down, and we came in on..." He looked over his shoulder, hesitating.

"A helicopter," said Fedorov, who had been studying the Sergeant very closely, noting every line and detail of his equipment and uniform. The collar

microphone comm system had not escaped his notice, and now his heart was racing, his mind a whirlwind of possibilities in the blowing sand. No one from the British Army in 1940 could possibly have such equipment. No one... Who was this man?

“Popski,” he said. “Ask him what his unit is, please.”

“That’s clear enough,” Popski said in Russian, then he turned and smiled at the Sergeant.

“No worries,” he said. “I’m in as a guide and interpreter for this man and his rescue team. We’ve a squad back there, and these men are Russian military.”

“Russians?”

“Right,” said Popski. “Out here on the General’s orders—Wavell, I mean. Your general is the one we’re after, O’Connor. His plane went down somewhere north of here and we’re out to fetch him, before the desert does the man in. Can’t do anything until this storm lets up, but you’re a sight for sore eyes out here. Thought we had a Dego patrol that got lost, and we’re glad to see you.”

Sergeant Williams took that in, then conveyed the essence of it to Reeves over his comm link. “Sir,” he finished, “I think you’d better come up here. Looks like we’ve got some bloody Russian military here, or so this man says. He’s speaks the King’s English, though.”

“Russians? I’m coming up.”

Reeves could not make sense of that. Why, weren’t they just taking pot shots at us with 15 kiloton nukes? Bloody hell, what’s going on here? He might want to inform the Sergeant that they were presently at war with the damn Russians, but he needed to see what was happening up front with his own eyes. So he tapped Cobb on the shoulder again, nodding for him to move out.

“Easy does it,” he said. Then on his command line he gave another order. “Number two, follow me up. Twenty yard interval, if you can see that far.”

The Dragon’s engine purred and the IFV moved forward, the turret gunner at the ready. As they moved up they could now begin to see the dark shadowy mass of the helicopter in the distance, still largely obscured by the blowing sand.

A Major Peniakoff... Russians... What in god’s name was going on here? Could this be a Spetsnaz commando unit out here as a fifth column? Maybe

these sons-of-bitches have been sighting for that ICBM, and vectoring the damn thing in! He steeled himself for that possibility, but as his vehicle approached the scene he could see only the five man ground team led by Sergeant Williams and two other men.

“Stop right here,” he said to Cobb. “Cover me, boys. I’m going to try and sort this kettle of fish out.”

He exited the vehicle, goggles fixed tightly over his eyes now in the blowing sand. There they were, the Sergeant and two men, one in what looked to be old style British kit, right down to the boots and cap. The other was clearly Russian, with a black leather jacket, and he looked to be an officer, though he was certainly not army, or rigged out for desert operations. If these were Spetsnaz commandos, then he was a ninny goat, so he decided to try and solve the mystery.

“Lieutenant Reeves, 1/12 Royal Lancers, 7th Brigade. I don’t suppose you gentlemen are looking for us? What’s the Russian military doing out here, eh? There’s a bloody war on mates, and we don’t take it well when you lob 15 kilotons at us like that bit a while back. Now what in hell are you doing here?”

Popski looked very surprised. What was this man talking about? “Yeah? There’s a bloody war on alright, but we’re on your side, mate, or haven’t you heard?”

Reeves tightened his lips, eyes obscure behind those goggles. “Well, sir,” he said. “Begging the Major’s pardon, but you and your whole lot are now prisoners of the British Army! What’s that you have parked out there?” Reeves gestured to the dark mass of the helo.

“Helicopter,” said Popski. “From the Russian navy. We’re on search and rescue out here, looking for the goddamned general.” He was beginning to lose his temper now, but his eye kept straying to the vehicle this man had climbed out of, and the longer he looked the stranger he felt about it. Had to be something new, as he had never seen anything like it. Fedorov was looking at it too, and now he knew he was suddenly facing another one of those impossible moments that had been strung out like pearls for all these many long months. Those were modern Infantry Fighting Vehicles, he knew, and he also knew who the 12th Royal Lancers were in the modern British Army. What was going on here? How could this man be standing here... How?

Then he realized that his own presence here at this moment was an equal impossibility, yet this moment was real, as iron clad as reality ever got in the cold steel of what he now recognized as the barrel of a 25mm autocannon pointed his way. He could hear the engines of many more vehicles obscured by the blowing sand. Something had happened. The mirror of history had cracked again, and they had moved one way or another. Either these men came here through the fire of time, slipped through a crack in fate's battered hourglass, or he and the KA-40 had flown through a hole in time again, only to reach their own day and era in 2021...

Then he remembered Orlov, and that thing he had been playing with that had burned like a fallen star and nearly scalded his hand. My God, he thought. We're riding the tiger's back again, and heaven help us now.

Part X

Nick of Time

“In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.”

— Henry David Thoreau

Chapter 28

The waters of the Strait of Artemisium were high that day, a sudden storm brewing up in the narrow channel that heralded another warrior arriving from a doomed world. It blew down from the craggy heights of Mount Paranassus, stirring the waters to a fitful state until the waves were capped with frothing white spray, and the tides crashed hard against the tiny Isle of Argyronison at the outlet of the strait.

There sat a fisherman, who had seen the rising clouds and pulled hard to reach the safety of the island, knowing he could never get back to his mainland village of Katadika in time. He would be the only human eyes to witness the coming, and when he saw it he first believed the Italians had come to add naval gunfire to the torment already underway in his homeland. Germans and Italian troops had invaded a month earlier, and were now relentlessly driving the stalwart Greek Army back towards Athens.

If *Regia Marina* is here, he thought, then they mean to cross the Strait of Artemisium, and my home town is right where they will land. He knew he had to get there as soon as possible to warn his friends and family, but now he stood, transfixed when he saw the ship in the grey rain, its tall white mainmast crowned by a spherical dome the like of which he had never seen. It shimmered with a strange glow, Saint Elmo's Fire crackling from the lines and masts, outlining the sharp fighting edges of the warship in stark relief with an eerie green light. He did not really know what he saw that day, and he would never know that it had come from the fire of one great battle to this one, arriving like the hard steel of the Spartans of old, as if hearing the drumbeat of war and marching in this grave hour.

The high pass of Thermopylae was very close, but it was not Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, marching to the doom foretold by the Oracle of Delphi so long ago:

*O ye men who dwell in the streets of broad Lacedaemon!
Either your glorious town shall be sacked by the children of Perseus,
Or, in exchange, must all through the whole Laconian country
Mourn for the loss of a king, descendant of great Heracles.*

Another warrior had lately visited that shrine, and found their a talisman that would describe the lines of fate that would set a new doom in motion. But the fisherman knew nothing of this, for it had not yet come to pass, nor would it happen for another eighty years when a young woman would find the weight of the world on her shoulders, and the doom of the Oracle in a strange metal box.

* * *

Elena Fairchild had been truly puzzled when she found no further doorway in the hidden passage beneath Delphi. There was nothing but that strange black box. She had inserted her key, but it would not turn or open. Could other members of the Watch help her solve the riddle? Protocol now required her to report the incident. That was mandatory, but there was so little time and only one place she could do that—back on *Argos Fire*, the corporate HQ and security ship cruising out beyond the Strait of Artemisia. Its sleek lines and soft white paint scheme belied its true purpose, for the ship was a *Daring* class British destroyer, purchased by the Fairchild company and refit for the role it now served, and it was every bit as deadly as any of the other warships in its class.

It was well past the eleventh hour, on a hard night in 2021. The missiles were about to fire in the war that had been building to a terrible climax for the last nine days. Her only thought now was how they could possibly survive it, and where they could go. This place was not likely to be on any immediate target list, but on one hour or another, a warhead might come that would end all their days on this earth. The answer she desperately needed had to be inside this box, but how to open it?

“Get the men to the helicopters,” she said firmly. She was obviously meant to find what she now had in hand. Why else would she have been sent here? The box may not open with her key, but it might be opened with another. She had to report this! She had to get back to the ship, re-enable her secure command line to the Watch and report. They had precious little time, but enough to get there and back again if need be on the fast X-3 helos.

The Sergeants whistled, calling back the Argonauts from their security perimeter and shouting to fire up the helicopter. They would leave the famous

Oracle scarred by the spade work that had uncovered the hidden entry. It won't matter anyway in a few hours time., she thought. It won't matter...

But it did matter. It was going to make all the difference, at least to them and the lives they would lead in the world they returned to. The helos landed on the after deck of *Argos Fire*, and the Argonauts dismounted, laden with arms and equipment and feeling like passengers at an airport whose flight had been cancelled. Yet they were glad to be back aboard the ship and soon settled in below decks, thinking nothing more of the strange mission.

The Captain went forward with Elena Fairchild, carrying that small box they had retrieved from the dig site at Delphi. They reached the executive suite, tired, and somewhat confused. Morgan came in last after having stopped on the bridge to confer briefly with Commander Dean.

"What's happening out there, Mack?" said Elena as she cast a worried glance at the clock on the wall.

Her intelligence officer, Mack Morgan, scratched his dark beard, a puzzled expression on his face. "Well, Mum, there's been nothing on the black line while we were gone, so I've no hard intelligence over that channel. Funny thing now is that Mister Dean says we've got some strange interference on all the normal communications channels."

"Interference? Anything wrong with the equipment?"

"No, Mum, they've checked it top to bottom. It's very odd. We can't even pick up anything on either AM or FM bands, not a word, not a whisper. It's as if there's just no one out there."

At this Elena's eyes clouded over with a squall of fear. It has started. It's already underway. Captain Gordon MacRae was watching her closely as she stood up, slowly walking to her desk to depress a hidden button that would open the rear bulkhead to secret room harboring the red phone.

"Come with me, gentlemen. There's one more line we can try."

Morgan looked at MacRae, and the two men passed a knowing glance with one another. This was the hidden inner sanctum of *Argos Fire*, and messages coming across that line had been the seed of many missions in the past. Neither man had ever been permitted to enter the room before this, and so it was with some surprise and an equal measure of curiosity that they both stood now, quietly following Elena into the small room.

There was a single chair sitting before a small pedestal crowned by a Plexiglas dome over the red phone. It had a keypad for code entry and Elena

quickly used it to re-enable her phone. MacRae set the box heavily down on the pedestal desk, waiting while Elena seated herself on the chair.

“Well,” she said, “protocol has it that I should report any red mission irregularity at once. I never thought I would find myself sitting here in front of this damn phone again. This is all quite unexpected.”

“What was the failure?” MacRae folded his arms.

“You saw yourself. The key would not operate, and there was no other passage or door.”

“But there was that box,” he pointed.

“Yes, and now I’ve got to report that and see if I can find out why my key won’t open it.”

“Try it again,” MacRae suggested. “No sense making your call unless you’re sure it won’t work.”

That sounded reasonable, and so she nodded, drawing out the key again on its chain and slowly inserting it into the hole. It turned! There was an audible click and a quiet tone from some mechanism inside the box, and now the front side tilted open, revealing a small drawer that held a rolled scroll. She glanced at MacRae, perplexed, and then slowly reached for the scroll to open it.

There was a brief message, addressed to her, and she read it aloud. “Should you read this your mission will have concluded as planned. Keep this device within a secure room aboard *Argos Fire* at all times and it will serve to hold you in a safe nexus. As of this moment, you are now Watchstander G1. Godspeed.”

“Watchstander G1?” MacRae did not understand.

“There were nine of us left,” said Elena. “It seems I’ve been promoted.”

“What does it mean, Mum?” said Morgan. “A safe nexus?”

She turned, looking at him with a new light in her eyes, and then smiled. “It means I know why you can’t raise anything on the radio now, Mack. It’s begun. It’s happening right now, and we’re right in the eye of the maelstrom.”

“What’s begun?”

“The bloody war you’ve been feeding me information on these last nine days. The missiles are in the air.”

“Athens would surely be on the target list. It’s fairly thick out there with this sudden squall, but we’d see a nuclear warhead if one went off.”

“Perhaps,” said Elena. “Unless we’ve moved.”

“Moved? Where?” Morgan didn’t understand. They were still in the strait northeast of Delphi.

Elena just looked at him, then back to the message on the scroll. She hadn’t read it all to them, not the string of numbers there, nor the name of the man who had signed off on the note.

A tone sounded on the ship’s intercom, and Elena tapped the button to take the message. It was the ship’s executive officer, Mister Dean.

“Bridge reporting. We’ve got radar returns now, but can’t seem to get signal returns on the tankers. Radio is clearing up, but nothing on the Black Line.”

“Forget the Black Line,” she said. “Listen to AM bands. See if you can pick up any local news. And you can forget the tankers as well.”

At this Dean seemed to stumble, a brief silence indicating his confusion before he spoke again. *“Excuse me, Mum... Forget the tankers? I thought we were to escort them to Heraklion.”*

Both Captain MacRae and Mack Morgan were giving her the same look that had to be on Dean’s face at that moment, a bemused look of worry and concern.

“Yes, proceed to Heraklion, but I’m afraid the tankers won’t be coming. I’ll explain everything later Mister Dean. Just get us underway.”

“Very good, Mum. We’ll get moving immediately.”

They had shepherded the company’s tanker fleet through every hazard, all in the service of securing the deal that could save Fairchild Inc. from certain bankruptcy after the loss of *Princess Royal* in the Persian Gulf, and secure vital oil supplies for Britain in the bargain. They had braved the transit of the Bosphorus and dueled with the Russian Black Sea Fleet, losing one of their three remaining tankers there, *Princess Irene*. Yet they had managed to get safely through the Bosphorus with the last two tankers and two million barrels of precious oil. Then, like a dog that had tussled for hours with a rope and then suddenly lost interest, the Company CEO had told them the oil no longer mattered.

MacRae pursed his lips, wondering what was up here, and how they could have lost radar signals on the tankers. “We’d best check that radar dome on the mainmast,” he said. “It may ‘ha been damaged in the storm.” His Scottish brogue rolled like honey at times, and his reserve of calm was most welcome

in the tension of the moment.

Elena Fairchild took a long breath. “Don’t worry about that, Gordon,” said Elena. “The tankers don’t matter now. They’re no longer with us...”

MacRae scratched his head at that. “Well they were five miles off our stern ten minutes ago,” he said, an edge of frustration creeping into his tone.”

“Yes,” she returned, “they were, and they’re probably still sitting there, god help them now that we’ve moved.”

“Moved? You’re not making sense, Elena.” He used her first name, he realized, and in front of Mack Morgan, but then he threw that aside. They were talking about the two million barrels of crude oil he’d been shepherding the last nine days, and it was no time to worry about the niceties of protocol. Mack wasn’t stupid. He could read the book that MacRae and Ms. Fairchild had been writing together, and knew they had crossed that thin professional line between them and become something more than a company CEO and her dutiful ship’s Captain.

“Sorry Gordon, but there’s no other way to put it. We’ve moved. *Argos Fire* is no longer in the soup the world was serving up in 2021. They key finally worked and it did its job—only not the way I expected. We’ve moved in time, gentlemen. We haven’t lost our tankers, but they’ve lost us, and god speed them both to safety now. We’re somewhere else. Their fate is no longer our concern.”

“Somewhere else?” MacRae looked at Morgan now to see how he was taking this, and he was just standing there, stupefied, and looking to MacRae to sort things out. The Captain had at least one anchor on the situation. Elena had made some startling revelations the previous night, about the Russians, their experiments with an odd effect of nuclear detonations that cause aberrations in the flow of time. Yet the real stunner had been the business about the shadowy group that had been established within the Royal Navy called the Watch.

Yes, the Russians were playing with time travel, or so she had explained, and it all had something to do now with that big warship that went missing last July in the Norwegian Sea, the battlecruiser *Kirov*. The ship went missing alright, to another century! It had apparently displaced in time to the 1940s, and became embroiled in the Second World War! That was what she had told him, the goddamned Russians were tampering with history, but the real revelation was how she had managed to find that out. He remember the

moment when her words had struck him like a thunderbolt...

“Something truly profound is about to happen,” she had told him,
“something terrible.”

Chapter 29

“What?” he had asked. “Is it somehow related to this Russian ship?”

“Yes. *Kirov* has everything to do with it, but we aren’t exactly sure what to expect. One thing we were told is this: it could be catastrophic—life ending—at least life as we know it now. And the worst of it is that no one that survives will know about it. This thing will happen and then it will all change—that is if the missiles don’t finish off the world first.”

“What do you mean with talk like that? What will happen that could be worse than a full on nuclear exchange? Is another volcano about to pop off? And how can you know something like this? Is this all speculation? I can understand that the world’s at the edge of oblivion now with this news from Morgan on the Russian ICBMs, but you sound a whole lot more terrified than that.”

“I am... And to answer your question, we know because we were warned about this very moment—told what to expect.”

“Warned? By who? Has some pointy headed scientist come up with this prediction or was it a politician this time?”

“No, Gordon. The warning didn’t come from anyone here...”

MacRae remembered the look he had given her, cocking his head to one side, his eyes narrowing. “See here now. If you expect me to believe in little green men from Mars...”

“No, it has nothing to do with extraterrestrials either. I’m afraid our doom will be kept all in the family this time around. The warning came from the one and only place that *could* possibly know what would happen. It came from the future.”

From the future... Yes, as impossible as that sounded it held a kernel of sense that he could finally grasp. If it was ever possible to perfect the science of travel in time, it would be in the future. If it was true that the Russians had been conducting strange experiments on the fringes of their nuclear weapons tests all through the decades, then future generations would know that and certainly do the same. If these experiments carried on through the decades yet to come...

“You’re saying they revealed this event, this thing about to happen?”

“More or less. Look, Gordon, I need you to *think* now. I’ve told you a good deal, but not everything. Yet consider what I’ve said. The Russians have been playing with time. They’ve sent a bloody battlecruiser back through time, and it’s been less than kind about minding its own business. Things have changed, quite a few things. I’m not sure about it all myself, but think about it. The world can take a poke now and then and still hold together. We’ve learned that much. The history has a kind of cohesive quality. It wants to hold true, but there are some events that are too profound. The changes they introduce in the line of causality cannot be smoothed over.”

MacRae and Morgan were trying to follow her, but this was all fairly amazing and they could not quite grasp what she was saying. Elena could see the looks on their faces, so she tried again.

“Let me see if I can make this a little more concrete,” she began. “Yes... a man is laying concrete for a new walk. He gets it all laid out, mixes everything with just the right amount of water and all. Now he has only so long to trowel and smooth it all out before it begins to dry and harden. Once it does, it can’t be changed easily, and any blemish or misstep in the process sets in as it hardens. History is like that. Events get sifted and mixed into the slurry of time, and it all gets laid out nice and neat, hardening to the facts we take for granted as unchangeable. Well that isn’t true. Find a way to go back in time and do things differently, and you can change things quite easily. In this case that’s what the Russians have done, and messed that nice fresh laid concrete up rather badly. That change ripples forward. Break something there in the past, and things get broken here too, in our time. Back then it might be just a seemingly insignificant change, like a soft motion of the mason’s trowel, but here it could manifest like a sledgehammer on the hardened concrete of the history we know, and it can be rather terrifying. It’s called a finality—an event so important that it *must* change the history of everything that follows it. When that happens, things *do* change all throughout the continuum, suddenly and painfully. That’s what we were warned of, and it’s about to happen—it may be happening even as we speak. The only way to avoid the maelstrom of change is to be in the center of a safe spot on the flux of time—a nexus point.”

“And how do we do that?”

“I think we’ve already done it.”

The Captain shook his head, like a boxer shaking off a hard punch, and

then he turned and stared at the box on the desk by the red phone.

“That?” he pointed at the box, saying nothing more.

“Yes,” said Elena, “That box is from the future too. At least that is what I now believe. Apparently we received more than messages from that distant time—sorry Mack, you haven’t heard any of this, but you may as well know now.”

She told him the same impossible story that she had revealed to Gordon the previous evening, all about the secret group that had been established by the Royal Navy, secret even from the British government itself. She told him how they had begun to receive strange signal transmissions, video feeds of events that seemed to make no sense—until they happened four days later. They had seen the horrific attack on the World Trade Center, in pixel perfect video that replicated the entire event, but four days before it happened! They had been send a list of the closing price of every stock on the Dow three days before the big crash, and it was accurate to the decimal point. That got their attention. Someone was trying to communicate with them from the future, trying to warn them of a great, impending doom, and it all had something to do with that Russian ship, the battlecruiser *Kirov*.

Morgan stood there, a stunned look on his face, and Captain MacRae clasped his shoulder. “You look as though you’ve seen a ghost,” he said. “Just as I did when I was told this last evening. At least I had a good stiff gin at hand when I got the news.”

“You mean to say...”

“Yes, it’s all true,” said Elena. “It sounds impossible but it’s been known for some time, really, since 1942 when British intelligence finally figured out that a strange ship they had been calling *Geronimo* was actually not from their own time, but the future. That’s when the Watch was set, a group of highly placed men in the Royal Navy who set a watch on history itself. You see, that Russian battlecruiser appeared, raised hell for a time, and then simply vanished. The Watch was established to wait for its next appearance, a dozen sheep dogs waiting for the wolf to return. It was started by a very famous British Admiral, the man commanding Home Fleet at the time, John Tovey. It also had a man inside Bletchley Park, Mack, someone you’ve long admired, Alan Turing.”

“Turing? He knew about all of this?”

“He was the one who figured out the Russian ship had to be from the

future.”

“But you’re saying tha’ box there is from the future as well?” Gordon pointed again.

“I believe so. It must contain a fragment from the Tunguska event—sorry, that’s a part of the story I haven’t told you about, but we eventually sorted it out. You all know of that event.”

“The big explosion in 1908?” Morgan had heard of it.

“Exactly. Well it wasn’t just nuclear detonations that seemed to fragment time, but any massive explosion could do the same now that the china has been cracked. This is what we’ve learned.”

“But there have been massive explosions all through history. Are you telling me they’ve all affected time?”

“No, just the one’s after 1908. The Tunguska incident was different from any other similar event in the earth’s history. We don’t know why yet, or even what actually happened that day, but whatever it was had a profound effect on time, and like the first crack in a piece of pottery, the whole thing is unstable now. Time has a crack in it, and now any big explosive event seems to be compounding the damage. Beyond that, the event left remnants of a strange element that seems to cut time like a diamond. We’ve found a very few samples, and learned that they can be activated or catalyzed by any nuclear detonation, or other means. Something about the proximity of this element to nuclear fission creates some most alarming effects. We aren’t really sure, but we think the Russians were using it in the control rods of the nuclear reactors aboard that battlecruiser—*Kirov*. It took a good long time for us to discover that, but we put the clues together with skills you would be privy too Mack, good intelligence work.”

“Then there’s a piece of that thing from Tunguska right here,” said Gordon, “in that bloody box?”

“Correct. It was sent to us... from the future. Tunguska had more profound effects than anyone realizes. Whatever it was that exploded over Siberia that day fragmented spacetime itself, created cracks, fissures, like a stone breaking glass. Stumble upon one of those cracks and you can move right through time. We’ve found quite a few over the last eighty years, and taken great pains to conceal and secure them. In fact, those we have found are behind lock and key.” She reached for her own key now, dangling it to make the point.

“I thought our little foray to Delphi was going to be a farewell journey through one of those fissures in time, but finding that box was the real surprise for me.”

“Well how did you come by that damn key?” Morgan wondered, somewhat pointedly.

“Because I’m a Keyholder,” said Elena. “I was a member of that secret organization—the Watch started by Admiral John Tovey.” She smiled, telling him how she had been recruited seven years earlier. Then she revealed those final lines in the scroll that had been hidden within the box.

“See those numbers?” she pointed them out. “That’s a date line for our intended destination. If our systems recover as they should, we will soon pick up transmissions indicating we are in the year 1941.”

“Date line?”

“Tunguska fragments have a propensity to cut time and fall through to a specific date. In this case that would be January 30, in the year 1941.”

“1941?” Mack Morgan was shaken by the news. Then we’ve slipped through one of these cracks as well? The whole bloody ship? Because of something in that box there?”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Elena.

“Well, what in God’s name are we suppose to do here?” Morgan folded his arms. MacRae was also waiting.

“Live, gentlemen,” Elena said with finality. “Live... Because if we had stayed where we were it would have been the end for us, as the whole damn world goes to hell in 2021. Our friends from the future told us that too

“The war?”

“That and more, this radical change I’ve been talking about. No time to explain it all now, but the simple fact is this. If we had stayed this ship would probably be destroyed by now, and we’d all be dead. But we’ve moved—in the nick of time—and we’re here. This is our watch now, my watch, and this may shock you, but we’re here to stay.”

“What? You mean we can’t get back?”

“No, I’m afraid we have a one way ticket this time, Mack.”

“We’re stuck in 1941, just like that bloody Russian ship? Is that why we’ve been sent? Are we supposed to find the Russians and deal with them?”

“Possibly. We’re here for good now. This is our life, but this ship still remains true to its service as a proud member of the Royal Navy.”

“Royal Navy? I thought *Argos Fire* sailed for Fairchild Incorporated.”

“So you did, and that was a convenient thing for other people to think as well. Do you think the British government would so easily sign off on a *Daring* class destroyer just because I asked them nicely and had the money to pay for one?”

Now Morgan gave her a wry smile. “Clever girl,” he said slowly. “You say you are a member of this Watch, started by Tovey during the war, and the *Argos Fire* has been registered in the Royal Navy Fleet all this time. Well some intelligence master I am. You’ve kept that secret well.”

“That we have. Now that we’re here we’ve got to have our wits about us. This is World War Two. There’s fighting in Greece and the British are at it in North Africa. So we sail for Heraklion as planned, and get to safe waters under British control. We may have to be discreet in the short run, and we’ll need time to break this news to the ship’s crew. Their lives are all replanted here as well, and we owe them the same explanation I have just given you. Once we get the ship’s systems sorted out, which should be a matter of hours, we’ll try to make contact with Admiral Tovey as soon as possible.”

“Tovey? What? And just announce ourselves as fresh off the tube from 2021?”

“Something like that. You see, I neglected to mention the man who signed off on that farewell note I read you from the box.” She showed them the paper now, and there was the name in large, bold letters: ADM JOHN TOVEY.

Elena smiled. “A box from the future, a voice from the past, and here we are in the present moment, with a new lease on life, and a new mission, gentlemen. But I certainly hope Admiral Tovey and Alan Turing have sorted through this *Geronimo* business by now, because we’re about to deliver a new warship to the service of the Royal Navy, and it may come as quite a surprise.”

Chapter 30

Everything Elena told him was confirmed within the hour. Mack Morgan huddled in his secure comm-link room, where data feeds from all his intelligence sources would come in, including the “Black Line,” which was no longer operational. In fact, most of his feeds, taps on satellite transmissions, were now gone. He had some intermittent Morse code in the local area, and some other transmissions that would not resolve through the normal Morse decoder, so he put his decryption team on them with the considerable resources of the ship’s computers. Beyond this, there was traffic on normal radio bands, AM, FM, and shortwave, but nothing in the HF or ultra low frequencies that would be used by modern military or government sources. All that traffic was as dead as his Black Line. The world he had once been so connected to was gone.

What he did hear was all typical AM broadcast news at the outset, and he thought he was listening in on a documentary. The Germans were in the Balkans, and Greece was under attack. He checked on some facts and found it easy to isolate the probable year of this news to early 1941. Nailing down the exact month and day was not as easy, until he caught a BBC transmission that confirmed everything Ms. Fairchild had told them.

It was true, impossibly true, and here they were in January of 1941! There were some odd stories in the stream that he could not quite get a handle on. From what he could gather there was fighting in the Caucasus, but a quick fact check told him that should not be happening until July of 1942. The startling thing was that it seemed to be a battle between two Russian factions, and he caught news of the Orenburg Federation and the siege of Novorossiysk that made no sense to him. There was also fighting on Malta, and he knew enough about the old war to realize there should not be fighting there at all, except the air duel that made the place one of the most heavily bombed pieces of real estate in the war.

Confused and frustrated, he took the information to the Captain first, and the two men were discussing it in the ready room off the Bridge.

“It doesn’t make any sense. What’s this Orenburg Federation?”

“Beats me, Mack. And you’re correct about that report of fighting on

Malta. That never happened.”

“Yeah? Well I looked a few things up. The Germans are in Greece, but that wasn’t supposed to happen until April of ’41. In North Africa the British were supposed to have taken Derna in Libya on their first offensive of the war against the Italians, but it’s the other way around! They just retreated from the place, and guess who’s nipping at their heels—Rommel. He wasn’t suppose to set foot in Libya for another two weeks, arriving with his 5th Light Division and a Valentine on the 14th of February, but he’s already closing in on Tobruk. Things are all out of whack, Gordon. If this is 1941 then someone has shuffled the deck here, and we’re not being dealt a fair hand.”

It was then that there came a knock on the door, and Executive Officer Dean was there, a look of concern on his face. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” he said still using the more relaxed protocols of civility, as the ship had always been a corporate HQ. “It seems we have an AEW warning light.”

“Air alert?” That got Captain MacRae’s attention immediately.

“Yes sir, Mister Haley says it looks to be a flight of five aircraft, relatively slow, and coming from the vicinity of Athens to our northwest.” They had been cruising for Heraklion on Crete, and were now passing the second in a string of five Greek Islands off their starboard side, Kythnos. Athens was a little over 100 kilometers to the northwest.”

“Well stand to, Mister Dean! The next time you get such a warning the ship is to come to full alert, with all battle stations manned. Understood?”

“Aye sir. Sorry sir.”

“Consider this ship to be on a wartime footing from this moment forward,” MacRae reinforced his order. “Come on, Mack. Let’s see what we have.”

They were soon out with the bridge crew, who had the news of what happened but were understandably confused by it all. They had been facing the difficult prospect of surviving a war in 2021, now they were right in a new kettle, and having difficulty getting their minds around the news they had been given.

“Listen up!” MacRae thought he had better get the crew focused again. “Enough chit chat over what’s happened to us. We’re here, and it’s bloody well 1941. That’s the fact of it, and one we’re going to be living with for some time. And if any of you still remember your history books, there’s a

war on here as well, and a damn nasty one. So buck up! This is a war zone, and from this moment forward this is a ship of war, and in the service of the Royal Navy. We may still be wearing our dress whites, but the gloves are comin' off, ladies and gentlemen. Now... What do we have, Mister Haley?"

"Air contact, 80 kilometers out at 15,000 feet. Flight of five aircraft, speed 300KPH. They look to be vectored right in on our heading sir."

"Air alert one!" MacRae gave his voice the amplitude the moment required. He had to get the crew's instincts and reflexes sharpened for war, and shake them from the dazed stupor that had seemed to settle over the entire ship when Ms. Fairchild made the announcement on the P.A. system explaining what had happened. Now she was walking the ship, talking with the crew, answering the thousand questions that were sure to be asked by her 300 Spartans.

Haley punched the audible alarm, and the warning claxon sounded. The deck panels opened and the sleek lines of the ship were now studded with the emerging close in defense guns, a pair of Phalanx CIWS systems, two Oerlikon 30mm batteries, augmented by two miniguns and six more general purpose MGs. But the ship's real air defense was in her missiles, a cell of speedy Sea Vipers under the forward deck. They were so accurate they could hit a cricket ball in flight. They had fired 12 of 48 in the Black Sea against the Russians, and were now ready to deal with this new threat, whatever it might be. Crews in battle dress were already preparing the close in defense systems, removing the protective gun tarps as the batteries emerged from their hidden underdeck compartments.

The ship may have had a facelift and makeover to look more civil in her role as a corporate HQ, but it was every bit as deadly as the military version of the Type 45 Destroyer, a vessel that had five times the capability of the older British Type 42 which it replaced.

The bridge of the ship was a bit roomier than that of the British destroyer. It spanned the entire beam of the ship, where seven large windows took in the expansive view forward, and the bridge crew sat right along these, serving a line of glowing digital displays and consoles to manage all the ship's systems in a series of EMEs, Electrical Modular Enclosures. Behind these there were two comfortable blue chairs, one for the Captain and the other for his XO. Other Watchstanders would do exactly that, and take up standing posts to the left and right on the carpeted deck.

Now MacRae was considering what to do. “Missile count on the ready Viper system,” he said sharply, all business.

“Sir,” a crewman responded, Ensign Temple, Angela Temple, coordinating air defense that day. “I have 36 missiles ready in the VLS module.”

“Reloads?”

Temple tapped her screen for magazine inventory. “Two cell reloads of 48 missiles each.”

“Very good.” MacRae knew his ship was like a shark, with a row of sharp outer teeth at the ready, but with plenty more in reserve. The *Daring* class had been built primarily as a fleet air defense ship, perhaps the best ever designed, with its Sampson radar able to track hundreds of targets at any given moment out to 400 kilometers, and the longer range air surveillance radar, designated S1850M, could track a thousand more. The missiles were actually Aster 15, an ancient Greek word meaning “star,” but aboard the *Argos Fire* the crew preferred the overall system name, “Sea Vipers.”

“Now what might be coming from that direction,” MacRae said aloud to no one in particular. “I doubt if this is the Greek air force.”

“My money is on the Germans,” said Morgan. “A flight of five would make it strike planes or fighters. You don’t bunch up that many for simple reconnaissance.”

“Aye,” MacRae scratched his chin. Yet he had the inclination to wait and see what was coming. Might it be a flight of British planes heading for Crete? They did not have long to wait. The planes were in visual range in under fifteen minutes, and the ship’s long range optical cameras had an image that was chilling. The dark fuselage and characteristic bent gull wings of the German *Stuka* were quite evident, and easily recognizable—and they were just starting to tip over to begin their diving attack.

“Miss Temple,” said MacRae coolly. “Shoot down those planes.”

“Sir?”

“Sea Vipers. Right now.”

“Aye, Aye Captain.” Temple minded her business as air defense officer that day, and keyed the firing commands. Seconds later the forward deck of *Argos Fire* seemed to belch angry flame and smoke, and, one after another, the Aster-15 “Vipers” launched and hurtled up to find their targets. They watched as the first four missiles swatted the planes unerringly from the sky.

The last had come in close enough that the system held the final missile in the salvo and elected to utilize the CIWS Phalanx system. It rotated, the barrels elevating and then blasting out its lethal shower of 20mm rounds that shattered the *Stuka* in mid flight, ending the attack with a shuddering roar as the plane exploded.

The incident got the attention of everyone aboard, and as he expected, the bridge intercom soon carried the voice of their CEO asking what was going on. MacRae tapped the switch. “No worries, mum,” he said calmly. “But we’ve just made it official and taken up sides here. That was a flight of five German *Stuka* dive bombers thinking to say hello. I saw to the matter.”

“Very well,” came the familiar voice. “How much longer to the gate?”

She was referring to the Sikinos/Ios gate, named after the two islands that flanked the narrow passage. Beyond it lay the caldera island of Santorini, the volcano also known as Thera, that some believed was the site of the ancient Atlantean civilization before it exploded in what was called the “Minoan eruption,” a massive event with a V.E.I. of up to 7 by many estimates, equal to that of the Demon volcano that had been in the news just before these events occurred in 2021. Yet now the *Argos Fire* was far from that news cycle, lost in another era, and she had just fired her first shots in anger.

MacRae checked quickly with his navigator. “We should be through the gate and off Santorini within the hour, mum.”

“Good enough. Meet me in the executive cabin, please. I’m heading there now. And if you can find Mack Morgan, have him come along.”

“He’s right here on the bridge, and we’ll be there directly.”

Mack Morgan leaned in, catching the Captain’s ear. “That was easy enough with those planes,” he said. “We outclass anything they can throw at us.”

“Aye,” said MacRae in a low voice. “At the moment.”

Morgan thought about that, then realized what MacRae might be thinking. Ensign Temple had just reported 36 ready Vipers with two cell reloads of 48 missiles each in the ship’s magazines. Four had just been fired, and the count ticked down to 32 ready, which MacRae immediately corrected.

“Miss Temple,” he said calmly. “Kindly send down an order to have the ship’s Vipers reloaded. I want that VLS system topped off to a full battery.”

“Aye sir.”

MacRae looked at Morgan now. “What day have you figured it is,

Mack?”

“30th of January, 1941.”

The Captain folded his arms, saying nothing more in front of the crew. There was a tense silence on the bridge now. The men and women there were tending to their business, watching system panels and radar screens, but their thoughts were searching the world around them now with equal intensity. It was 1941! None of them really understood what had happened to the ship, or how it could possibly be here. The incident just concluded had also made them keenly aware that they were in dangerous waters. The island of Santorini up ahead was a hotbed for European tourist traffic, with nightclubs and bars generating most of the heat on the island in 2021. Yet they would never see that time again, or so Miss Fairchild had told them all. She had not really explained how they came to be here, but did make one thing very clear—they could not go back, she had said. They were here to stay.

Ensign Temple had caught the low discourse between Morgan and MacRae as the two men started away. As she keyed the system maintenance order, she suddenly realized what the Captain meant. Her system board told the tale well enough. Their Viper inventory had just rotated from a total of 132 missiles to 128. That count was also stuck on a one way journey, she realized. If all this was true, if this was really what it looked to be, and they had landed right in the middle of the Second World War, then that missile count might tick away over time... And then what? The meaning of the Captain’s statement to his intelligence master was now quite apparent.

When the two senior officers had gone, Mister Dean seated himself in the blue Captain’s chair, his face still troubled by all that had happened. Dean was a young and handsome man, and Angela Temple had always enjoyed taking her watch while he had the bridge.

“Funny, sir,” she said quietly.

“What’s funny, Miss Temple?” Dean gave her those dark eyes.

“It’s just that it looks odd now in color.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This, sir.” She waved her hand expansively. “World War Two. All I ever knew about it was in black and white.”

Dean sat with that a moment. “Well,” he said at length. “There’s one color they used with a liberal brush in this damn war, red—blood red, Miss Temple. It’s not black and white any longer. This is living color, and that

wasn't an old newsreel we were just watching as we took down those planes."

"Aye, sir."

"My Great Grandfather fought here. Died here in fact, right in the Mediterranean."

Temple raised a blonde eyebrow at that. "Then he's out there somewhere? Right now?"

"Not quite," said Dean. "He was aboard HMS *Regulus*, a British submarine. Damn thing struck a mine off Taranto and went down with all hands.. December 6, 1940. So he's gone, I suppose."

"Lucky he got his business done with your Grandmother before that," said Carl Hampton, the Helmsman on that watch. "He smiled with the remark, then thought twice about it. "Sorry," he apologized.

"Never mind it," said Dean. "I expect we all have ancestors out there somewhere, right this very moment."

"I suppose that's true," said the Helmsman.

"Let's just hope time keeps a very tight ledger on them. Gramps went down with the *Regulus*, but what if something slips?"

"What do you mean?" Temple didn't follow him.

"Well," said Dean. "I think we just made a new entry in the record books with that missile fire. Who knows how those five fellows out there were supposed to finish out this war? Well, we've seen to that, haven't we? They were Great Grandfathers to somebody out there, eh? Let's hope they got their business done too before our Vipers took them down."

No one said anything.

Part XI

Echoes

“I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all.”

— Richard Wright

Chapter 31

“**See** here,” said Popski. “You can stow that crap about us being prisoners, lad. That is if you want to keep those two Lieutenant’s stars on your shoulder for very much longer. Sorry I’ve only got one on my shoulder, but it’s a bloody crown, mate, and you damn well know what that means in the British army. Now, if you haven’t got any sense in your head, then where’s your senior officer?”

Reeves eyes could not be seen, but his jaw tightened. “I can send you to see someone who’s got one of those crowns on his shoulder if you like. Only he’ll have three stars beneath it! Will that suit you? Now, I don’t care if you’re Prince Harry in the flesh! I’m officer on point, and there’s a war on. You’re standing here with this man—a Russian—and you tell me one of their damn helos is out there. You have crew aboard that helo? How many are you?”

“Of course we’ve got crew! I’ve told your Sergeant here what we’re about and why. Search and rescue! There’s a man out there in this mess, and a particularly important one. He won’t last long with you wagging your ruddy jaws here, will he?”

Fedorov could not follow all the English, but he could see the exchange was heating up, and his heart beat faster as he considered what to do. These men were certainly not British soldiers from the 1940s. There was a modern IFV sitting in front of him with its engine on a low growl, and he had managed to catch the Lieutenant’s remark about Prince Harry. Now he knew he had to discover what had happened. Could we have moved again, he wondered? How? That thing Orlov had—could it be responsible? He said he found it along the Tunguska River on that last mission. That thought knocked down one domino after another in his mind.

He had to determine what had happened here, and his first thought was to get to the helicopter and radio *Kirov*. If the ship responded, then they were still in 1941. But he did not think this Lieutenant would take kindly to him trying to contact a Russian battlecruiser just now, so he had another idea. Popski had radioed for support from his comrades at Siwa. They were supposed to be bringing in jeeps tonight, and the plan was to establish a base

camp here, and at least have vehicles available for a ground search in the event this storm persisted and they could not fly. Time was of the essence, or so Popski stressed. A man could only survive so long in the desert, and this was not just anyone, but General O'Connor himself. Yet if they had somehow moved in time again, all that was irrelevant now. He had to decide what to do; how to find out what had happened here.

"Major," he said in English, then switched to Russian in a low voice. "When might your men arrive on those jeeps?"

"Soon enough to straighten this lot out," said Popski with an indignant look on his face. This cheeky Lieutenant in front of him had riled his temper, and he was clearly not happy.

Reeves own impatience got the best of him, as the entire column was lined up behind him and waiting to move out. He reinforced his demand. "I said how many are you?"

"What does he say?" Fedorov asked quickly, and Popski translated, arms folded on his heavy chest.

"Tell him we have two squads of Naval Marines deployed 100 meters behind us with the helicopter. Tell him we have no quarrel with him, and we'll stand down and cooperate fully as he wishes. But we have an urgent need to speak with his commanding officer.

"Look here," said Reeves. "Do I have to order my squadron to deploy?"

Popski could hear the urgency in Fedorov's voice, though he did not understand why. Yet his own instincts also argued quietly with him, and he knew this might be a dangerous situation that he should diffuse as quickly as possible. That tough Russian Sergeant with his Marines looked to be the sort to shoot first and ask questions later, and that could be a problem. This Lieutenant here didn't seem happy to have found Russians at all, and he wondered why. He also realized the man had a job to do, orders to comply with, and knew they might only get things resolved by seeing his senior officer as Fedorov urged.

"Alright Lieutenant," Popski relented. "We've ten good men behind us, and two pilots, all well armed and holding a perimeter around that contraption back there. But we'll do things your way. We'll need to see your commanding officer right away and get this sorted out."

"Tell your men to lay down their arms and come forward," said Reeves. "And if you have any ideas about doing anything else, I've a column of tanks

and infantry behind me five miles long. Understand?”

Popski grimaced, but swallowed his pride. “Well enough,” he said. “But I’ll say one thing. We expected we might get this sort of treatment from the Degos or Jerry out here, but not the Desert Rats!”

While he was talking Fedorov turned discretely and pinched his own collar microphone. “Troyak,” he said in a low voice. “All is well. Stand down immediately and stow all weapons in the helo. Understood? All weapons in the helo. Contact the ship tell me immediately if they respond. Then come forward, and no man is to carry as much as a pistol with him. Get it done, Sergeant.”

He looked to Popski and told him to tell them they were bringing his men up at once, unarmed. At this the Lieutenant seemed satisfied, and he seemed to stand easier now, shifting his eye goggles to his forehead.

“Well then,” said Reeves. “Get your party over there, and Sergeant Williams will see to you. We’ll have a lorry sent up for your men, and I’ll inform my Brigadier that you wish to speak with him.”

The winds were beginning to quiet down now, and visibility was improving. Reeves got a glimpse of the KA-40 for the first time, and could hear the sound of some activity there, men moving about, deep voices. He was still very guarded, and he left the odd, unhappy Major and his Russian officer with one last remark.

“Now if you don’t mind, Major, I think I’ll have a good look around with my squadron. Any trouble, mind you, and I’ve got plenty more to share with you and your Russian friends. Understand?” Then he ordered two more armored cars, which is how Popski saw them, to come up and cover the helicopter.

“Don’t worry yourself, Lieutenant,” said Popski. “With those monsters at your beck and call, you’ll get no trouble from our lot.”

“What? This here?” Reeves gestured to his IFV, still waiting behind him, gun at the ready. “Those aren’t the monsters, Major. The big boys are well behind us, as you’ll soon see.”

He gave orders that his Sergeant should get everyone rounded up, secure the scene, and prohibit all radio communications. Then he leapt back up onto his IFV, turning and offering Major Popski the courtesy of a salute, which Peniakoff did not return.

* * *

Brigadier Kinlan had a problem on his hands, and one he did not expect. He had finally come up in a Panther Command Liaison Vehicle with three staff officers, leading the Regimental HQ Scout Troop of eight Scimitar light tanks. If Popski was impressed by the eight wheeled IFV that Reeves had rolled off in, the appearance of these tanks widened his eyes even more.

"They look to be a new breed of animal," he said. "Never saw a tank like that one before. Why it's as big as a Matilda II, and I hear you boys call that the Queen of the battlefield."

A soldier standing by heard that and spoke. "The Queen? Well you can have a look at the King now. Here he comes."

Then Popski got the surprise of his life. One of the 'monsters' that impudent Lieutenant had spoken about came up in a cloud of blowing dust and he could hardly believe his eyes.

The Challenger 2 tank was truly an awesome spectacle, a 62 ton beast that dwarfed the biggest tank Popski had ever seen, which was one of the stalwart Matildas. This tank was nearly three times heavier, almost twice as long and wide, and with a gun on it that looked to be a full sized artillery piece, bigger even than the 25 pounder he was familiar with. It made the 2 pounder on the Matilda look like a tiny popgun by comparison.

"God in his heaven!" His jaw dropped as he stared at the tank. If the British Army had things like that at its command, then all would be well in the world. He simply could not believe what he was seeing, and there was a second monster right behind this one, rumbling with the sound of unmistakable power.

"Sweet Jesus," he breathed, looking at Brigadier Kinlan now. "Where did you get those?"

"And what part of the British Army do you say you belong to if you never set eyes on a Challenger?" said Kinlan.

"Long Range Desert Group," said Popski. "Chaps call us the Libyan Desert Taxi Service out here. Italians call us *Pattuglia Fantasma*, the 'Ghost Patrol.' I was assigned as a guide for this man here, and we were out on search and rescue until your cheeky Lieutenant with that scout detail stuck his nose in it."

"Long Range Desert Group?" Kinlan knew something of the history as

well, and the name immediately registered. What was this man doing here, pulling his leg in the middle of a hot zone? Was he daft?

The Brigadier was a quiet, intelligent man, somewhat taciturn, and not given to idle chatter. He ran his outfit with precision and competence, and expected the same from every man under him. He was taking Popski in with a calm, careful gaze, and he could see through a brick wall if given the time. Yet there was something about this strange interloper in the desert and his Russian officer that rang true. These men were not posing or role playing here, though he could not imagine why they were here at all, unless to conduct some deep sabotage or special ops raid. He said as much.

“Well now, Major Peniakoff is it? My take on this situation is as follows. You’re here on a Russian KA-40, which would have to come off a Russian naval unit at sea up north, correct? This man beside you here is clearly an officer in the Russian Navy, and that makes him, and you by extension, my prisoners of war. Now you can make this a whole lot easier if you would cooperate and tell me what you’re about.”

“Prisoners? Are you out of your mind? Yes, we came off this man’s ship—a Russian battlecruiser—and it’s up north in the Med just as you say, cruising right alongside HMS *Invincible*. Prisoners? The Russians are *allies*, General, or at least they claim to be. Where do you get off treating us as hostiles out here? And for that matter, I’m regular British Army, just like I’ve told you.” He folded his arms again, ready to stick up for himself and vouch for the Russians no matter how many stars were under this man’s crown.

“Look, Major, the Russians just lobbed a missile our way with the aim of toasting every man in this unit alive, so you’ll forgive me if I’m just a bit touchy about something like that. Lucky for us we got the damn things before they got us. Then I find you out here with a couple squads of Russian Naval Marines, and something tells me you were lasing targets for that ICBM. Didn’t think the Russkies would need to do something like that, but maybe they wanted to be extra careful, and here you are. Now what’s this talk about a Russian battlecruiser sailing alongside HMS *Invincible*? Old Vince was decommissioned in ’05 and scrapped, so you can scrap that line right along with her.”

He was referring to the modern day light aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*, of course, nicknamed ‘Vince’ in the service. If this man thought the ship was still at sea, then it was a giveaway that something was rotten in Denmark

here. He was going to find out what it was, one way or another.

“Scrapped?” said Popski. “You might try that one on Admiral John Tovey. He’s out there too, sir. Now, I’ve told you what we’re doing here and, begging the General’s pardon, you might think you’d have half a bone in your head and want your General O’Connor fetched back safe and sound. I’d expect cooperation from the Desert Rats out here, and not this sort of treatment from our own rank and file.” He gave the General an indignant look.

Now a Staff Officer, who had been listening to the whole interrogation, stepped up and quietly whispered something to General Kinlan, which prompted an odd reaction.

“You’re certain?” he said.

“I’ve just called it up on the library pad, sir. Have a look at this...” The man handed Kinlan something that looked to Popski like a small tea tray topped with a glass cover but, to his amazement, the thing lit up in color with a single touch of the General’s hand, and he watched as the man studied something there, then stared at him as though he were looking at a ghost.

“Peniakoff,” said Kinlan. “And you say you’re called Popski?” The library pad was opened to a file on the man. Though Kinlan could not believe this could be the same person, the resemblance to the man in the photograph was uncanny. What was going on here?

“Long Range Desert Group, you say?”

“Right, sir. We’re a new unit, set up by Major Bagnold and Captains Clayton and Shaw—all volunteers, just like me. Long Range Patrol was our first handle. Now we’re the L.R.D.G.”

Kinlan tapped at the strange thing he held in his hand, and Popski could not help leaning in to try and get a better look at it. Then the General gave Popski a long look, puzzled yet penetrating, as if he were trying to see beneath the man’s skin.

Fedorov had been listening, not following everything, but he did catch a few words, and one of them was ‘ICBM.’ He asked Popski what had been said about it.

“Just gibberish to me,” said Popski. “Something about us lazing about a target area or some such nonsense. The man doesn’t make any sense, and he’s looking at me like I was his long lost uncle or something. What in the world has happened? These aren’t the Desert Rats I know, and I know a good

many. I heard Jock Campbell was out here with the Royal Horse Artillery, but these lads are way over the top. Get a look at those tanks. Bloody amazing! This has to be a special unit. Maybe something Wavell has kept under his hat to surprise old Rommel.”

Jake Kinlan caught those names, another oddity, and scratched his head. Wavell? Rommel? And didn't this man say he was out here looking for a downed British aircraft carrying a General O'Connor? The name was familiar, and a few taps on his library pad called up the file soon enough. There were several men by that name, a General Rory O'Connor who had served with 11th Armored Division, Middle East Command and Commander of British Forces in Hong Kong before retiring in 1966. This couldn't be the man they were talking about, nor the older entry for General Richard O'Connor dating back to WWII. Yet something about this man seemed to connect in his mind with these old files. The L.R.D.G. had fought here in Egypt and Libya, along with this 'Popski' character as well. Wavell was the man in charge; Rommel his enemy. And this General O'Connor had fought here as well. Was this some sort of elaborate hoax, a man playing at WWII in the desert?

No, he thought. Not possible. I don't know who this Popski fellow is, but there's no denying those are bona fide Russian Marines in that truck over there, and that's a KA-40 sitting there. They came here for a reason, and they were up to no good.

He was interrupted again by his Communications Officer, who reported they had another message from Lieutenant out on point. The column was moving now, the continuous rumble of the heavy vehicles shaking the earth itself as the heavy tanks of the Scotts Dragoons were now passing by, obscured by the sand storm. Popski kept looking over his shoulder, a look of alarm as he listened to it, as if he thought a freight train might come crashing in on them at any moment. The sound of the moving column had a deep, threatening tone that spoke of power and steel on the move, and the unmistakable sound of tanks on the desert sand.

“It seems we have another group out there sir. Reeves is beside himself. Says six jeeps came up the road from Siwa.”

“Berbers again? I thought we had that problem solved for the time being. They must have seen that fireworks earlier, and you'd think they'd want to stay out of it.”

“No sir... Not Berbers. Listen to this!”

Chapter 32

The difficulties of operating in the desert soon became all too apparent to Rommel and the troops of the fledgling Afrika Korps. Those first days on the new continent, walking along the broad streets of Tripoli, amid the bleached white stucco buildings were long gone. Then they were warriors arriving in a new land, full of optimism and vigor. The road move to their jumping off point at El Agheila had not been that arduous, but once actual operations started, the trials of desert combat were before them. Now they faced the empty wasteland, with maps that were far from accurate, dust and blowing sand everywhere, and Rommel's hot pursuit driving them on like a lion tamer with a whip.

Soon his single division was strung out all across the desert, meeting little resistance beyond an occasional Jock Column or a small delaying force of a few 2 pounder AT guns. The Italian Ariete division bulled its way up the main coastal road, followed by two corps of motorized and leg infantry. The 5th Light swung south and east, hoping to cut off the British retreat.

He did not realize, in those hectic first moments of his offensive, that dark eyes were watching his progress, and the Generals in OKW were thinking what to do about it. His military instincts drove him on, and he pushed his men and vehicles hard to achieve the position he wanted.

Yet his enemy was too crafty and had not fallen into his trap. The British pulled out quickly, and started to retreat, with the infantry heading for Benghazi, and the remnants of 2nd Armored division cutting across the peninsula towards Tobruk. There the British retreat consolidated around that fortified port, with the armor attempting to reorganize to the south of El Adem, protecting the port from a turning maneuver.

Wavell had managed to scrape together a few Indian motorized units and send them west to try and bolster the situation, and he was getting the 9th Australian Division ready to board the trains. That and the 2nd New Zealand Division might be enough to hold, and now he saw that the naval situation preventing the transfer of these good troops to Greece may be a boon in disguise, if the Royal Navy could survive what they were now facing.

The problem now was Rommel. How fast would he come east, and how

far would he try to go? And what had happened to General O'Connor? Would the Russians make good on their promise to find him? As reports stacked up, Wavell wished he had the plucky General at his side to plan the defense. Now all he heard was one report after another of Rommel's advance. He was coming at them like a bad desert storm.

* * *

O'Connor had heard him coming when he listened to the opening rounds of the battle, and he knew he did not have enough men and material in hand to stop the German attack, and the prospect of any further advance on his part to Tripoli was now out of the question. So he turned what was left of the 2nd Armored Division over to General Neame and answered the call from Wavell to fly in to Alexandria for a conference. The German fighter that took a bite out of his plane en route would prevent his timely RSVP, but when the plane went down, he was thankful that he had survived without any serious injury beyond a bruised ego. He seldom gave that any mind, and now his only thoughts were set on how to make contact with friendly British patrols before the Italians found him. He knew they still had a garrison at Giarabub, but also that there were elements of the British 6th Australian Cavalry at Siwa.

The storm that had helped to bring down his Blenheim was still raging, but he thought it best to get away from the wreckage of the plane, even though it was the only shelter available. He and the only other survivors, the pilot and navigator, set about gathering up supplies, flares, water, food, and they took one solid meal in the plane, waiting out the worst of the sandstorm.

"The Italians might have seen us go down," said O'Connor, "but I doubt if they'll be too keen on investigating a wrecked plane in this mess. That said, when the storm abates, we move out on foot."

"But the radio is gone now, sir," said the pilot. "How will anyone know where we've gone if we can't report?"

"Where else would we go our here but south to Siwa?" O'Connor was squinting at a map, his eyes still full of energy. "But I think we'll come at it by a roundabout way. If I deduce that's our only play, I won't put it out of the question that the Italians might also. So when we move, we'll head east first, towards that escarpment at the southern end of the Qattara Depression. From there we can work our way south to Siwa. And I'm afraid we shall have to

move while the wind is still up, gentlemen. That way it will blot out any tracks we might leave. One man can carry the survival tent and cooking kit. The others lug all the food and water we can carry. I'm not sure where we are, but I can damn well navigate if I have to. You can back me up, Mister Monk."

Isaac Monk was the navigator, and he nodded. "I've a decent sun compass and time piece, sir."

"Monkey will get us where you want to go, General," said Bowers, the pilot. "Just you lead the way."

It was tough going at first, as they left before dawn with the wind up, as O'Connor suggested. They soon found that walking in the desert was no easy task. When the ground was sandy, it got into their boots and shoes, and their feet would sink into it to the point where they felt they were struggling through mud. When it was stony and hard, the rocks presented sharp, jagged threats, and it was tough on ankles or knees, particularly when they would stumble or fall, which happened all too often.

As they trudged along, O'Connor took the lead, tapping out a brisk pace with his riding crop as he went, seemingly tireless. Six hours later the other two men were near exhaustion, and so the party stopped to rest and take some light nourishment. O'Connor wanted another six hour march before they set camp for the night, but a second storm seemed to be brewing. He decided to press on, until the blowing sand forced them to stop two hours after mid-day and rig out the survival tent.

There should have been plenty of daylight left, but the skies were blood red with the desert dust, and it almost seemed that night would be upon them soon. They could barely see in any case, the sand stinging their faces and eyes. That night they rode out the storm, huddled in the cold tent while the conference at Alexandria concluded, and the fleet put out to sea. They were still holed up when the KA-40 was also forced to land, but some hours later O'Connor thought he heard the approach of vehicles.

"Look smart, gentlemen," he said rousing himself. "There's movement out there. I'm afraid we'll have to move too, and quickly. But at least knock down the tent. That way it won't be seen if these are Italians, and I think they must be."

So they moved on foot again, with no time to break down and stow the tent beyond knocking it flat. But soon the sound of vehicles grew louder, and

they were forced to go to ground, hoping they had not been seen. But the well schooled eyes of men who were out there looking for them had found their quarry, and it soon became apparent that they were going to be discovered.

“Stand ready men. We’ve only the three side arms, but if things go the wrong way here, keep a steady hand and make every shot count.”

Thankfully, he did not have to lead this last little defensive action, for when the vehicles appeared he saw they were the jeeps of the Long Range Desert Group. The lead driver waved as they came up in a billow of dust.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes!” said the navigator, Monk.

“Well met, gentlemen.” O’Connor was pleased to see the men, but took in their shabby appearance and made a mental note to have a word with them later. The men were unshaven, uniforms filthy, and looked to be self-styled military vagabonds.

“We’ve been looking for you, General. Sergeant Galloway here, and these are Lance Corporals Cokes and Jewell—Signalman Simpson there in the back.”

“Signalman?” O’Connor took a long disapproving look at Hector Simpson, his beard so long that the other men had taken to calling him “JC,” Jesus Christ.

“Then you have a radio?”

“That we do, sir,” said Sergeant Galloway.

“Good then. We’ll want to get a message off to Alexandria and let them know you’ve found me.” He stopped, looking over his shoulder when he heard the sound of more vehicles approaching.

“More of your boys, Sergeant?”

“No sir, we’ve just these six jeeps, and those sound like armored cars.”

“Armored cars? That must be the Italians out of Giarabub. There were no armored cars available on our side for work out here, as you well know. It was all we could do to keep 2nd Armored running up north. I couldn’t even spare a single Wellington bomber to support Fergusson. We only had two! Well now, can we outrun them?”

Corporal Cokes was already pulling back the bolt on the machinegun mounted on the jeep, but it was going to do them little good, for other eyes had been out searching that day as well, noting the long column of dust that seemed just a little too thick where the jeeps had come up.

* * *

They were not human eyes, but the sensitive infrared sensors at the nose of Lieutenant Reeves' scout column in the 12th Lancers. The speedy Dragons moved, with lightning speed, fanning out in a wide line abreast to envelop the contact and prevent its escape.

It was then that both O'Connor and Reeves got a real surprise, for it seemed there were British armored cars operating in the desert after all, but the like of which he had never seen. And for Reeves, it seemed that the story that odd Popski impersonator had told him about the General's plane going down was true—impossibly true.

His column of Dragon IFVs pulled up surrounding this new group, yet when he made the P.A. announcement, stating he was British Army, he was surprised to hear cheering from the small group of vehicles they had come upon. That in itself was a bit of a shock, as the locals here had little welcome for them whenever they patrolled outside the Sultan Apache perimeter zone.

One thing led to another, and he was soon on foot, questioning the men, as he had the Russians. There was one among them that all the others deferred to, a short wiry man with grey white hair and an officer's cap. He carried a riding crop, which he tapped incessantly at his thigh to emphasize anything he said, and he was wearing the uniform of a serving British officer. Reeves could clearly see the rank as well, a Lieutenant General!

He stared at the short energetic man in front of him amazed, because he knew the history of the desert war very well, and this man was the spitting image of General O'Connor, just as that other fellow had been the image of Popski. He passed a fleeting moment, thinking this new catch might be in league with the others, a grand theater, a re-enactment group, but why would anyone want to come out here and play at World War Two? Here? Now, with the whole world going bonkers in another very real and deadly war?

The Lieutenant started with a brisk salute, more to the rank than anything else. These men might be imposters, like the last group, but he would play out the game and see what he could learn. Yet the man's answers made no sense, mentioning names like Wavell and Cunningham, all long dead, and making the grand claim that he was, in fact, commander of the British XIII Corps in the Western Desert!

"Just who the hell are you, Mister Reeves?" said O'Connor. "12th Royal

Lancers aren't even here in Africa as far as I know. And how in the world did you manage to trade in your old Morris CS9 for that!" He pointed at the Dragon IFV, clearly amazed.

Reeves found his interrogation had quickly backfired on him, as the sheer force of O'Connor's will and determination seemed to carry the moment. He rode out the storm of words, waiting for this so called General's questions to abate like he waited out the blowing sand to get this mission started. They came one after another: Where did he get that vehicle? What in bloody hell was he doing out here wearing the patch of the Desert Rats on his shoulder, when that division was back at Alexandria refitting? Did Wavell send him? Was he a new unit? How many men were in his column? ... and on it went as if the fellow thought he was out here to fight the last war, his great grandfather's war, settled long ago with the blood of another generation on these cruel desert sands. In the end he simply held up his hand as if calling for a truce.

"Easy does it," he said to O'Connor, strangely bothered by the odd notion that this man seemed so completely authentic in his role that he could be the real thing. "I have orders to report all contacts," said Reeves, "and to get anyone found out here to the rear of our column. Perhaps you'd best tell your story to my Brigadier."

O'Connor's fate line was redrawn that day, when the history resounded with a strange echo, enacting his disappearance and capture right in the midst of the first German offensive. Yet there was one dramatic difference—he had not been captured by the Germans of Ponath's 8th Machinegun Company, but by a bemused Lieutenant in the 12th Royal Lancers, in a British Army that would not exist for another 80 years.

Reeves elected to do the only sensible thing he could think of at that moment, and pass the problem along to the officers above his pay grade. So he radioed in to Brigadier Kinlan, and his report came at a most opportune time.

* * *

The Staff Officer leaned in, speaking quietly to Kinlan as he reported. "These were men claiming to be British soldiers, sir, dressed out in that same old style British kit from head to toe!" He gestured to Popski now, who was listening intently.

“A Sergeant Galloway, sir. Six jeeps and an odd bunch that look like they’ve been out here for a good long while. That’s how Reeves put it. But they had another man with them, and sir, the fellow claims to be a British General. Calls himself O’Connor.”

Brigadier Kinlan just stared at him. “O’Connor? Rubbish! What in bloody hell is going on here?” He looked down at his library pad again. There was the entry on the General himself in the data file, complete with a vintage photo from World War Two.

Fedorov heard the name O’Connor and his heart leapt. He immediately asked Popski if he had heard what was said.

“Sure enough,” his guide said. “They’ve done our work for us, Captain. So you won’t have to spin up that helicontraption of yours any further. It’s O’Connor alright, along with some of my men! I caught several of the names that staff officer reported.”

Then to Brigadier Kinlan he said: “Just you wait and see now, sir. General O’Connor will be more than glad to straighten this matter out for you.”

“Will he now?” Kinlan did not seem happy at all, and he gave a sharp order to his Staff Officer. “Tell him to bring the whole lot in,” he ordered. “We’ll get to the bottom of this mess right now!”

Chapter 33

Troyak had been unable to get through to *Kirov*, saying there was odd interference on every radio band. This news kept Fedorov in the dark, knowing that something terrible had happened again here, but unable to determine whether his team had moved in time again... until he heard that the British had found O'Connor. If this was so, if it was actually General O'Connor out there in the desert, then this new British General and his Desert Rats had somehow manifested here from the future! *They* were the interlopers in time, and not his own small contingent. But how did it happen?

He remembered that strange glow in the sky, the almost phosphorescent light in the blowing sand, and that odd moment when Orlov had yelped with pain dropping that thing he had found in Siberia—in the Tunguska river valley. He began to piece together the odd bits of the puzzle, thinking hard. This British General Kinlan had said something about a missile, an ICBM. Popski told him that they 'got it first,' before it could make an end of them, though he did not know what Kinlan meant by that. That could only mean they engaged it with anti-ballistic missile systems, but he gathered that the warhead had detonated, somewhere over the Qattara depression.

Kinlan thinks we're a fifth column, he realized, finally understanding that remark about lazing about near the target area. He meant 'lasing,' but Popski would have never heard of that word, and translated it otherwise. Brigadier Kinlan thought we were here to paint the target zone and help guide the missile attack in. He questioned Popski further about it, and it was the only conclusion he could come to. If this were so, then Kinlan might see Popski and his men as saboteurs, even O'Connor. How could he possibly believe anything else?

Now he had come to one of those critical moments of knowing that could make all the difference in how this all played out. A nuclear detonation... a Tunguska fragment... a hole in time. It was the only possible explanation. That's how Rod 25 must be working. It contained exotic residual material from the Tunguska event, and when lowered into the sublime nuclear dance of the ship's reactor, the combination cut time like a razor, and anything within a given radius fell through the rift.

Director Kamenski told him that large explosions disturb time, particularly those of nuclear origin. Could that thing Orlov found serve as a kind of lightning rod, where all that strange effect was targeted at this very place and time. If so, the radius of this event must have been very great if it allowed a force the size of a full Armored brigade to move through the rift. Then again... From what he could determine, and see all around him, this brigade had been tightly concentrated, ready to make a road march, with all its vehicles and equipment gathered into a zone that probably did not exceed five or ten kilometers. Even Rod 25 could produce a radius effect that wide, and this thing Orlov had could be a highly concentrated fragment from the Tunguska event, with considerably more power than the control rod.

All these thoughts tumbled through his mind in a matter of seconds, but now the agonizing question was before him—what should he do about it? What could he do? Saving his own skin, and extricating his contingent from this dilemma was one thing, but to do so he was going to have to convince this Brigadier Kinlan that his brigade was no longer where he thought it was—that he and all his troops were now sitting in the Egyptian desert in January of 1941! Look how long it took us to accept what had happened to us. And Admiral Tovey... He and Turing had years to figure this all out, the slow accumulation of hard evidence, tangible clues, right down to those photographs they handed us. What can I do to convince this General without sounding like I'm a madman?

He groped about, trying to figure a way he could persuade this man, and explain what had happened. O'Connor, he thought. General Richard O'Connor. They were bringing him in with Popski's men this very moment. O'Connor is a prominent historical figure. There will be photographic references, in fact, I could call them up on my jacket computer if need be. Would that be enough? Perhaps, but then he realized what was on the other side of that coin.

If I do convince them they have moved in time, he thought, then they'll have to know who we are as well, and wonder how we came to be here. This man was British military, with a very important post in commanding one of the only heavy armored units they had left in 2021. It is very possible that he would have heard about the disappearance of our ship during those live fire exercises.

He thought about this. Could I tell him who we are, and how we came to

be here? That lets the bear out of the cave, doesn't it? Admiral Volsky was bold to reveal this to Tovey, but to convince Kinlan of his impossible fate, I may have to reveal it to the entire world. This is information known only to Admiral Tovey and Alan Turing in this era. My god, even Popski is still in the dark. He doesn't even know who we really are!

Yet the more he thought about this incredible situation, the more he realized the inevitable outcome of these events. This unit was posted to the BP Sultan Apache oil concern in the year 2020, after the massacre of British oilfield personnel there. He remembered the incident clearly, and now he knew what must have happened. The damn war, he thought. It's started. The missiles are in the air in 2021, and this was on the target list, two fat birds that could be killed with one nuclear stone. Our forces could take out a vital oil and gas recovery facility here, and wipe out the best unit in the British Army at the same time.

But it didn't happen that way, and we had everything to do with that. *Kirov*, this entire odyssey, *Orlov*, that mission to *Ilanskiy*, all of it. Then he realized that he, himself, had been at the heart of everything that had happened to forge that chain of events. Yes, *Orlov* jumped ship, or so he now secretly believed, but I was the one who insisted we go after him. I found the stairway at *Ilanskiy*, and whispered that warning in *Sergei Kirov's* ear. I was the one who insisted we go after *Karpov* too, and now *Kazan* is involved in all of this. I was the one who sent *Troyak* and *Orlov* on that raid in *Siberia*, and that's how *Orlov* found that Devil's Teardrop. This is all my doing! And now look what's in front of me, the British 7th Armored Brigade from the year 2021! My God, the power this unit has at its disposal could influence the entire outcome of this war, and all the history that follows it.

What should I do? It's going to happen one way or another, with or without any action on my part. These troops were set to move out from their base at *Sultan Apache*. If so, then they were going to head north to ports that might be able to accommodate the movement of this tonnage. That would be a chancy move with the war heating up as it was, but they'll try. Yes, they'll try, and if they do go north they will run right into the thick of things, demigods on the field of battle, the Desert Rats, echoes from the future, born of a past that was playing out here and now, reincarnated in a form and shape so potent that it could change everything. They could save Egypt, prevent England from being knocked right out of this war if things continue to

unravel here.

Fedorov had been deeply troubled by the news that Gibraltar had been taken, and the shadow looming over Malta. The dominoes were falling now. He knew the history so well that he could easily see the most likely outcome of these events. Even now, Admiral Volsky was out to sea with *Kirov* to try and bolster the British fleet as they faced those impossible odds against a combined Axis naval force twice their size. That fight we can win, he thought. With *Kirov*, and with *Kazan* out there somewhere, we can unhinge the growing Axis naval power and reset the balance here as it was, restoring the Royal Navy to a position of naval supremacy.

Yes, that we can do, but what about Rommel? How do we influence events on land? That was the dilemma he had discussed with Admiral Volsky. The Germans took Gibraltar, and they'll likely take Malta now. Rommel will get all the tanks, fuel and supplies he needs here, and what if the Germans reinforce him further? What if they make this place their major war effort for all of 1941? We can win the war at sea, but how in god's name do I stop Rommel?

There were two ways, one an indirect approach that was within their power—logistics. If we establish naval supremacy here, then we can sink any troop transport the other side puts to sea, and cut off Rommel's supplies. That was one thing *Kirov* and *Kazan* could easily accomplish, particularly with the stealth of the sub.

Yet can we do this before the German force footprint here becomes too large for the British to oppose Rommel's advance? Now he remembered what Admiral Tovey had confided to them before they put out to sea to look for their battle. He revealed that Turing had sent word that BP had wind of new German troop authorizations for North Africa. They were going to send the troops they had used to smash the Rock of Gibraltar, put that hammer in Rommel's hand by augmenting his force with 1st Mountain Division and a newly reconstituted Grossdeutschland at full division strength! Those units and others, like the 90th Light Division, were now earmarked for North Africa, and they just might get here before this naval situation is resolved to our satisfaction. Then all we could do is try and make their lives miserable here, by cutting off their seaborne communications with France and Italy.

He considered that, and realized the Germans now had many more options open to them for supplying a force here in North Africa. Tripoli was

the first port they would use, but they also had Oran, Algiers, and now the narrow straits of Gibraltar to Tangiers. Getting supplies to Egypt from those ports would be much more difficult, but if the Germans were determined... There was even the possibility that they could create an air bridge, like they tried to supply the 6th Army at Stalingrad.

And how to stop Rommel from smashing his way to the Suez Canal before *Kirov* and *Kazan* can make that vital difference? A logistics war is a long, drawn out affair, a way of killing your enemy by starving and smothering him. But there was another way, the direct solution to the problem, right here!

The answer was now right in front of him, all around him in the thundering rumble of heavy tanks and IFVs. The Desert Rats had come home again, by chance, fate or design, and if they do move north Fedorov now knew what had to happen. They would find the British holed up in Tobruk, and by god, they would learn the horrible truth of what had happened to them the hard way and, after the madness passed, they would fight. He was as certain of this outcome as he could possibly be.

So you see, he thought. You can stand here worrying about revealing this insane truth to this world, that men from a future time were here to take up arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them. Shakespeare had something to say about everything, he thought, smiling inwardly as his anxiety settled down around this conclusion.

It wasn't up to him after all. Kinlan was going north, and he was going to fight for Great Britain in this war, and that was that. He doesn't know that now, and he certainly won't believe a word of it should you try to tell him, but that's what will happen. So all you have to do, really, is go along for the ride. In fact, that won't be our choice either. These men have us now, and they certainly won't apologize, send us back to the KA-40, and wish us farewell.

Perhaps General O'Connor and I can do something about that first, before Kinlan takes that hard road north. Then he smiled again, wondering how O'Connor was going to take in the sight of a battalion of Challenger 2 tanks! Standing there in disbelief was one thing. Putting your hand on that Chobham armor, hearing that big 120mm gun fire, and the thunder of this force in attack—well that was quite another thing entirely, and it will make a believer of O'Connor in short order. He won't understand it at all, but he'll see it with

his own eyes, and seeing is believing.

It would be good if I could somehow spare both Kinlan and O'Connor the shock and confusion of everything we went through to get this far on this amazing journey. Then he thought of something he could do that would make a very strong argument with Kinlan. Something very simple.

All he had to do was convince him to look over his shoulder!

Brigadier Kinlan gave Popski a frown as he turned from his Staff Officer. "This is already wearing out my patience," he said. "Now, I'll give you one more chance to tell me what you are really doing out here, and if I get any more of your nonsense, Major, I'll lock you and this whole troop up for good! You're standing there wearing a British soldier's uniform you must have dug up at a surplus store, and you think you can make me believe your regular army? Alright, have it your way. You know what happens to enemy combatants found behind lines, particularly someone trying to pose as one of our boys?"

Popski had a look of shock on his face, but before he could say anything Fedorov tugged urgently on his arm. "Major, he said quickly. "I need to speak with this officer, and I need you to translate everything I say, faithfully, and without question. Can you do that?"

"I'd just as soon give him a piece of my own mind," said Popski in Russian, "rank or no rank. The man is going bonkers on us if he thinks we're his enemy. What's gotten into him? He's no British General I've ever heard of, nor have I ever seen anything like this lot here!" He gestured to the vehicles still passing them in a long, steady column.

"I *need* you now, Popski. This is urgent. I must speak with this man. Can you translate? You may not understand any of what I will now say, but just translate. I'll explain it all to you later, but consider this discussion top secret, something known only to the very highest placed officers in your military. Believe this. I was with Wavell and Admiral Tovey, and privy to things you will not have heard, but I must trust you now. Can you do this?"

"Well get on with it then," said Popski, a dejected look on his face, arms folded, eyes dark with his rising temper.

"Very well... Please tell the General that..."

How should he begin? He was about to try and give this man the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the heartache of a thousand natural shocks, the whips and scorns of time. But he had to do something, so he led with the

one suit he knew was long in his hand.

“Tell the General that I regret the attack on his position, and hope that it was not my countrymen who were responsible.”

Popski frowned. “It’ll take a bit more than a nice apology,” he said to Fedorov in Russian.

“Popski! Don’t think now. Don’t even listen. Just translate as faithfully as you can. This is critical!”

“Very well, don’t get your britches in a wad. We’ve enough trouble here as it stands.” Then he translated as Fedorov continued.

“Tell him that my men had no mission here associated with that missile strike, and I ask him to believe that. We were here to find and rescue the man his scout troop has just found, but I must now ask him to do one thing that will help explain this entire situation.”

Half a minute later Brigadier Kinlan spoke again. “Sounding a bit better. Yet I fail to comprehend why Russian Marines would be interested in finding a British General, except to capture him.”

“I understand that would be your view,” said Fedorov, “but again, I ask you to do one thing that will help explain everything here. The situation is very critical.”

“It doesn’t get much more critical when the nukes start flying,” said Kinlan darkly. “Alright, what is your request, Captain?”

“Do you still have vehicles near the Sultan Apache facilities?”

“What? We’re nearly ten kilometers outside the perimeter here. You don’t think I was going to sit there and wait for another missile, do you?”

“What does he mean—missile?” said Popski. “Is he talking about those rockets of yours?”

“Just translate!” This time Fedorov put some iron in his tone, and Popski shrugged.

“Tell him there is no further missile threat. Tell him I guarantee this absolutely.”

“You guarantee it?” Kinlan smiled. “Just who are you now, the Commander of the Russian Strategic Missile Troops? The Devil’s Apprentice, are you?”

Popski translated that, though he had absolutely no idea what it meant. The primary Russian ICBM was still the deadly RS-20B ballistic missile, called “Satan” by Western analysts. Their commander was known as the

Devil's Apprentice in intelligence circles, but Fedorov smiled.

"No sir, I am not that man. I am Anton Fedorov, Captain of the First Rank, battlecruiser *Kirov*, and I ask you to do one thing now. Send the closest vehicle you have to Sultan Apache. You will find the entire sector completely undamaged."

"That's because we got your damn missile," said Kinlan quickly. "Battlecruiser *Kirov*? You mean that Russian ship that went missing out of Severomorsk last July and then turned up in the Pacific? We thought you tangled with the wrong people and went down off the coast of Japan some weeks ago."

"No sir, the ship is sound, seaworthy, and at sea in the Mediterranean, as the presence of that KA-40 there testifies. We lifted off with my Marine contingent from the fantail of that battlecruiser."

"Just as I thought," Kinlan smiled. "Yet I find it hard to believe your ship made it into the Med. How would you get there? Our side would have seen any move like that easily enough."

Popski could see that these two men seemed to share a common understanding of what they were talking about, but it was as if they were speaking an entire different language, so he just translated as well as he could.

"I will ask you to humor me, then," said Fedorov, "because here I stand, and I am, indeed, the Captain of that ship. Now... will you send a reconnaissance to Sultan Apache?"

"What for?" Kinlan folded his arms, head cocked sideways, his battle helmet shading his eyes.

"Because I can tell you exactly what you will find there," said Fedorov. "Nothing. There will be no perimeter wire. No guard towers, no roads, no buildings, facilities, oil drilling equipment—nothing. There will be nothing there but unblemished desert, and it will not be because anything was destroyed by another missile. You would have seen that, even through this storm. Do this, and you will have your hand on the beginning of an answer that will sort this whole mess out. Trust me, General, officer to officer, man to man, in spite of what has happened these last nine days. You'll find nothing back there but blowing sand and desert scrub. Sultan Apache is gone, and once your people confirm this, I will tell you why."

Part XII

Impossible

*“Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before
breakfast.”*

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Chapter 34

The fleet was a full day out of Alexandria, now steaming about 200 kilometers west of Crete. They could make only 20 knots at best, which was just under the full speed of the older *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships, and that stately warrior was in the lead position of the main column, followed by *Warspite* and *Malaya*. *Invincible* was 2000 yards off the port side, with the heavy cruisers in attendance, and *Kirov* bringing up the rear as an escort to the two British carriers.

A flight of *Fulmar* fighters was up providing top cover, though Admiral Volsky had told Tovey he could adequately defend the airspace over the fleet. “Use your fighters to defend any strike aircraft you may have,” he said. “If they get mixed up in a dogfight over the fleet, our missiles could find them in that confusion.”

So it was decided that, on spotting the enemy fleet, the two carriers would launch the 18 *Swordfish* as a fleet strike asset, protected by the bulk of their fighters. *Kirov* would provide early warning with her long range radars effective out to 300 kilometers, and Lieutenant Yazov was on radar that day watching his screen for any sign of enemy activity. He was suddenly surprised by a warning light on a subsystem that identified known incoming radar signatures, yet he thought it certainly had to be a false signal. His reflex was to tap the screen, as if this simple gesture would cure the problem, but it persisted, so he reported.

“Radar signature?” said Rodenko, who had the con. “On the IFF module?”

“Yes sir,” said Yazov sheepishly. “It is reading for a Marine Navigation radar on the I-Band, and NATO encoded E and F band as well. But look sir, I’m getting IFF identification now.”

Rodenko was an old hand at radar, and he immediately knew what he was looking at, but it made no sense, and his first thought was that it must be a glitch or after effect from the many time displacements that left their system dazed for hours after they moved. This was reading for the British SAMPSON long range AESA Air Defense radar, a kind of phased array system used by modern Royal navy vessels, particularly the newer Type 45

Destroyers.

“Some difficulty?” said Admiral Volsky as he came onto the bridge, the men all standing and saluting as he was announced.”

“Welcome back, Admiral,” said Rodenko. “It seems we have a little mystery on our hands.”

“We’ve certainly had nothing else since we left Severomorsk,” said Volsky. “What is it this time?”

“Well sir, we just got painted by a radar common to the British Type 45 Destroyer class.”

That got Volsky’s attention immediately. “Type 45?”

“Yes sir, but I have no sub-line signature. The entire electronic suite is lining up on that IFF resolution, and I’m definitely reading two rotating planar arrays. That’s unique to the Type 45 SAMPSON.”

Most other modern phased array systems used multiple arrays for constant 360 degree coverage, but the SAMPSON used only two, and they rotated at 30 revolutions per minute in the spherical dome high atop the characteristic tall main superstructure of the ship.

“An error, Mister Rodenko?”

“Possibly sir, but now I have confirmation from both our long range systems, and simultaneous failure of both systems is not likely. We’re definitely getting a phased array radar signal, sir. Our IFF module could be defaulting to this interpretation, but it seems fairly certain.”

“Phased array? Here? What other ship could possibly have such technology. This makes no sense.”

Volsky came over to the radar console to see for himself, though he was not entirely sure what he was looking at. Radar applications had never been his strong suit, but Rodenko was one of the very best in the fleet.

“I could try to challenge that system and see what happens. It is fairly well impervious to jamming, but if this is a false positive from a local radar set from this time period, we’ll jam it easily.”

“Make it so,” said Volsky, arms folded as he waited.

“Mister Yazov.” Rodenko passed the order to his radar watchstander, and he keyed the jamming challenge. It should have blotted out any radar of this era with little difficulty, particularly as Rodenko had tuned the system to hit typical bandwidths used in WWII. But seconds later the IFF was again protesting that the ship was receiving a phased array signal. Rodenko gave

Volsky a look that spoke volumes, real concern in his eyes now.

Volsky hesitated, for the barest moment, then he gave a series of orders that were deadly serious given his tone of voice, though he maintained a calm demeanor.

“The ship will come to full battle stations immediately,” he said. “Mister Nikolin, please call Chief Dobrynin and ask him if there has been any unusual flux event in the reactor core. Has he run any rod maintenance procedure in recent hours?”

“Aye sir.”

“What are you thinking, Admiral?” Rodenko asked.

“The impossible again,” said Volsky. “Either our electronics are having a nice laugh with this little joke today, or there is a British Type 45 class destroyer out there somewhere painting us with this radar signal. That can mean only two things. Either we have moved again, subtly, without our even realizing it, or...”

The second alternative was obvious, but inexplicable. “I don’t see how a Type 45 could be here, sir. That is if we still remain in 1941, which seems most likely. I have solid returns on all the other ships in the British fleet. They are right here with us.”

“Yes? Well it would be a stretch, but we have pulled things along with us before during a time displacement.”

“A torpedo, sir, and a small fishing trawler when the *Anatoly Alexandrov* moved, but we’re talking about an entire fleet here, several hundred thousand tons of material. I doubt that we could move that kind of mass.”

“As do I,” said Volsky, “and I know Dobrynin will tell me he has stowed those control rods away, but I must check every possibility to be certain. Yes, the presence of the other British ships is quite telling, but could there be a modern British warship here? Where is this signal originating from?”

“Due east, sir, and given the maximum range of the SAMPSON system, it could be no farther east than Santorini.”

“Santorini?” That name was familiar to Volsky. If Fedorov were here he would have picked up on it as well. “Santorini is a volcanic caldera, is it not?”

“I believe so, Admiral.”

“Then we may just have an explanation. Let us not forget where the Demon volcano sent this ship of late.”

“An eruption sir? We see no sign of that.”

“Not here, Mister Rodenko. But if that island erupted in the future it could have sent that ship through a time rift.”

“Ah, I understand sir.” Rodenko looked back at his screen. The reason Volsky had ordered battle stations was now quite evident. If this ship came from the same world they had left behind, it was their mortal enemy.

“Well,” said Volsky. “They must be having a conversation very similar to this one on their bridge right now. Let us see if we can diffuse what could quickly become a most unfortunate engagement, because if they fire on this ship, I will be forced to do the same. Mister Nikolin?”

“Chief says no unusual reading or maintenance procedures, sir.”

“Very well. Send a message using standard NATO frequencies and format. Identify us as the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov*, and request weapons tight for parley. And get a message to HMS *Invincible* on a secure channel. I want to speak with Admiral Tovey as well.”

“Parley?”

“Yes, gentlemen. The first defensive system we initiate will be our words and human reason. That failing, we get what we have been sailing in all these many months at sea, the madness of war.”

* * *

“**Incoming** message, sir!”

“What is it Mister Thomas?” Captain Gordon MacRae was not expecting this.

“It’s using standard NATO format, sir—a request for open communications link from... the battlecruiser *Kirov*!”

The surprise redoubled. “*Kirov*? That was the bloody ship Elena had told him about, the Russian behemoth that had been raising hell, moving in time, wreaking havoc on the history.

“Mother of god,” he breathed. “What is that thing doing here in the Mediterranean? Mister Dean, kindly ask Miss Fairchild to come to the bridge, and state we have a most unusual situation at hand—an emergency.”

“Aye sir.”

“Mister Thomas. Open communications, and put it on the bridge intercom. The ship’s personnel will stand to, all systems.”

The alarm sounded, and that would put some fire in Fairchild's feet, thought MacRae. In the meantime, he looked to his radar man. "Well that explains it, doesn't it?"

They had also picked up the electronic signature of the Russian ship, and had been debating what it meant, just as Volsky had predicted. Now the truth was unequivocally clear when Nikolin's voice came over the ship's intercom.

"Kirov to any ship bearing SAMPSON radar. Do you copy? This is a comm-link from Admiral of the Fleet, Leonid Volsky, requesting weapons tight for parley."

"The big brass is aboard," said MacRae. "And they want to chat before we start lobbing missiles at each other. Fair enough. Get Mack Morgan up here as well, and signal go ahead *Kirov*, standing by."

"Aye sir."

Fairchild was through the back hatch, up from the executive suite, her eyes wondering what was amiss. She could see the earnest attention of the bridge crew to their systems. MacRae was sitting in the blue Captain's chair, and Executive Officer Dean was standing right behind him. A medic crowded in behind her, offering a brief salute before taking up his post.

"The ship, mum," said MacRae. "That Russian monster you've been talking about."

"Kirov? Here?"

"About 370 kilometers due west at the moment by our latest reading, just inside our maximum radar coverage zone. They want to parley, but shall I get the X-3's armed and airborne in case manners fail us here?"

Elena thought quickly. *Kirov, Geronimo*, It was right here! Could this be the reason Admiral Tovey had encoded this date and time for their displacement to the past? Were they meant to find and deal with this ship, once and for all. She knew that *Kirov* was a well armed, deadly opponent if it came to a battle. The side that fired first would have great advantage. Now she realized that the men aboard that ship must be as surprised to find *Argos Fire* here as she was. They were standing like a pair of gunslingers at fifty paces, and if she launched those X-3s it might give them more weapons to put in play, but it would also be like a man slowly moving aside his overcoat to expose the sidearm on his hip.

"Have they launched helicopters?"

"No mum. They've requested weapons tight."

“Then no movement on the X-3s.”

“Admiral Volsky aboard the Russian battlecruiser Kirov requesting weapons tight and parley. Please identify yourself and respond, over.”

“Announce ourselves, Mister Thomas,” said Elena. Then she leaned in to MacRae. “If it comes to a fight here, what are our chances?”

He just looked at her. “It won’t be pleasant, for either side.”

“Sir,” said Healy at radar. “Getting many more seaborne returns now. Surface contacts just west of the primary, but no IFF signatures.”

“No signatures? How many contacts?”

“A good number. I read two ships, close by the primary. Five airborne contacts, then multiple ships in column. I’m reading at least twenty ships, more resolving as we approach.”

Argos Fire was moving at 30 knots due west now, as MacRae had turned to investigate the IFF contact some ten minutes earlier. “But No IFF data? That’s odd.” He looked at Elena, explaining.

“We’ve got clear electronics signatures on the one ship, Fregat 3D radar system as we read it. Now we’re just coming into better range and it appears there’s quite an armada out there. I’m not sure what to make of it. None of the other ships are emitting electronic signatures that can reach us, but they could be running dark and leaving that work to the flagship.”

“You think this is an entire Russian battlegroup? That can’t be possible.”

“Then our wolf is out there cavorting with the sheep, mum. It might have been attacking a convoy, and then up we come, the unexpected sheep dog.”

“Any sign of that? Could we tell if there was combat underway out there?”

“Aye, we’d see it on radar, but there’s no indication of any missile fires underway. It looks to be one big happy family out there.”

Elena rubbed her hands together, always cold, even in temperate climes. *Kirov, Geronimo*, steaming with a group of many ships that had to be from this era. What was this about?

“Identify us as *Argos Fire*, Royal Navy. Then confirm parley request,” she said. “Ask identification on those other ships. Let’s see what we can find out.”

“Aye mum,” said Thomas, and he returned the message.

“Senior Lieutenant Nikolin here, speaking for Admiral Volsky. We have patched in a third party. Standby.”

The wait seemed interminable, then a voice came, quiet but firm, and the sound of it seemed to strike a tone of reason and authority. Her heart leapt when she heard the name.

“HMS Argos Fire, this is Admiral John Tovey aboard HMS Invincible, fleet flagship. I am now commanding His Majesty’s Mediterranean Fleet. Sorry to say we haven’t made your acquaintance, Argos Fire. But we request an immediate rendezvous. Over.”

My god, thought Elena. John Tovey! He was here, now, at this very moment. Then this was why this date and time had been chosen. But what was Tovey doing cruising with *Geronimo*?

“That’s the man who signed off on the message in that box?”

“It appears so,” said Elena taking a deep breath, and feeling like the weight of the entire world had just been taken off her shoulders. Tovey was the legendary founder of the Watch, but that was in 1942. It was 1941 now, and none of that may have happened. But it was Tovey’s order that sent her here, so she would wait to find out what had happened, elated, a feeling of great relief sweeping over her.

“Give my name and indicate my present post as Watchstander G1, code *Geronimo*. Then ask them if we are to consider the Russian ship as friend or foe.” She waited while the message was sent.

Far to the west, Tovey heard the voice and smiled, though he did not know why. Watchstander G1? The words struck some deep inner chord in him, but he could not quite hear it, a distant memory, stubbornly just beyond his reach. But that other word, *Geronimo*... This he knew quite well. It was boldly labeled on that strange hidden file box Turing had found, and typewritten all through the contents. Admiral Volsky had just told him that this was another ship from his time, from the future. My God, he thought. King Arthur has come back from Avalon, and in the nick of time.

Argos Fire soon received his message. *“All is well, Argos Fire. All friends here. We request a rendezvous in the Gulf of Chania. Over.”*

Mack Morgan had come up, and he was listening in, amazed. “All well and good, mum,” he said. “But I must tell you that the Royal Navy had no ship by that name active in 1941. The last ship to bear that name was sunk at the Battle of Jutland in 1916.”

“Oh? Well, then we’re in for a surprise, and I suppose they are as well. Signal confirmation on that rendezvous request. Tell them we’ll be waiting

for them... with bells on!”

Chapter 35

The man was getting his Arabs and Indians mixed up, thought Popski. What was all this rubbish about an Apache Sultan? What was all that about guard towers and oil rigs? He gave Fedorov a frustrated look.

“Well I’ve told him the whole lot, but you’ve completely lost me with all of this. They’re no Indians or oil rigs out here. Why would you tell him that? How would that rubbish solve anything?”

“Bear with me, Popski. What does he say?”

“Alright,” said Kinlan. “Mister Simpson. Send to the back of the column and have three vehicles from the rear guard troop return and report on the condition of the Sultan Apache facility. I’ll meet this Russian Captain half way. At the moment I have business to attend to, but I’ll continue this when I get my report.” The General left to consult with his staff, and they were left alone, watched by a pair of helmeted British soldiers.

“He’s given the order to check on that Sultan Indian fellow, whoever that might be. What are you two talking about here?”

Fedorov gave Popski a sympathetic look. This was going to be the fate of any man alive now who ever came into contact with men of this unit, and realized the truth. They would all stand and stare amazed, some dumbstruck with awe, like Cortez, silent upon a peak in Darien, as Keats would put it. Others would stare in disbelief, until the hard steel reality of these men from a distant time was driven home with the shock and fire of war. The Germans and Italians would get the worst of it, for here was a mighty champion that would soon come to the field of battle and weigh heavily in the equation of this war.

And yet, thought Fedorov, they were mortal men, not demigods, and their power and influence on events here would not be without limits. This was the realization that he had faced on the ship as they watched their missile count diminish, one by one. Once *Kirov* fired the last of its Moskit-IIs, and the inventory of SAMs was gone, it was nothing more than a veiled threat, toothless, though the appearance of the ship on an enemy’s horizon might be seen as a shadow of imminent doom.

The same thing would happen here with these men. They would begin

with power that seemed overwhelming to any foe they encountered. A German light Panzer II could do nothing whatsoever to bother one of these modern new tanks.

And yet, the tanks would store little more than 50 rounds of their deadly 120mm ammunition. This brigade would likely have considerable replacement stores, but Fedorov knew they were finite. Once the ammunition was gone the tank would just be an impregnable moving pill box. It was 1941, and this was going to be a very long war. In the end, Fedorov knew the power this brigade could wield could be decisive in any given engagement, but it would be a rock in the stream of this war, stalwart, invincible, yet unable to stem the full flood of the madness WWII eventually became. Entire cities were destroyed in single bombing raids here, a conflagration never seen in modern warfare, where casualty rates dropped precipitously.

The US lost 4487 soldiers in the ten year war they fought in Iraq. On the first day of the Normandy invasion, they would lose 2500, and go on to lose 29,000 before that campaign concluded, with another 11,000 British deaths and 30,000 Germans. And though very significant, that battle was not decisive. The fight would continue in the Market Garden campaign, the Battle of the Bulge, and the battles fought to cross the Rhine before Germany finally was beaten.

The loss of a division or two here would not stop the German war machine. The Germans lost well over half a million men at Stalingrad and still fight on. The Russians lost over a million there. This Brigade could win any engagement it fought while its ammunition lasted, but that was the end of it. The effect its presence here would have on the war itself would depend entirely on how, where, and when its awesome power was used.

Now he thought of Karpov, ever seeking that decisive moment in history to bring the full might of *Kirov's* weapons to the cauldron of war. Karpov may have been misguided, selfish and headstrong, but in one thing he was correct. *Kirov* was a lever that could move a mountain if placed at precisely the right place, its tremendous power fully applied. Even now Admiral Volsky was thinking to decide the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean Sea in one decisive battle. The same would apply here with this brigade. But would even this be enough? How would the Germans react? Might they send even more troops and material to challenge this new foe, or initiate vast new programs to gain these new "wonder weapons" for their own

use?

But there stood Popski, unaware of any of this, yet soon to be shaken by the hard reality of what was about to happen. How could he bring him to that understanding, bridge that 80 year gulf between Kinlan and Peniakoff and see them shake hands as one?

“Popski,” he said, quietly. “Have you ever seen uniforms like those worn by these men?”

“Can’t say as I have. Those helmets are unlike any used by the Tommy’s, and the same goes for those rifles they’re carrying, but they look like they’ll do the job well enough.”

“And have you ever seen armored vehicles like these? Look at those tanks!”

“Those are real beasts,” said Popski. “Have to be entirely new. They’re magnificent!”

“They are,” said Fedorov. “And have you ever seen a contraption like the one that we flew in to get here, our helicopter? For that matter, have you ever seen a ship like mine, or rockets that could do what we demonstrated earlier during that air attack on the Suez Canal?”

“I was there to see that!” said Popski. “Rumors make the rounds fast in Cairo, and we heard a fancy Russian ship was coming through, so I went over to the canal when you came in and saw the whole thing. Marvelous! You fellows have a few of those for our ships?”

“I wish it were so, but our ammunition is limited. That’s why we use it carefully, and sparingly, and only when it counts.”

“Smart enough,” said Popski.

“These weapons, these machines, I know they impress you, but don’t they seem fantastic?”

“That they do. One look at a tank like that will drain the blood from this General Rommel’s face, and that’s a fact.”

“Quite so, and it will drain the blood from his men as well, literally. Popski...”

He wanted to tell him that tank could not have been built by the British industries of today; that the craft of its making would not be possible for another sixty to eighty years. Then he realized this man would simply never understand the real truth, so why did he have to know? Popski would believe the tank was here, right before his eyes, but never grasp that it could have

come here from the future. That would be the experience of most here. They would never know the real truth, though they would rejoice that Achilles had come to the fight, an invincible champion in this hour of need—Achilles, with one weakness in the limited duration of his power. Yet he realized now that to fully explain this situation to Kinlan, he would need to rely on his own limited skills in English, and he wished Nikolin were here. He was going to have to tell this man something that General Wavell did not even know yet!

“Must be a prototype,” he said at last, leaving Popski in the innocence of unknowing. Some would eventually know the real truth. Wavell would have to be one of them, and O’Connor was on the way here at this moment. Other men highly placed in the British army and government would certainly have to know. The rest of that impossible truth would still be protected by that bodyguard of lies, as Churchill might put it.

“I think that I will try to speak with General Kinlan on my own now, if you don’t mind. I can manage a bit of English.”

“Have a go if you wish. Maybe you can talk sense into the man.”

Fedorov checked with Popski on a few words he was uncertain of, words like displacement and detonation, and then he had him ask for a private conference with the Brigadier, which Kinlan granted. His report had come back, and he had an odd look on his face. The two men went off near an FV432 command vehicle and Fedorov began his faltering attempt to communicate.

“Forgive my English. You’re report? It is concluded?”

“It has, and it seems you were correct, Captain. My men report the site is... well the whole damn facility has vanished! What is going on here? What kind of trick have you Russians pulled?”

Fedorov struggled to get all of that, but the essence came through. “No tricks,” he said. “An accident.”

“Accident? There were millions of pounds worth of equipment and facilities back there. What kind of accident could have them go missing short of another of your damn warheads? Either that or my patrol got lost. They certainly weren’t all carted off by the Berbers, or buried by that sandstorm. Right?”

“No second warhead,” said Fedorov. “It was the first.”

“The first? Well we got that one. At least we got two of the three, and the last was off target to the east. Those facilities were completely intact when

we moved our column out.”

“The attack... it caused big accident. Odd effect of nuclear detonation, like EMP.”

“EMP? That might fry electronics, but it bloody well could not account for what we’re talking about here.”

“Not EMP... similar strange effect of detonation. Causes big problem with time.”

“A problem with time? I don’t follow you.”

“Sorry. I will try again.... Detonation *changes* time, *breaks* time. It can make things move in time. Understand?”

“Move in time? That’s bosh.”

“Bosh?”

“It’s nonsense! What are you talking about?”

“Not bosh. Is real truth. Your men just found General O’Connor. He is the real man... General Richard O’Connor, and you will soon see. Your base at Sultan Apache remains there, in year 2021. But *you* are not there. Your men, your brigade, all displaced in time due to detonation. Big accident! I know for sure. Because this happened to my ship.”

Kinlan gave him a look that was half annoyed and half astonished. “Your ship? Are you telling me you think you moved in bloody time?”

“Yes! This is true. Nuclear detonation during live fire exercises. Accident. Then we appear... somewhere else! Same place, different time. Honest truth.” He held up his hand as though he were taking an oath. “I know it sounds impossible. I never believed it myself, until facts made things true. We moved *here*, to this time—1941.”

“1941?” Kinlan grinned at him, unbelieving, as there was no rational place he could put this. “You’re trying to tell me you think this is 1941? You’re daft, man, off your rocker.”

Fedorov did not follow that, but he could sense the other man’s rejection of what he had told him. “Then where is Sultan Apache?” He returned to his long suit, playing another spade.

Kinlan stared at him. “Well I don’t know where it is, Captain. But it seems you don’t know where it is either with this silly explanation.”

“Sounds false, sounds crazy, I know this. But I speak truly. Sultan Apache is all there, but in 2021. It is you that went missing, just like my ship. You heard reports? *Kirov* lost in Norwegian sea. You heard this?”

“Yes, I heard the report. Then you show up a month later in the Pacific.”

“Yes! But we do not sail there in oceans of 2021. We sail there in 1940s! Then it happens again. An accident with reactors sent us back to our own time... to year 2021. All true.”

There was movement from the grey brown sand out beyond the sheltering tent set up off the hatch of the FV432. Then one of the Staff Officers, the man named Simpson, emerged with another report.

“Excuse me, sir. Reeves’ scout section is back. They’ve a number of men in jeeps, a bunch of throwbacks, or so they appear. Jeeps look to be old relics, and one man is claiming to be a General O’Connor.”

“Very well,” said Kinlan, the same problem on his hands, unresolved insofar as he was concerned. “Bring the man in. Maybe he can make more sense than this one.” He gave Fedorov a disparaging look.

“General Richard O’Connor,” Fedorov tried again. “Real man—from 1941. Look close at this man. Check photos. Look close at Popski. Look at jeeps. All 1940s!”

“Or all some elaborate theater you Russkies cooked up to hold up my column so you can lob another warhead or two our way.”

“No! Not true. No more missiles. Let your eyes prove this. See General O’Connor. Then you believe... You are here now, in 1941, and this is real. My ship is here, up north, and we fight for the British now. *Kirov* is an ally, a friend, not enemy. Russians and British are allies in 1941. Soon you believe this too. It is very important... Critical. This can change the war—change history—make no more war with Russia in 2021. Understand? We can stop war there, in 2021, and we can win war here, in 1941.”

Kinlan took that all in, his eyes fixed on Fedorov, seeing the urgency in the man, hearing the sincerity in his tone of voice, and the desperate need to be believed.

“This all happened as I say,” said Fedorov. “An accident, but all true. Otherwise, you tell *me*, General Kinlan. Where is Sultan Apache? Go look with your own eyes!”

Simpson returned, leading in a short man dressed out in the garb of an Army officer, but one from days of yore. He expected he might see someone wearing a uniform like his own in modern camo scheme, but not dressed like this, heavy wool socks reaching to knee length shorts, thick leather belt, a pale olive officer’s jersey with shoulder braids and a flash of red at the

collars, all topped with an officer's cap, emblazoned with a thick red band and the badge of a crown over a crossed sabre and baton, the insignia of a Lieutenant General. Rows of service bars rode above his left chest pocket, with a thick strap from shoulder to waist.

Yet it was not the rank and service medals that identified this man as a General, it was his manner and deportment, the bright penetrating eyes, always moving, the air of authority about him, not showy or arrogant, but a quiet strength that spoke of iron will and determination in the man.

"I'm told you are Brigadier Kinlan?" O'Connor extended his hand. "Can't say as I've ever had the pleasure. Have you just come off the boat?"

Kinlan took his hand, with reflexive manners, yet his mind was just as befuddled as before. What on God's good earth was happening here?

Chapter 36

He just stared at the man, seeing the characteristic white hair at the edge of his cap and short cropped white mustache. It was the image of the man he had seen in the data files he looked up on his library pad. Impossible! General Richard O'Connor had died in 1981, forty years ago! This had to be an imposter, there was simply no other way to look at the situation. Yet, at the same time, there was no reason on earth why anyone would be here, in the middle of nowhere, dressed up like this to play army. Did he come in on that KA-40 with the Russians to play out this sorry ruse?

Lieutenant Reeves was standing behind the man, and he saluted. "Sir," he said quietly. "One other note to report. Our lead troop picked up something on infrared and we had a look. It was a plane crash, General, so I took my vehicle out and had a good look at it."

"Yes?" said O'Connor. "That was our Blenheim. Jerry took a good bite out of our left engine, and we couldn't ride out the storm. Tried to make Siwa, but went down near the dunes a bit north of here."

"Reeves?" Kinlan looked to his Lieutenant for confirmation.

"Yes sir. It was a Blenheim, just as the General says. I had a look inside, and it was authentic, to the nines."

"An old wreck from the last war?"

"No sir. The plane was in tip top condition. Looked like it was flown that very day. The engines were still warm, and oil was leaking from one—shot up as the General says."

"As the General says, as the General says. Damn it Reeves! I'll grant you this man looks the part, but you know very well he can't be who he claims to be." He looked at O'Connor, frustration battling with his senses and reinforcing the one word that could be applied to this whole charade. Impossible!

"See here," said O'Connor. "You would do well to mind your manners, Mister Kinlan, and mind the rank and insignia you find on this uniform. I'm not one to lord it over another officer, but you're obviously new here, as is this entire unit. What's that parked over there?" He pointed with his riding crop. "That's the biggest damn tank in the world! Did Wavell send you out

here looking for me? How many of those monsters do you have?"

"Wavell?"

"Well I'm nobody special, just the commander of the British XIII Corps in the Western Desert, but you've certainly heard of Wavell. Yes?"

Kinlan folded his arms and shrugged. He should just throw this whole lot into a secure vehicle and get on with his move north. The column was nearly all past his position by now, the sound of the Warrior IFVs from the last battalion in the line of march still rumbling in the background.

By the time they brought O'Connor in, the storm had abated, but darkness and low blowing sand was still obscuring much of the landscape near the ground. Thus far O'Connor had seen only the eight wheeled Dragon IFV of Reeves' troop, the FV432 command vehicles, and the shadowy form of one Challenger 2 parked as part of the HQ guard unit. He had seen nothing of the real mass and material of the brigade Kinlan commanded, but he could hear it, and knew the sound of tracked vehicles on the desert ground well enough.

"From the sound of things the whole division must be out here," said O'Connor. "But I can't imagine why, or even how you managed to get a force of this size out here. Suppose you tell me exactly what this unit is and what your orders are, General Kinlan."

Now Fedorov spoke up. "General Richard O'Connor?"

"One and the same," said O'Connor, noticing Fedorov. "Who is this man?"

"I am Captain Anton Fedorov, off the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov*. We came to search for you."

"Russians?" O'Connor had not heard anything of the ship, as he had his hands full managing the retreat east, with Rommel's tanks and armored cars in hot pursuit.

"I was in Alexandria, with General Wavell when we heard your plane was lost."

"With Wavell? I see. Very good, Captain Fedorov. Now then, Mister Kinlan?"

The Brigadier shook his head, smiling. "Barmy nonsense, this whole bit. The two of you are going to play this out, are you? In for a shilling, in for a pound, is it? Well if you think you can blag your way on like this, I've run out of patience with the whole lot. I've a mind to run you and all your men before a firing squad!" He was interrupted by his Staff Officer. "Yes, Mister

Simpson? What now?"

"That report on comm-link status, sir."

"Anything from Command?"

"IT Systems Operator has nothing on the combat network, sir. All the TALON system digital satellite links are down with the GPS."

"Everything?"

"Sorry, sir, but it's all dark. No TSC 503, No PSC 506. And nothing through REACHER or Skynet 5."

"What about Ptarmigan?" He was referring to a modular battlefield WAN system which operated like a secure VHF mobile radio telephone.

"Nothing there either."

"Damn. That detonation had more of an effect than we thought."

Even as he said the word detonation, Fedorov caught his eye. Detonation... strange effects from a nuclear blast... movement in time. Rubbish! That was the load the Russian Captain had shoveled his way. All of this was supposed to be an accident. Then there was this fellow Popski, who looked for all the world like the historical figure by that same name, and O'Connor here was the spitting image of the real thing. He was supposed to be a bloody time traveler now, with the whole brigade lost in 1941. Rubbish!

"One more thing, sir, for what it's worth." Simpson had a wan look on his face. "This bloody sand storm is clearing, and Staffer Jacobs managed to have a look at the sky to get a fix on our position for desert navigation."

"Good for him. We'll get these men into another truck, wrap this up and move out."

"Well sir... about the stars. They're all wrong, sir."

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

"Jacobs says Orion is rising, and Sirius right behind it. Those are winter constellations, sir. We should be looking at Sagittarius and Scorpio rising now in the late summer. And he says the moon is wrong too. It shouldn't be up." He pointed to the thin crescent moon, barely visible. "He says it was supposed to set at 11:14 this morning, sir—doesn't rise again until nigh on to midnight, and it should be a waning gibbous moon. That's an evening crescent!"

Fedorov caught this, struggling to understand it all, but suddenly realized what the Staff Officer was saying when he pointed at the moon.

"Yes!" he said enthusiastically. "Listen General. Hear that? Look at the

sky,” he pointed to the stars. “It is last day of January, 1941. That is date and time here and now. The sky has changed, because the time has changed. Where is Sultan Apache? Think, General Kinlan!”

Think! Kinlan was a no nonsense man, but now his eye roved upwards, noting the clearing skies and the cold light of the stars. Something there seemed even colder than the desert night now, a lonesome feeling settling over him, chasing the irritating bother he had been sorting through with these men. O’Connor in a Blenheim bomber?

He had to think.

“Reeves, you’re certain of what you saw with that plane wreckage?”

“Yes sir. A Bristol Blenheim, and brand, spanking new—still warm as toast. That’s how we spotted it on infrared, sir. The engine heat was very evident.”

Fedorov seized on this, knowing that only one such plane existed in 2021, just like that Fulmar that had overflowed his ship when *Kirov* first appeared. He remembered how he had broken citadel integrity to run out onto the weather deck to see it. He had seen the plane in England the previous year while on leave—in a museum. And now he remembered the single operational Bristol Blenheim he had seen on that same trip, at RCAF Bolingbroke.

“Only one Blenheim bomber exists where you have come from,” he said. “Explain how this one is suddenly here?” He was very pleased that he managed to get the English correct.

Brigadier Kinlan gave him a dark look. O’Connor was standing there with an indignant look on his face, not used to such treatment, and put off by some of what he was hearing now that made no sense. What was this bit about Talon and Reacher the staffer had teed up? What did they mean that the satellite links were down? Who in bloody hell was this man? What was this unit doing out here, with vehicles that he had never seen before? Who was this Russian Captain here saying he had just seen Wavell? Why was this Brigadier being so damnably thick and obstinate?

“General,” Fedorov tried again. “Sultan Apache is gone because you are gone... moved... to a time where Blenheim bombers still fly, and General O’Connor commands the Western Desert Force in 1941. Can stars and moon change in one hour? Think, General. Impossible? Yes. But still all true.”

Kinlan did think... Popski, the Long Range Desert Group, old jeeps that

should not even be able to run, a Blenheim bomber, General O'Connor, and the stars were all wrong. On top of that he had a Russian Captain off a KA-40 claiming he and his ship had a nuclear accident and actually moved in time! It was the stuff of science fiction, and he might have turned his head to look away from it all and just carried on, but for these stubborn things he was still struggling with. What happened to the bloody stars and moon? Was the whole earth off its kilter? And where the hell was Sultan Apache?

It was the first thing this Russian Captain had come to him with, telling him the place would not be there even before any of his men knew that was so. How could this Russian Captain know this? His men had confirmed it. The entire facility was gone, lock, stock and oil barrel, and that was an argument that he simply could not dismiss, like a man going out for groceries one Saturday morning and then coming home to find his house was missing, with nothing more than a vacant lot in its place. It was madness. The men must have gotten lost on their way back. This simply could not have happened. He looked up at the stars again... Impossible!

Brigadier Kinlan would not be satisfied until he got into a command vehicle and drove back to Sultan Apache himself. There he stood, his eyes scanning the craggy features of the escarpment, places he had come to know in the months he was there. He was standing right in the place where he knew a tall metal guard tower was suppose to be positioned. His boots should be on the hard black asphalt of the internal camp road network here, cleared daily by the heavy street sweeper vehicles that should still be sitting there in the maintenance facility—the 30,000 square foot building that was completely gone.

There was no wreckage, no sign of trauma or the fire of war at all. But it was all gone, the barracks facilities, mess hall, vehicle parks, oil workers village, and all the equipment and rigs and drilling tube and pipeline that should be stockpiled at the southern end of the zone—all gone.

There was only the sand and stone of the heartless desert, sand blowing listlessly over the toes of his service boots as he stared down at his feet. He was standing on solid ground alright, though he felt as though he had wandered into some episode of Doctor Who, a Twilight Zone of madness where nothing he ever took for granted as real could be believed again. It was all impossible, and yet it was as real as the hiss of that biting desert wind.

He took his helmet off for a moment, and let the last of the blowing sand

sting his face, almost as if he needed to feel the pain to be certain he was still alive. He caught a last glimpse of the crescent moon above, cold and unforgiving, the moon that should not even be there! Then he slowly fixed his helmet in place, adjusted his eye goggles, and turned to his Staff Officer Simpson.

“What do you make of this, Sim? Are we both crazy?”

“I haven’t the foggiest, sir. What could have happened here? I don’t understand.”

Kinlan took a long breath. “Who do we have on the left flank guard?”

“Lieutenant Dobie, sir. 2nd Squadron, 12th Royal Lancers. He’s got the Scimitars, about 15 miles north of Siwa.”

“Tell him to get down there and have a look around. He’s to see if he finds any sign of an Australian unit there—A Colonel Fergusson. Got that?”

“Yes sir. I’ll get him moving right away.”

Kinlan took another long look around the stony plateau where the enormous BP facility had been just two hours ago. It wasn’t burned, or blasted. It wasn’t buried by the sand storm, or carted off by the Berbers, but he knew one thing—it wasn’t here either. Sultan Apache was gone.

The Russian Captain told him it would be gone, and he also told him why. If this were true... If he was the one that went missing in 2021... He resolved to have another chat with the man right away.

My god, he thought. If Dobie radios back that he’s found this Fergusson fellow, then that’s the last straw. But what in the world do I do now? I’ve a full brigade here, men, tanks, IFVs, and a supply train a mile long. I should be half way to Mersa Matruh by now, and I suppose that’s my only play. My *god!* Could it be true? Could I be standing here in 1941 like this crazy Russian Captain says?

He returned to the command vehicle and they started back for the main column. By the time he got there, he had a report back from Lieutenant Dobie. He had found what looked to be an ill equipped company of Australian infantry at Siwa. They had a few old lorries, and yes, a man came forward calling himself Colonel Fergusson, wanting to know who he was and how he came to be here, but happy to have any reinforcement Wavell could give him.

“He said that?” Kinlan returned on the radio. “Wavell?”

“That was the name he used, sir. And there’s another officer here that

says he's with the 7th Armored. He's even got the Jerboa patch, and a battery of four artillery pieces, field guns, General. But they look like the old 25 pounders!"

"Very well, Lieutenant. Return to the column, Kinlan out."

The General took off his helmet, rubbed the weariness from his eyes, and took a long breath. He could hear his Communications Group working their systems, but all the normal military channels remained dark. Maybe if he just hunkered down for the night here he would wake up tomorrow morning and all this would just be a bad dream. Any sane man would have thought that, but he no longer numbered himself among that group.

Off in the distance he heard the AM band radio playing at one of the comm stations. A staffer was there, listening, and hearing news of Rommel's advance and the British retreat to Tobruk! Then Simpson was back, looking crestfallen and somewhat pale.

"Sir," he said. "We've just gotten through to someone in Alexandria, and he's hopping mad."

"Who? Dempsy?" Kinlan hoped they had finally made contact with reality again, as General Dempsy was the liaison officer working out of Cairo.

"No sir... A General Wavell..." Simpson rubbed his forehead. "He wants to know what in blazes is going on out here, what happen to his rescue mission to find O'Connor and where the general is. And he wants to speak with you, sir, directly."

Kinlan smiled. He was about to be chewed out by a man who had been dead 71 years! "Tell him to stand by, I'm on my way."

"Yes sir... But General Kinlan, sir..." Sims had a lost look on his face. He had seen and heard all the impossible evidence himself, yet was still in a state of shock and disbelief. "What are we going to do here, General?"

"What are we going to do?" Kinlan shook his head. "Well I think I'll go over and take my lumps from Wavell first. Then I expect we'll take this brigade north to Mersa Matruh, just as we planned it, and if we run into a gentlemen named Erwin Rommel... I'm going to kick his German ass, half way from here to Berlin!"

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Series: Book XIII - *Grand Alliance*

Three new and powerful forces have suddenly appeared in the Mediterranean Theater, soon to be united in a grand alliance and single minded purpose to stem the tide of war and save Britain from almost certain defeat in early 1941. Three kings join Admirals Cunningham and Tovey at sea, with *Kirov*, *Kazan* and *Argos Fire* united with the British against a powerful Axis force from three nations in the largest naval battle since Jutland.

While in the deserts of Egypt, a bemused General Kinlan leads the British 7th Armored Brigade north, and the Desert Rats come home to their roots, joining hands with their ancestors to oppose a powerful buildup of new forces for the German Afrika Korps. Hitler has committed the victorious troops that broke the Rock of Gibraltar, with the addition of 1st Mountain Division, the elite Grossdeutschland Division and Student's 7th Flieger Division to the Mediterranean theater of war.

Meanwhile, Karpov raises a growing insurgency in Siberia, bedeviling the armies of Ivan Volkov's Orenburg Federation with his ingenious and devious tactics, and new deadly weapons of war. Action and suspense dead ahead as the amazing *Kirov Kaga* moves into 1941, and the hour draws ever closer when the ship and crew must face that fateful date and time of their first arrival in the searing fires of WWII.

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading Three Kings, and especially if you have been with me from as far away as Book I in this series. This is perhaps the most elaborate alternate history/time travel series ever written, and I have been struggling with trying to figure out how to get it integrated into Wikipedia like other authors have with their stories. However Wiki says the author should not make these entries on their own, but have someone else do it. Is there anyone out there who is a master of Wikipedia and interested in taking on the task to become the official historian of the *Kirov Series*? If so, please drop me a line and let me know.

Best regards,
John

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie “The Final Countdown” which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in these books the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Like episodes in the never ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship’s position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon*, then is resurrected again in a 9th volume entitled *Altered States*, which begins the third trilogy in the series.

How To read the Kirov Series?

The best entry point is obviously Book I, *Kirov*, where you will meet all the main characters in the series and learn their inner motivations. The series itself, however, is structured as sets of trilogies linked by what the author calls a “bridge novel.” The first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. The bridge novel *Men Of War* is a second entry point which covers what happened to the ship and crew after it returned home to Vladivostok. As such it serves as both a sequel to the opening trilogy and a prequel to the next trilogy, the three novels beginning with Book V, *9 Days Falling*.

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans book 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as

Kirov faces down the US in two eras. This second trilogy also launches several subplots that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021 and also deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The trilogy ends at another crucial point in history where the ship's Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events.

The next bridge novel is *Armageddon*, Book 8 in the series, which continues the action as a sequel to Book 7 while also standing as a kind of prologue to the *Altered States* trilogy. In this third trilogy, *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. The opening volume will see the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has new powerful ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov's* earlier actions.

Altered States also covers the German attack on Carrier *Glorious*, the British Raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship duels!)

The sequel to the *Altered States* Trilogy and the bridge novel leading to the next set is this volume, *Three Kings*. Subsequent books will continue the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It will also present the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

You can enter any of these three trilogies that may interest you, though your understanding of the characters and plot will be fullest by simply beginning with book one and reading through them all!

The Kirov Series: (Military Fiction/Alternate History)

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Kirov - Kirov Series - Volume I
Cauldron Of Fire - Kirov Series - Volume II
Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume III

Bridge Novel:

Men Of War - Kirov Series - Volume IV

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Nine Days Falling - Kirov Series - Volume V
Fallen Angels - Kirov Series - Volume VI
Devil's Garden - Kirov Series - Volume VII

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Third Trilogy:

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