

Kirov Saga



Book 30 in the Kirov Series

Ironfall

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Ironfall

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

Now we are deep into 1943, and there is a great deal going on, over many fronts. Hitler's gambles in Syria, Iraq and the Caucasus, have paid him good dividends. Fedorov's ploy of leaking that strategic map of present and future oil developments ended up causing a good many headaches for the British, and as we shall soon see, for Ivan Volkov as well. Yet, at the same time, the Germans have placed a number of divisions in Syria, and with no clear objective other than to stand as a holding force to prevent the British from flanking Guderian's startling drive into Iraq.

That is about to change, and our Desert Fox returns to see to the planning and execution of Operation *Eisenfall* , Ironfall. But Rommel cannot attack with Kubler's Mountain Divisions. He must have panzers, and this sees the transfer of strong forces to his command that will soon be missed on the *Ostfront* .

At the same time, Manstein's operation Edelweiss has been much larger than the original forces allocated to that attack, and the General now believes those troops will soon be returned to his main front along the Don. Only then can he contemplate any new offensive for the Spring and Summer of 1943, but the Soviets have ideas of their own.

All these battles will play out here, with some surprising turns that will end up being very important to the future course of the war. In the meantime, we must not forget the Pacific, and so that is where we will begin. Admiral Kita is about to make a most important decision, handing Yamamoto some amazing new capabilities, and this is going to become a problem for Karpov, Fedorov, Volsky and Gromyko. Churchill will also make an appearance here, eventually visited by Elena Fairchild to peel off yet another layer on the onion that will become a new search for the key that was lost aboard the *Rodney* .

This offering marks a milestone for the series—volume 30! To all those who have been with the series from book 1, my profound thanks and appreciation for your tenacious loyalty to this story.

Enjoy! - John Schettler

Part I

The Ides of March

*“ Who is it in the press that calls on me?
I hear a tongue shriller than all the music...
Beware the ides of March!”*

— **Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2**

Chapter 1

The fighting for Nandi was particularly fierce. After a brief pause to bring up the 164th Regiment, Patch moved three companies of his 754th Tank battalion to form an armored spearhead and attacked straight up the road towards the town with the men of the 132nd Regiment on the line. He wanted an all-out push, willing to burn the 132nd out and then feed in the 164th to sustain the momentum, but one way or another, he wanted Nandi before this week would end. At the same time a concerted push was made over the river to the west of that town towards the village of Suituro, right at the edge of the coastal mangrove swamps. It was the 147th Regiment that pulled that duty, and getting over that river was hell. Artillery from three regiments and the division pool was laid on thick and heavy, perhaps the heaviest bombardment of the war in the Pacific to date.

It was to be a grinding, vicious battle of attrition. Those M3 tanks would break through up the road, but heedless of the cost, the Japanese infantry would simply fix bayonets and charge in to get at the American infantry that was crouching in the advance behind each tank. The Shermans blasted away with their main guns, spitting fire in all directions with their MGs, but still the enemy came. All this was happening as the US artillery thundered away, the shells falling first at the edge of the Japanese line and then walking back through their positions towards Nandi, eventually reaching their infantry gun and artillery emplacements.

This was where the US enjoyed a decided advantage. They had that breakthrough battalion of 42 M3's, armored cavalry right behind them in half tracks, and then two battalions of infantry. And the artillery fire was more intense than anything the Japanese had ever experienced in the war. It was to be steel against bone, blood, and raw courage, and steel prevailed. The tanks broke through to Nandi, and it was the commitment of the 164th Regiment that gave the attack the momentum to carry through. In spite of ferocious counterattacks, the Japanese could not dislodge the Americans, or stop their steady advance. General Yuitsu Tsuchihashi was now in command of the 48th Division, and he knew the loss of Nandi would bring the American artillery within range of the airfield, a most decisive factor in the outcome of

the entire campaign for Fiji.

At first, he thought to seek reinforcements from General Sano's 38th Division, but he soon learned that the situation in the north was every bit as dire as his own. Lightning Joe Collins had come up on what looked like an impregnable Japanese defensive position. The heart of the division was strung out along the west bank of the M'ba River, a swift moving current that had been swollen by the rains. The Japanese were dug in deep at the Sugar Mill and Varoka Bridge to the north, and it looked like there was no way Collins was going to get over that river.

Aggressive patrolling over two nights presented Collins with a different picture. While very strong in the center, the north and south flanks of this position were much weaker. The north was held by the burned out 228th Regiment under Ito, and the south was only being screened by elements of the Kawaguchi Detachment.

Collins decided to try and enfilade the south first, moving the 35th Regiment across a ford found earlier by Edson's Raiders. There was a finger of high ground southwest of M'ba field on the far side of the river, and those troops were ordered to take it. The river crossing was made at night, and carried off without incident, but it did not go unnoticed by the Japanese. Well back from that hill, in the thick woodland where Carlson and Edson had been days earlier, the remainder of all the SNLF Marine companies were posted as a Provisional Marine Regiment under the overall direction of Admiral Gunichi Mikawa. He immediately ordered Commander Minoru Yano to take in all his Yokosuka Marines and stop the American advance, and this he did.

Surprised by these fanatical warriors, the US line wavered and fell back. Frustrated, Collins had to send the remainder of the light tanks left behind by the 2nd Marine Division to stabilize his own flank. It was clear that he would not turn that position easily, but in all these actions the Americans had achieved one salient objective that would weigh heavily in the campaign. Collins had taken the airfield at Tavua, overrun the second field at M'ba, and now Patch had the main field at Nandi under his artillery. That meant the Japanese had to fly off the few planes they still had there to a small strip on Yasawa Island they had scratched out there. In effect, the US now had complete land based air superiority over the Fiji Island Group. That meant that any supply convoys running out to that island would need carrier support, and that was always a dangerous mission.

* * *

Yamamoto stared at the message for a very long time. It had been handed off to him by a white gloved aide, fresh off the plane from Tokyo, and it was a most unusual way to deliver an order. A directive from the Emperor himself! This was most likely the work of Tojo, but here, at last, is the answer to the questions I pressed upon General Imamura. This directive leaves no doubt as to what the Army will now do. They are ordered to hold all the islands now under contention, including Efate, New Caledonia and Viti Levu in the Fiji Group. All enemy forces are to be ejected from those islands, and to assure that these objectives will be met, the Army has seen fit to release substantial reserves made available because of the recent accord between our forces in China and the Kuomintang under Chaing Kai-shek. A full army consisting of five new divisions will be sent to secure all present holdings and undertake the offensive operations deemed appropriate to achieve the objectives set down by the Emperor.

This was a major escalation of the Army's commitment to the South Pacific, and now the Navy was directed to conduct all necessary operations to ensure the timely and safe transport of Army units to designated objectives, and to become masters of the seas in and around those objectives as required. So easily conceived and written down in a directive like this, thought Yamamoto. Yet not so easily accomplished. There is an enemy out there with both an army and navy, and clear objectives of their own.

He looked over the list of new divisions, noting that one of them was the powerful 3rd Infantry Division, a top tier veteran unit from the Nanjing area. But look at this list of new objectives! In addition to reinforcing Fiji to reverse the unfortunate situation there, the large adjacent Island of Vanua Levu has now been selected for occupation by Japanese troops, to take and hold all the airfields now being used by the Americans. They have constructed larger fields at Bua, Savu, and Lambasa, with three smaller landing strips at Baiugunu, Katherine Bay and Matei. Trying to strike them all to suppress enemy air power for the assault landings will not be easy.

The 3rd Infantry Division has been assigned to this task, and now I must find shipping to move it, and the means to control the seas. Hopefully we can retain the shipping that transports them here from China, and I will make this

a personal request. The 6th and 9th Divisions come next, one for New Caledonia to begin a protracted campaign there, and the other to storm Efate and eliminate those enemy landings. After these objectives have been fulfilled, then the 15th and 17th Divisions will be released, and we are directed to begin planning for operations against ‘other targets of opportunity to be specified later.’

By all kami great and small, I might be able to get those troops to their objectives, but how in the world does Tojo think I can keep all these divisions supplied? How does he think I can defend these sea lanes over such a wide area? We simply do not have the shipping available to do this, and so it is clear to me that Admiral Nagano was bypassed in all this planning, or otherwise silenced. He would have certainly pointed this out.

Then again... The early release of the Phase II Shadow Fleet ships may have something to do with all of this. Even so, the fleet is straining just to support the few operations already underway. Now I must find the means to cover another major amphibious assault into the Fiji Group—let alone all the other things mandated in this directive.

But the Admiral would soon find out that he had more resources at his command than he realized. *Takami* had been ordered to Yokohama before it was sunk, summoned there by Admiral Nagano himself. It was clear the Admiral had heard enough from the rumor mill to make him very curious. When Admiral Kita learned this, he convened a meeting of his senior officers, including Harada and Fukada off the stricken *Takami*.

He had broken off his hunt for *Kirov*, content to gather his fleet and make some general determination on how they would now proceed to operate here. *Kirov* had run south, and he believed they might soon hear of its whereabouts. Now he had to decide how to use his task force for the mission the officers and crew had chosen. They would support Japan, though he still had reservations about that choice. Yet with the power they had, *Kirov* and the Russian submarine aside, he had every confidence that he could change the course of this war, and forestall the terrible end that Japan suffered in 1945.

“Gentlemen, I’ve been asked five times why we broke off that scrap with the Russians. Yes, we had them on the run, but the situation was far from resolved in our favor. We lost planes, and also saw that this Karpov was willing to stop at nothing when he resorted to the use of that nuclear warhead.

We didn't know where that damn sub was, and it already put your ship down, Captain Harada. We had the fleet too spread out, and neither the carriers, nor the replenishment group, were adequately covered. And we were burning through a limited supply of fuel at 30 knots for hours on end, while our enemy cruised off at 32 knots without using a single drop. So I elected to play it safe and pull in our horns to think this thing through. We've got to consider all the factors here, and logistics is front and center. They can operate out here indefinitely, and we can't. It's as simple as that. So I can't get involved in a sea chase here. It's just that simple. We would have three days to operate before every ship would be looking to *Omi* for fuel."

"So then what do you propose?" asked Captain Asano from the destroyer *Kongo*.

"Just what Captain Harada suggested before we ran into the Russians. He said we might head southwest to find tanker support from our friends, before we tangle with our enemies. Unfortunately, we sailed right into trouble. Is that option still doable?" He looked at Harada now.

"I don't see why not, sir, but there's another issue we should consider. *Takami* is due to arrive at Yokohama today, and that isn't going to happen. It's going to raise eyebrows. I was told to report directly to Admiral Nagano, and he won't be happy that I failed to do so. He'll go right to Yamamoto to find out why, and I wouldn't be surprised if Yamamoto is already trying to contact us."

"Alright," said Kita. "You say you're on fairly good standing with Yamamoto, but Nagano is his senior commanding officer, and he still remains in the dark about all this."

"Correct," said Harada.

"Well should we keep that appointment?"

"It's 2000 nautical miles to get there," said Harada. "And we'd be making quite a revelation of ourselves when we arrived in Tokyo Bay. I say the smarter play is to continue south to Rabaul and meet with Yamamoto, or perhaps the bay at Davao. I can contact him directly, and see if I can clear things up, and then he could cover us concerning Nagano. That also puts us in *Kirov's* wake, even if we don't move to a high speed chase scenario here. This Karpov just hit Truk, and as we've seen, he'll use any arrow in his quiver. If he went south, then he did so for a reason."

"What reason?" asked Captain Ichiro Akino from *Atago*.

“Rabaul.... That’s the real forward base for Yamamoto now. We’ve got to stay in a position to defend it—and I don’t think we’re going to the Panama Canal, let alone those American shipyards.” He glanced at Fukada now.

“Agreed,” said Kita. “Those operations are out of the question for the time being. But how will you explain this to Yamamoto?”

“He’s already had the saké with us, and so he will not suffer quite the same shock that Nagano would to learn all of this. I think I will just come out with things as they are. I will tell him that while we were on our scheduled rendezvous at Eniwetok, we encountered an unknown task force, and then determined that they were our comrades—from our own time. How they came to be here remains a mystery to us all, but the Admiral now has two more carriers to add to his fleet.”

“Very well,” said Kita. “Then we continue south, and into dangerous waters. I’ll want an ASW helicopter watch posted at all times, *Omi* in tight with the two carriers and all the destroyers in a nice tight screen. We’ll have strike planes spotted and ready at a moment’s notice, and if this Karpov wants to go another round with us, so be it. We throw everything we have at him. After all, that’s our main mission here—to kill that ship.”

Fukada had been listening quietly, his wings clipped in more than one way with both the loss of *Takami* and his grand campaign to destroy American carrier production. Now he finally spoke.

“With your permission sir, I’d like to suggest an alternative.”

“I thought we laid that Panama Canal thing to rest a moment ago,” said the Admiral.

“Yes sir, I’ll agree that is impractical, at least for the time being while *Kirov* is still at large. Yet I’d suggest that we’ve been going about this the wrong way. We went looking for *Kirov*, and we damn well found that demon. It should be on the bottom of the sea right now, but you are correct in what you said about this Karpov. That said, I don’t see our primary mission here is this hunt for the Russians.”

“Well then please enlighten us, Lieutenant Commander,” said Kita, folding his arms.

“Sir, respectfully, I think we should simply coordinate with Admiral Yamamoto, and operate to preserve and protect his remaining ships—and to put harm on those of the Americans—*Kirov* and the Russian sub be damned.

If they want a seat in the kabuki theater, then let them come. We'll deal with them at that time. But otherwise, I think we should simply fight for Japan, and engage *Kirov* as we would any enemy contact, if and when that scenario should present itself." He looked around the briefing room, as if to gauge reaction and see what kind of support he might have. Then Kita spoke, and he was surprised by what he said.

"Lieutenant Commander, I like what you just said. This whole idea of trying to remain in the shadows here and hunt down the Russians aside from everything else going on never quite sat well with me. That's why I called off that last engagement and took this time to think things over. We thought we just had *Kirov* to worry about, but now we know what we're up against. While I still hold that we need to be able to operate autonomously, a close cooperation with Yamamoto appeals to me. Opinions?"

"May I ask what's happening now?" asked Captain Kenji Namura from the *Kirishima*. "In the war..."

"Nothing you could read about," said Fukada. "All the action has been a-historical. The Japanese invaded the Fijis—Operation FS superseding the Midway operation. They've been dueling with Halsey's carriers in a number of engagements supporting that campaign, but our Communications Officer has been listening to radio traffic and tells me things on Viti Levu are not going well. We've lost the use of the airfields on Fiji. The Americans have complete air superiority there now. That's our Guadalcanal—at least for the moment. The decisive battle that this war turns on will be fought there, and we're already losing it."

"Agreed," said Captain Harada. "This is the critical phase of this entire struggle," he said. "The Americans have just been reinforced with new *Essex* Class carriers and they have finally begun offensive operations against Japanese occupied territories. They have nearly won the battle for the main island in the Fiji Group, just as Fukada says, and now they have invaded New Caledonia at Noumea, and put Marines on Efate in the New Hebrides. Of course, none of these battles were ever fought in the history we know. It was Guadalcanal and Operation Cartwheel that was underway at this time as we know these events. Things have clearly changed, and it seems the decisive battles will be fought on these other islands. We can do a good deal in those campaigns, and I also like Fukada's suggestion. If we simply work to defend and support Yamamoto's prevailing operations, *Kirov* and the Russians will

have to come to us. There's no need to go racing off to hunt them down."

That would be the decision they would come to, all Captains signing on to this new plan. And even though both Fedorov and Karpov had thought to fight the decisive battle in 1908, many things would happen before they would get there. Their duel with Kita's task force was far from over.

Chapter 2

Admiral Halsey's position was nowhere near as strong now as Yamamoto may have believed. The sheer audacity of the Americans, attacking at every opportunity, presented the façade that they were now strongly reinforced, but that was not the case. TF Halsey, with *Enterprise* and *Yorktown II*, had only 137 planes ready for duty to cover Efate. TF Spruance was in Sydney, where *Lexington II* had just finished repairs. Along with the *Essex*, that force had only 112 planes. Ziggy Sprague was shepherding in the two new light carriers, *Independence* and *Princeton*, and they had 62 planes between them. The light battle carrier *Vicksburg* was at Pearl finishing up repairs, and her sister ship was doing the same at Suva. Between them they had another 24 planes, which meant that if he collected all his carriers into one group, Halsey could bring 335 planes to sea. He had replacements for his CV squadrons at Pago Pago, but would have to leave the scene of operations to go fetch them.

He wasn't worried about the Fijis any longer. The ground game there was rolling towards the end zone, though the Japanese continued to put up a tough defense. But they had lost their airfields, and the US ruled the skies. The US now had 123 planes at Brisbane, including 34 bombers that could hit New Caledonia. There were then 103 planes on the main island of Fiji, and 52 more on Vanua Levu. Throw in 80 more Marine and Navy planes at Pago Pago, and that was an impressive 358 land based planes. Beyond that, there were 175 more at Pearl, including a good many of the newest P-38's.

In spite of all this, Halsey was counting every leaf on the tree as he cruised southeast of Efate. In another few days, he would have to withdraw to Pago Pago to refuel. The oilers were up north, meeting up with the ships that had been damaged in recent engagements and topping them off for the long journey back to Pearl. The Admiral figured he could get replenished, flesh out his squadrons, and then get back out to sea to meet up with Spruance and Ziggy. MacArthur had taken the airfield near Noumea, and the Ichiki Regiment was retreating north. So that meant the planes could be ferried in

from Brisbane to provide local air cover for the 41st Division on New Caledonia, and all Halsey had to worry about was Efate.

So Halsey had it in mind to unite all his flattops into one big fleet. That would give him the muscle he might need if Nimitz wanted to do anything more with the 1st USMC Division, which had been resting on Pago Pago, but was now ready for operations again. Nimitz had been looking at Luganville on Espiritu Santo, thinking to put those fighting leathernecks in there and really saw off the tree limb that supported Fiji. Neither he, nor Halsey, had any idea of the dramatic developments that had shaken the tree in Japan. US Intelligence had picked up the movement of Japanese troops out of the Nanjing sector towards the coast, but made no firm conclusions about it. The last thing on anyone's mind was that the Japanese would double down on their overextended position in the Fijis, sending their crack 3rd Infantry Division to Vanua Levu....

* * *

General Toyoshima had the 3rd Division, one of the toughest in the entire army, a crack veteran unit that had been involved in fighting during virtually every major battle in Central China since 1937. He had narrowly escaped death during the 3rd Battle of Changsha along the Louyang River, when his division and two others had fallen into a well laid Chinese trap. That battle, and the tremendous losses sustained by the Japanese, had done much to convince the army that their campaign in Central China was fruitless, and it would be better to seek an alliance with Chiang Kai-shek. So there was a shadow over the division's reputation as it withdrew from China, and the troops were eager to restore their standing as one of the Army's best.

When it first entered combat in China, it was a "Square Division," which meant it had two brigades containing two regiments each instead of the later "Triangular" division model with just three regiments. And it was also 'well heeled' in terms of its TO&E. In the real history, this division had converted to a triangular division in July of 1942, but in these Altered States, it was made square again for this new deployment, with the 5th Brigade fielding the 6th and 68th Regiments, and the 29th Brigade had the 18th and 34th Regiments.

Considering 'boots on the ground,' such a division had a firm footprint.

Each regiment would field the normal three battalions, with a fourth weapons battalion, (really just a company), containing four 75mm mountain guns and four rapid-fire 37mm AT guns. Yet each battalion had four regular infantry companies instead of three, and one additional MG company, about 1,350 men in all, including a small infantry gun platoon with a pair of 70mm howitzers. The unit would be augmented by adding two more cavalry regiments, the 25th and 26th, as these troops were thought to be useful on the large island the 3rd Division was slated to conquer.

Toyoshima's division would leave China through the same door where it had entered, the port of Shanghai. From there it would sail to Rabaul and Momote in the Admiralties, the transports fat with supplies, men, equipment and horses, which were really the mainstay as far as transportation went for the Japanese divisions. A horse could go places in the rugged inland terrain of these islands where no truck could follow.

This unexpected turn in Japanese strategy had come from the secret conference Imamura had with Hyakutake concerning the message he had received. It contained only one cryptic phrase: *The warrior is lucky, for the moon shines bright, and the hour of the festival has come.*

The meaning of the phrase was immediately apparent to Hyakutake, a master of cryptanalysis, for there within that single phrase were the code names assigned to five Japanese Divisions.

"Do you see what I see in this?" asked Hyakutake.

"Of course!" said Imamura. "Five divisions. The Lucky Division is the 3rd, and that alone is worth its weight in gold. It is one of the most capable and experienced divisions in the Army, and I am told it will remain a square division. The Warrior Division is the 9th from Manchukuo, a very good unit that has been underutilized thus far. The Bright Moon brings us the 6th Bright Division and 17th Moon Division, and the Festival Division is the 15th. Every one of these has seen combat in China. The Army is finally getting serious about the war here in the south. At last we will have the troops we need to fight the Americans and all their allies. In fact, there may even be forces to allow us to reconsider a limited invasion of Australia."

This sudden infusion of ground fighting power to the Strike South plan was going to change the entire course of the war. MacArthur thought he would simply secure the southern end of New Caledonia, and then plan his recapture of Port Moresby to take the war to New Guinea. Nimitz thought he

would secure Efate and Espiritu Santo, then select targets in the Solomons, or even bypass those steamy islands altogether and move right into the Marshalls. But if Yamamoto could deliver 3rd Division to Vanua Levu, and keep it supplied, all those plans would have to be shelved.

The US had initially placed the entire 37th Infantry Division under General Beightler there, but two of his three regiments had been ferried over to the Main Island to reinforce Patch and Collins, so he had only his 148th Regiment on that massive island, along with Seabees, A few Marine Defense Battalions, and the 112th Engineers.

The regimental HQ and two battalions were at the main airfield at Lambasa in the center of the island; the Division HQ was 35 kilometers to the south on the broad Savusavu Bay with the third battalion; and the engineers at Bua field on the southwest end of the island. Most all of the airfield and support troops were to the east around the deep intrusion of the Natewa Bay. For an island encompassing over 2,150 square miles, that was a fairly thin garrison. The Americans thought that Halsey would prevent any move on the island... But Halsey was now 650 nautical miles to the northeast at Pago Pago.

His two carriers were anchored in the bay and taking on fuel, the ships watering, replenishing food, aviation fuel and ordnance, the squadrons filling out their dance cards. It might take him four to six hours to get out to sea again in an emergency, and then it was 18 to 24 hours to reach the scene of the planned Japanese invasion, and he would have to face down the Japanese carrier covering force under Admiral Hara.

When HYPO got wind of the arrival of 3rd Division in theater, it set off a lot of alarm bells. The initial assessment was that the Japanese were planning to reinforce Efate and garrison other holdings, but that would be work for their 6th Division. Nimitz still had 8th Regiment of the 2nd Marines in the bullpen for Efate, and all of 1st Marines for his mission against Luganville. So now it was a question of who would get there first.

“This is a first rate outfit,” he said to Vice Admiral Charles ‘Soc’ McMorris, who was now serving as his Chief of Staff. McMorris had come from the war plans office for the Pacific Fleet before taking an at-sea command of a cruiser division. Nimitz had wanted Ray Spruance for his CoS, by the was still operating with the carriers, so McMorris was next in line in Nimitz’s mind.

“Yes sir, 3rd Division has been raising hell in China since 1937. If they moved a unit like that here, then they mean business.”

“Soc, you figure they plan to counterattack?”

“Those aren’t the sort of troops you farm out for garrison duty,” said McMorris.

“But where?” asked Nimitz.

“They could hit us anywhere. We’ve got the Japs on Fiji in a vise—penned up in a 40 square kilometer pocket on Viti Levu. So they may be trying to reinforce there. Then again, they could also hit Efate. They’ve only put in a single regiment of their 20th Division there, and that was a back waters reserve division from Korea.”

Neither of those options were on the table for the Japanese, but they seemed logical choices from the US standpoint. Nimitz nodded. “They could do both,” he said. “It was a come as you are party when we hit Efate. All they had in theater was the 20th, but now we may have uninvited guests. I was going to reinforce with 8th Marines, and I thought that would give us an edge on these people to clear that island. If we move fast, we might still do that.”

“Halsey moved to Pago Pago, but I’m a little troubled by this latest information we had out of Rabaul. We thought they were landing the 3rd Infantry there, but it stayed put on those transports. In fact, HYPO says it could be out to sea from the sound of signals traffic coming out of Rabaul yesterday.”

“Now you went and ruined my day,” said Nimitz.

“Should we crank up Halsey? He could be back to Efate in 48 hours.”

Nimitz thought about that. “And the Japs could be there in that same timeframe too, and they’ve patched up *Kaga* and *Soryu* at Rabaul. So if Hara moves to cover anything big, then he could be coming at us with four fleet carriers. We’d need to pull in every flattop we have to counter that. To send Halsey in alone to try and bust up their operation would be a mistake. So we’re going to have to play this another way. Get a message off to Ray Spruance. Tell him I want *Essex* and *Lexington* out to sea immediately, but I want him here.” Nimitz pointed to a position between Noumea and the Fiji group, and a little south.

“As for Halsey, let him replenish, and then he can join Spruance when he’s ready.”

“But that may be too late to stop anything if they want to land troops on

Efate.”

“Correct,” said Nimitz. “Halsey is sitting on the last fleet carrier we had afloat when the japs hit us at Pearl two years ago. That’s a lot of sting. Everything else we can bring to the game now, we had to build after they hit us. We managed to get three *Essex* class carriers in theater, and thank god for that, but I want to operate differently with them now. We don’t even have parity yet, so we play defense for a while longer. In some ways, these amphibious operations we rushed out last month still seem premature in my mind. Yes, they made good headlines, and the President loved it, but we weren’t really ready. So I want Halsey and Spruance together before we contemplate any move. If that means the Japs get troops onto Efate, so be it. When they withdraw, we move 8th Marines in to see their bet.”

“What about *Bunker Hill*?” said McMorris. “She’s brand spanking new, and sitting right out there in the harbor. For that matter, we’ve also got the other two Escort carriers, *Belleau Wood* and *Long Island*.”

“Those escort carriers need time on sea trials. I was going to use them to ferry planes to Pago Pago, and that will be all we ever use the *Long Island* for anyway. I also wanted to give *Bunker Hill* time to work up some steam,” said Nimitz. “But under the circumstances, she may have to get in the game early. Let’s give her to Ziggy Sprague. He’s already got the two escort carriers down near Wallis Island. I’ll want him to link up with Halsey and follow him down to meet Ray Spruance. Maybe it’s time we put some real metal under his seat.”

“One big happy family,” said McMoriss. “With *Bunker Hill* active, that will give us 436 Planes at sea.”

“Let’s hope they stay happy,” said Nimitz.

Chapter 3

The Japanese Operation *Suriyoko* (Thrust) would get underway on the 11th of March, as all the various task forces assigned began to make their rendezvous east of the Solomon Islands. Yamamoto wanted to make a wide approach towards Tuvalu, and then come down on Vanua Levu From the north. The waters in the rendezvous area were swept by long range Mavis seaplanes the previous day, to look for prying enemy subs or ships that might spot the Japanese armada.

That would be a fitting description of the force now getting underway. Admiral Hara had his flag on the carrier *Taiho* , with *Tosa* , and *Junyo* in attendance, along with the battlecruiser *Kongo*, two heavy cruisers and four destroyers. Admiral Yamaguchi was given command of *Akagi* and *Soryu* , with the light carrier *Hiyo* , two heavy cruisers and five destroyers. They would both be joined by Admiral Nagumo coming down from Truk with the Shado Force battle carriers: *Ryujin*, *Kinryu*, *Kitsune*, *Gozo Kaya*, and *Gozo Kiryu*. The Troop Transports would be escorted by Yamamoto himself aboard *Yamato* , with heavy cruiser *Myoko* , three light cruisers and nine destroyers. It was every fleet carrier the Japanese had, carrying 440 planes, and only three lighter escort carriers were on duty elsewhere. In effect, it was an operation on a scale greater than that devised for the Midway campaign, but the American fleet would also be much stronger on defense.

Admiral Halsey would have the *Enterprise* and *Yorktown II* , three heavy cruisers and four destroyers. He would be met by Admiral Ray Spruance out of Brisbane with *Essex* and *Lexington II* , with his cruisers and DDs in escort, and then Ziggy Sprague would come down with the newest fleet carrier *Bunker Hill* , and the two escort carriers *Princeton* and *Independence* . Admiral Lee would divide up his battleship squadron so that each of the three US carrier groups would have one in escort. At the same time, both *Gettysburg* and *Vicksburg* were now repaired and again escorting Marines to Efate, this time the 8th Regiment. They would boldly take up a position north of that island, barring the way between the landing site and Luganville, where the Japanese had dive bombers and Nell twin engine torpedo bombers.

Halsey was itching to get out to sea and into another fight, but Nimitz had made it very clear that he was not to do so alone. No attempt would be made to seek or engage the enemy until all three carrier groups were within easy supporting distance from one another. Their rendezvous point would be midway between Noumea and the Fijis, where all groups arrived on the 14th of March.

The first sighting report Hara received came in that same day from a Japanese submarine, indicating 1 carrier, two battle carriers, and two heavy cruisers. The intrepid sub Captain had it partly right. He had seen *Gettysburg* and *Vicksburg* enroute to Efate, mistaking one of the US APDs for a carrier. A US Catalina had better dope for Halsey a day later. He would learn of six Japanese carriers of various types cruising west of Funafuti, which seemed rather far afield considering the US intelligence estimate of Japanese intentions.

“Now that can’t be right,” Halsey said to his new Captain aboard the *Enterprise*, Osborne Bennett Hardison, or simply “Ozzy” for short. “This report has the Japs some 600 miles east of where they should be.”

“Well,” said Hardison, “If they were where they should be, I wouldn’t want to be aboard those transports headed for Efate now. Six carriers? That’s a lot of wallop.”

“HYPO said they’re up to no good,” said Halsey. “That’s probably what spooked Nimitz. He wouldn’t let me take the gloves off until Spruance and Sprague got into position.”

Captain Hardison scratched his head. “600 miles is a good long haul. If they went that far east, then they did so for a very good reason. Could HYPO be screwed up on the target of this big Jap operation?”

“Stranger things have happened,” said Halsey.

“Maybe the pilots got it wrong,” said Hardison, but either way, Halsey had his carriers all within arm’s reach, and now he had a decision to make.

“Let’s wait and see if the intel firms up. We’ll wait here tonight and get squadrons ready for action.”

So far things had been very quiet, but eight hours later a combat report came from *Gettysburg*, and Halsey’s first thought was that he had waited too long. He had images of all those Japanese dive bombers descending on the 8th Marines, and with only those two brave battle carriers there to try and cover them. Yet when he looked at the message, he realized this enemy strike

could not have come off the decks of six carriers.

“Why, they got hit with a dozen Vals and a handful of Nells. There was no more than seven or eight Zeros flying cover. That had to come from Luganville.”

“Then where are those six Jap flattops?”

Halsey rubbed his chin, his eyes dark beneath those big grey brows. “Come to 45 northeast. Signal all groups to follow.”

A sixth sense told him that if the Japs were that far east, then they wanted the Fijis, and he was going to head northeast to cover those islands just in case. He was looking for trouble, but with seven carriers bearing 400 planes, he would be ready for it. Even as he gave that order, the Japanese carriers were turning southeast, intending to interpose themselves between the American carriers and the troop transport convoy, which Yamamoto was taking further east towards Wallis and Funafuti Islands. That was going to set up a collision at sea, and it would all happen on the 17th of March.

* * *

“1908?” said Volsky. “I feel a very bad case of *déjà vu* coming on when I hear that.”

“The root of the problem lies there,” said Karpov. They were meeting aboard *Kirov*, now sailing about 200 nautical miles due west of Nauru. Karpov had taken *Kirov* well out into the Pacific, far from Truk, Rabaul, or any sea lanes that Japanese were likely to be using. Nauru was an outlier of the Marshall Islands, which were well to the north, so it was relatively isolated. There was a small Japanese garrison there, and they had built an airstrip, but they were not concerned about discovery. The Japanese might have a few seaplanes on the island, but in the unlikely event of a search directly on their heading, they would see the plane long before it ever got close to them.

“Our plan to try and cleanse this time cannot succeed.” Karpov began to summon the line of reasoning he had shared with Fedorov. “It was long odds to simply get *Takami*, but now look, we’ve another entire Japanese task force out there, and getting all those ships is not likely. I had to use a nuke just to survive our first encounter with them, and consider the impact that could have on this time if we fail to sink each and every ship.”

“Yes, this is certainly a complication we never expected,” said Volsky. “Can we kill them? Captain Gromyko, what do you think?”

“I got *Takami* , and I could have probably put that other destroyer down too—the *Takao* . But we didn’t engage, and for good reason. There were still a lot of other ships out there, and they all carry helicopters that can find and kill *Kazan* . Even if I evaded, how many more ships do they have? I only have so many missiles, and it can take a good many to kill a single ship. If you order me to engage, I will get you one or two more, but I cannot promise you I can get them all, or even find that carrier.”

“You see?” said Karpov. “And if their carrier survives, it will wreak havoc here. It could devastate the American fleet—change everything.”

“So your solution is to shift backwards and leave this task force here to do exactly that? I don’t understand.” Volsky folded his arms.

“It’s simple, Admiral,” said Karpov. “We have no real assurance that we can get all those ships, and that pretty much rips our little plan to shreds. So we can’t do what we planned here in 1943. We simply don’t have the power. Even if we did sink all those Japanese ships, what about Volkov? Yes, we have a contract out on him now, but that might not work. He’s a very clever and crafty man, and his security is very tight. How long do we wait while we run one operation after another to try and get him? But even that is irrelevant, because if we did kill him, his Orenburg Federation will still be there, and someone else will just take over. There’s simply no way we can cleanse this meridian of Orenburg. I knew this all along.”

“Then why were you so eager to sign on to this plan?” asked Volsky.

“That’s simple—to make certain our Captain Gromyko here would not do what he was sent here to do. I had no desire to get into a shooting war with *Kazan* .”

“So you went along only to save your own skin?”

“Correct. Then we get F-35’s in the sky, and I knew at that moment that the entire plan was doomed to fail. We can’t fix things here, but in 1908, we become all powerful.”

Volsky took a long breath. “We moved heaven and earth to go back there and get to you,” he said, just a little anger creeping into his tone. “We saved the ship, and we thought you were dead, only to find you survived to work your way into this history again. So now you are head of this Free Siberian State, and it surprises me to hear you suggest that we go back to 1908 and

make certain that state never arises.”

“Anything else we do is a half measure,” said Karpov. “Yes, I’ll miss my little throne here. Being head of State is rather comfortable. At one point I decided I would do better here than I could anywhere else. I decided to stay and fight my war here too, to live or die here, come what may.”

“And now you are willing to give all that up; forsake the power you’ve worked so hard to grasp here?”

“It was rather self-serving,” said Karpov. “Listen to our Mister Fedorov. He’s figured out more of this than you may care to hear. Once he warned me that we might do something, change some key event, and it would mean that the future that arises never conceives a ship like *Kirov*. How’s that for a nice humbling experience. Yes, I was having a good deal of fun sailing about and bullying the Japanese Navy, and I was only getting started. Now, however, that navy can shove back, and I’m not one to flirt with death. Are you?”

“So this is all just to save your skin again, this time from the Japanese.”

“Think so if you like, but realize that anything we do here is futile. It will never be enough. Understand? 1908 is the only place where we can get a real lever on these events. From there we are powerful enough to change everything. We can eliminate Mironov—Sergei Kirov. Sadly that will put Stalin back in the picture, but Stalin wins this war, as we all know. We can also get Ivan Volkov before he ever builds his Orenburg Federation, and so we solve that problem very easily. Yes, that means the Bolsheviks unite all Russia, as in the real history, and that united Russia defeats Germany. Doing this is the only way to reset the clock, and get the history back on the right track—and that history is what gives rise to *Kirov*.”

Volsky had to admit that this was true. From 1943, they could simply not accomplish their desired mission. From 1908, it seemed a simple affair. “Fedorov,” he said. “What is the plan?”

“We haven’t really finalized that yet sir. This meeting was the first step. It’s something we all have to agree upon and support.”

“Well how in the world would we go there? You know how risky it is to use that old control rod.”

“You mean Rod-25?” said Karpov. “Yes, I have it here aboard the ship, but it isn’t the old rod. It’s practically unused. In fact, it has only been used once, to bring this ship here from 2021. Remember, this isn’t the original *Kirov*, and not the old Rod-25 either.”

“So you think we can dip that rod and it will simply take this ship back to 1908?”

“I do.”

“But why? It could take us anywhere, just as it did before.”

“I don’t think so. Look, this situation needs resolution. Time has been slapped around and bent over the couch by us for long enough. If we expose ourselves in another shift, and with the intention of resolving this nightmare once and for all, then I think she’ll cooperate. 1908 is the only place where we can fix things. I know that, Fedorov knows it, and so does Mother Time. So yes, if we shift, that’s where we’ll go. I’m sure of this. Fedorov, tell him. Tell him about this Absolute Certainty.”

The Admiral looked at Fedorov again, one eyebrow raised.

“It’s a concept from Dorland’s Theory of Time,” said Fedorov. “It’s easy to see that we have all been Prime Movers in creating this history. Each one of us has thought to shoulder the blame. I thought it was all my fault, Karpov will say it was his doing, and you will think that you are to blame. In any case, we did change things, and that means we have power—real abiding power to influence events. Dorland calls us Prime Movers. If we set our minds on something, the theory says that a condition of Absolute Certainty arises. This is why Karpov believes we’ll get where we intend to go if we try a shift—to 1908. But it will take all of us together in this to create that condition of Absolute Certainty.”

“So you say if we all agree, then our combined will forces things?”

“Correct,” said Karpov.

Volsky smiled. “Unless a Japanese task force has a modern carrier with F-35 stealth fighters. Didn’t we all agree on the previous plan? What happened to your Absolute Certainty in that?”

“Interesting,” said Fedorov, looking at Karpov. “That’s a good point. We did set our minds on one goal, but now we’ve come to the conclusion that it is fruitless.”

“So the same thing could happen with this new plan,” said Volsky.

“No...” Karpov’s voice was quite firm. “The previous plan failed because I knew it was futile from the beginning. I was merely paying it lip service. In fact, I simply wanted to use Gromyko and *Kazan* to help me get rid of *Takami*. Then we got... complications.”

“Quite a confession,” said Volsky. “So you were never really on board.

This is what you say now? And this is why there was no real combined intention on our part that could win through.”

“Admiral, you are very astute.”

“But now you are convinced that this new plan—1908—is the only solution.”

“Well can you think of anything else? Solve it then. You come up with a plan that gets Volkov, removes his Orenburg Federation, expels the Japanese from Vladivostok and all our other territories. And don’t forget beating the Germans in that too.”

“Alright... I admit that 1908 is a decisive year, and that from there we can have a profound effect on how the timeline moves forward.”

“I knew that the moment I first found myself there,” said Karpov. “And if we decide to go, we’ll get there. Hell, Fedorov got there all on his own, even against my direct order, and with no *Kirov*, and no Rod-25 at his command. He got there on a goddamned blimp! How’s that for willpower? Well, I could do the same. In fact, I could get there in seventeen little steps, if I wanted. You forget about Ilanskiy.”

“Suppose this is true,” said Volsky. “Suppose we do get there. When do we arrive? Fedorov has said we cannot go to a time where we already exist, so how could he go back there again?”

“I was only there very briefly,” said Fedorov. “I was there on June 30th, the day of the Tunguska Event, perhaps for just an hour. And I returned again, present through July 1st, and with a mission very much like the one Karpov suggests in mind. But.... I failed.”

“And you were also there on *Anatoly Alexandrov*, and then we were all there for those unfortunate events off Iki Island.”

“We’ve worked out the dates,” said Karpov. “I arrived on the 10th of July, 1908. To my great surprise, Fedorov contacted me by shortwave on the 17th of July.”

“Yes, the *Anatoly Alexandrov* shifted back on that day, and for another 48 hour period. That’s how we discovered where you were.”

“And I was there through the 25th of that month,” said Karpov, “so those dates are out for me.”

“Then when would we appear if we attempted this?” asked Volsky. “Assuming time cooperates with us as you believe.”

“We would have that window, from July 2 through the 10th,” said

Fedorov. “Then the next opportunity would not occur until after we finally attempted our shift home, late July of 1908.”

“And where would Volkov and Mironov be by then? You both may think we have all the time in the world, but we could do this thing and still show up late...”

Part II

Yasawa

“ Time is everything; five minutes make the difference between victory and defeat... And in battle, something must always be left to chance; nothing is sure in a sea fight.”

— Admiral Horatio Nelson

Chapter 4

The day would start very early for the Japanese carrier forces. The order sent down to awaken the crew would go out as early as 03:00 that morning. Service crews, plane mechanics, ordnance handlers would all take their brief morning meals in the mess halls before filing into the broad open spaces of the inner hangar deck. Their work awaited them in the seeming haphazard jumble of planes—white winged Zeroes, the deep green and dull earth tones of the torpedo bombers all sitting in silent repose. There were no neat lines, but there was a method to the seeming disorder, for the planes were all carefully positioned and aligned with white painted markers on the hangar deck, and meticulously anchored in position by cables fed through eye bolts. Sometimes as little as 5 centimeters separated the upward folded wingtips on the D5-A's from one another, and crewmen would stoop to dip beneath the wings as they moved about.

Some were fetching tools, others looking for spare parts, but they all worked together like a well-oiled machine. The *Sebichos*, petty officers of the maintenance deck, barked orders, seeing that each mechanic was at his assigned plane, and with the correct tooling required for any work that plane needed before being certified for operations. They would all labor in the slowly rising heat by mid-day, but now the cool pre-dawn hours were the time to get everything ready, and it promised to be a very busy day.

In effect, all these men, over 2,400 of them spread across the various carriers, were filling orders determined the previous evening by the ship's Air Officer and Squadron Leaders. Once given the authorization to operate by the ship's commanding officer, lists of aircraft and assigned pilots would be sent down to the hangar deck, and the *Sebichos* would identify specific planes for each *Chutai* leader by their brightly colored tail markings.

The first action of the day was going to be a long range armed reconnaissance, flown off by one squadron of torpedo bombers to be escorted by a dozen Zeroes out to conduct a fighter sweep. Sighting reports from the previous day's recon sorties had all been digested by the Air Officer, and now he intended to confirm the information. So only the planes assigned to this mission would be fueled and armed that morning, and it would be the

first real sortie that might result in combat since the fleet had left Rabaul.

The Nakajima B6N was selected for the mission, for it had a range of slightly over 1,600 nautical miles. The Japanese had only been receiving these new planes in recent months, the replacement for their venerable B5N's. They called the new planes the *Tenzan* , or "Heavenly Mountain," but to the U.S. pilots on the other side, they were demoted to the common code handle of "Jill." Four would go up, one heavy *Shotai* , where the flight leader would fly slightly above and behind the traditional trio of planes that would normally make up that formation. The Zeroes would be higher up, watching for enemy scout planes or fighters.

It was nothing more than a small probing sortie, intended to scout towards the last reported sighting made the previous day by a big seaplane out of Luganville. To make even this small mission possible, those mechanics and service crews had to be up and at their work well before dawn. Some were making last minute tune-ups on the engine of a Zero, others pulling the large drop tanks from the storage areas along the outer walls of the deck and getting them mounted on the planes. The whole scene was awash with the smell of aviation fuel, motor oil, lubricants of every kind. The ventilation fans were already at work to clear out the vapors, which could be deadly if ignited in the confined space of the hangar deck.

Once the long metal hoses that had fueled the planes were finally stowed away, the Armorers would begin to arrive, pushing their lethal charges on long metal carts. The weapons had already been manhandled up out of the magazines on the deeper levels of the ship, lifted by combinations of small cranes and simple block & tackle arrangements. The large carts at work this morning would carry the four Type 91 Torpedoes, weighing all of 850 kilograms. The mother planes were all fueled and waiting to receive their dark children, and the next ten minutes would see the long torpedoes wheeled through the densely packed hangar to the correct plane, and then mounted under the watchful eyes of the *Sebichos*. Other crews worked the belts of MG ammo into the nose guns of the Zeroes, and lugged out the sixty round canisters for their 20mm wing cannons.

The war in the Pacific was all about firing those MG rounds through the wings, fuselage, engine, canopy, or pilot of an enemy plane before it could do the same to you, and lancing those long deadly torpedoes through the hulls of enemy ships. It was just another way of hurling stones, some small, some

quite big, at the other guy. The stones of the Paleolithic era became spears, then arrows, before they were eventually mated with gunpowder to become bullets. Yet it was still one tribe out after another, only this time the stones would be lifted and hurled at the enemy under the wings of all these noisome aircraft.

All this was happening in the aft hangar aboard the carrier *Tosa* , where the B5N and B6N torpedo bombers would always be stored. Their neatly folded wings made them more compact, and allowed them to use the smaller aft elevator. Armed and fueled however, they would soon unfold those wings to become four tons of flying death, and the ordnance crews would now turn them over to the plane handlers and elevator crews to be lifted to the flight deck.

The Zeroes used the center elevator amidships, and many were already up on the deck and spotted in one of the three long rows for this mission. They were re-tethered to the deck with wheel chocks in place, waiting for the next act in the long morning drama. The four B6N's would be the last to take off, so they were aft. When completed, the spot would see three rows of four Zeroes, and one B6N behind each row. The last Torpedo bomber was the plane to be flown by the mission leader.

Usually Lt. Kikuchi Rokuro would prefer to take off *before* all the other planes assigned to his strike mission, but this time things were different. It was even unusual to combine a fighter sweep with long range recon like this, or for the squadron leader to go out this soon, when he should be briefing and planning his strike mission instead. But Rokuro had wanted to “see for himself” before the real business of the day got started, and a battle was engaged. Were the Americans really where that seaplane said they were? Had they moved? If so, where did they go, and what might they intend? A great deal was riding on the answer to all those questions, for virtually every seaworthy carrier in the Japanese Navy was now within 50 nautical miles of Admiral Hara's task force, where *Tosa* was sailing smartly behind the flagship *Taiho* , which was about 1000 meters ahead.

One heavy *Shotai* of B6N's, with three heavy *Shotai* of A6M2 Zeroes in attendance, would be ready for takeoff by 04:30, about 40 minutes after the service crews first arrived on the hangar deck. Rokuro knew that, even as *Tosa* was turning into the wind, a destroyer was taking station off her bow, a little under a thousand meters ahead.

Just in case one of the grease monkeys did not do his job, he thought. If a plane failed to get aloft and found itself in the sea, the destroyer crews would go “dragonfly fishing” for the pilot. It was an ignominious fate to be hauled out of the sea like that, and one that Rokuro had never suffered, but the ritual was still a necessary precaution. A strike pilot was a most valuable commodity.

They were all up on deck now, gloves pulled tight, scarfs flowing in the wind, ear muffs being adjusted as they lined up on the flight deck. There they would wait until the Flight Deck *Hikocho* shouted the order to run to their planes. It was like the offensive squad running to replace the defense in a football game, as the flight deck crews would retreat when the pilots and other crewmen arrived. Soon they would all be settled into the cockpits, the Zero pilots alone, but two extra flight crewmen riding in each B6N, a radio man and rear gunner. Sometimes they would give the 7.7mm Type 92 MG a quick inspection to make certain the crews had mounted the ammo belts correctly. If that weapon jammed at a crucial moment, it could mean the life of the plane, and everyone in it was at stake.

The signal was given to start the engines, and crewmen stood ready with fire extinguishers—another necessary precaution, for special high octane fuel would be used to ignite the engine and get it to turn over. Soon the cough of the fighter engines was heard in the still morning air, and the planes sputtered to life one by one, the props revving up to a wild thrum. The engines would be warmed up while a designated flight deck officer listened to them. Called *Uta no-rida*, the “Song Leader,” he was always a man chosen from the ranks of the *Sebichos* on the hangar deck, for he would listen for any abnormality in the song of those engines as they all spun up to higher revolutions. Better to catch a misfiring engine now, before the plane and pilot were in the air.

Everything was checked and double checked: flaps and struts, oil pressure, hydraulics, fuel response when the engines were feathered and revved up again. It was a full fifteen minutes of mechanical calisthenics on the flight deck. The plane would then rev up to full military power for a long minute to make certain everything was in working order. The pilots were watching their engine gauges and temperature closely for any sign of abnormality, but mostly, their minds were already on the mission ahead. After receiving the certifying nod of the Song Leader, a pilot would turn his eyes skyward, noting the cloud height and formation, the wind speed over the

deck as indicated by the cone flags and wind socks.

Once the Song Leader waved his hand to signal his choir was in tune, the actual launch operation would be ready to begin. It was only a matter of receiving final orders from the Air Officer, then the planes would be untethered, with the wheel chocks still left in place as each one made final preparations for takeoff. A different kind of song leader would now take over, the *Shohikocho*, who would make a last visual inspection of each plane spotted for the mission.

Then the deck lights would come on to mark the bow and stern ends of the flight deck, and light the way forward. Soon the wind sock was pointed dead aft as *Tosa* ran into the morning breeze. She would work up to 24 knots, and as the *Shohikocho* saluted each plane to signal it had passed his inspection, the pilot would visibly raise his hand so Rokuro could see they were all ready. Normally he would be in front, and turn on his wing lights when all was in readiness, but not this time. He turned them on for the *Shohikocho* to see that the planes were all reporting ready, and only then would that man signal the deck crews to remove the wheel chocks.

Lieutenant Saburo Shindo had come to *Tosa* from the *Akagi*, and he would be privileged to take off first. As his plane raced down the flight deck, all service crews waved their caps after him, with shouts of good luck on their lips. Then, one by one, the other pilots would follow, all the Zeroes getting off before the first of the torpedo planes lumbered after them. Rokuro was the last man up that day, finding the entire formation waiting for him. He maneuvered his plane into position behind the *Shotai* of three other B6N's, and watched the Zeroes climb to gain elevation. The overtures were concluded, an hour of perfectly choreographed theater, and now the play was about to begin.

They were headed southwest, and would soon find that the sighting reports were very accurate. It would not be long before Rokuro's sweeping recon mission flew into a firestorm of American fighters.

Halsey had his three carrier task forces separated by a good 25 to 30 nautical miles each. That kept them close enough to try and coordinate strikes, but far enough apart so he would not present his enemy with one fat target containing all his valuable carrier flight decks. While the many engagements fought thus far in the war had given the Americans a lot of much needed experience, "coordination" was still hit and miss when it came

to their own strike operations. So Halsey made no attempt to ask one TF to launch and loiter with its strike wave. He simply decided to throw them like successive punches at the enemy, instead of trying to load them all up into one haymaker, and he was already fighting. Rather than trying to confirm the sighting reports out of Suva Bay, he took them on faith, He was simply going to attack in that direction, come what may.

Being farthest east and north, Rokuro found himself flying right into Halsey's heavy CAP that morning. Halsey had allocated a full 50% of his fighters to that mission, with the other half flying escort, so there were a good many up. All 24 of the F4 Wildcats off the *Enterprise* were already in the sky, with twelve of those loitering to wait for the strike planes to join them. Another twelve F6 Hellcats were also on dedicated CAP, and they saw the Japanese sweep mission on radar 29 miles out. The resulting fighter duel was intense, but something happened that would shock the Japanese for the first time in the war—they would lose, and very badly.

That something was the F6F-Hellcat, which had made its debut flight in June of 1942 in the real history, but never got into a fight until September of 1943. In this history, it was fighting six months early, and the new Lady Lex had come with two dozen. With a powerful engine, rugged design including bullet resistant canopy, and armor around the cockpit, oil tank, and cooler, it was built to fight and survive. In fact, it had been built to order as a plane specifically meant to match, and defeat, the dread Japanese Zero.

Throughout its development, the Navy brought in some of its top Aces to work directly with the Grumman engineers who were building the plane, and hear right from the horse's mouth what was needed or wanted by the pilots. One of those aces was Lieutenant Commander Butch O'Hare. He had been the Navy's first flying Ace and Medal of Honor winner when he defended the carrier *Lexington* from a flight of nine Japanese Betty twin-engine bombers. He would get three of them, damaging others, as he utilized a high side angle of attack to avoid the dangerous sting of their tail guns. Once he got back to Pearl, the reporters descended on him, for America was looking for heroes to bolster morale, and Butch O'Hare was a perfect candidate, cool, personable, and handsome.

He was flown to the White House to get his Medal of Honor, put on Parade in Saint Louis, and then relocated to Hawaii to train other pilots. There he related everything he knew about the enemy Zero, and how to fly

against it. He told the young pilots never to follow one into a loop, for the Zero could turn tighter than the F4 and would end up on its tail. Instead it had to be countered with a break hard to the right, which would bring the F4 around in a timely way to get back on the Zero's tail after it came out of that loop. And he also passed on the one good habit that had served him well—*always look over your shoulder*, no matter what you were doing. Even if you thought you were alone out there, in a one-on-one duel with a single enemy fighter, you look over that shoulder. It was a life saver to many a Navy Pilot.

With new planes like the F6, and pilots trained by men like Butch O'Hare to fly them, the game had suddenly changed in the skies over Halsey's carriers. Lieutenant Rokuro's twelve Zeroes raced to engage, but for the first time they were bested and savaged by the speed and hitting power of this new American plane. They hit many of the Hellcats, but they kept flying, and when they hit back with those four .50 caliber MGs, the Zero was cut to pieces.

Ten of the twelve would go down, and the entire *Shotai* of those new B6N 'Heavenly Mountains' went into the sea, all except Lieutenant Rokuro, who managed to evade and dive away into clouds. The Zeroes got two Wildcats and one Hellcat, but the Japanese survivors were shaken by the bruising losses they had sustained. Rokuro knew he could not take the chance that he would also be shot down without sending a report back to Admiral Hara's carriers. So he ordered his radio man to send a message in the clear, even if it meant violating radio silence—"Sighted two enemy carriers, three cruisers, four destroyers. Enemy strike in the air!"

Chapter 5

The Japanese decided to hit back hard, those same maintenance crews sweating out another wild 40 minutes on the hangar decks, knowing the enemy was already out after them. That sighting report from the savaged recon sweep put the Americans quite far out, about 350 miles southwest of Hara's present position. *Taiho* and *Tosa* still had time to get a strike in the air before those American planes found them, but there would be little margin for error.

Cruising at 160 knots, the American strike wave would take two hours and twenty minutes to reach them. That window was wide enough for Hara to continue to launch his morning CAP patrols while the strike was armed and spotted. The sun had just broken over the horizon when Lieutenant Rokuro's warning was received. The messenger read off the signal tersely on the bridge of the *Taiho*, and King Kong Hara stood silently, his implacable self, seemingly unmoved. When he spoke, the order was exactly what the other officers wanted to hear.

"Signal all carriers in this task force. Prepare for naval strike! Admirals Nagumo and Yamaguchi should be notified immediately."

That would set in motion the frenetic machine below decks, the fueling, arming, lifting and spotting of the planes. *Taiho* had started the day with only 18 Zeroes, 27 D5-A2's and 18 B6N's. Four of those B6N's were already expended, and Lieutenant Rokuro was winging his way back home in the only surviving plane.

Tosa had the bulk of the fighters, 26 Zeroes, with 27 dive bombers and 12 torpedo bombers. *Junyo* had 15 Zeroes, 15 dive bombers and 6 torpedo bombers. That was a total of 164 planes, but 16 had already gone out on that ill-fated recon sweep. Hara was going to have to hold back at least half his fighters for defense, so he sent 23 Zeroes aloft for the strike, which was launching by 7:10. They would be joined by 36 dive bombers and 29 torpedo bombers, making the first strike wave 88 planes. The question after that launch was also crucial—could the second wave be armed and launched before the Americans arrived?

The crews would have another slim hour, and if the enemy got there

sooner than expected, the flight decks might be crowded with planes, all armed and fueled, a most undesirable situation for any carrier commander to find himself in. The alternative would be to wait out the American strike, devoting the remaining time to servicing all the remaining fighters and getting them aloft, and this is what Hara elected to do.

Lieutenant Joichi Tomonaga, a survivor of the lost *Hiryu* , was the Air Officer in charge, a man that had died in the real history at Midway. His planes would form up and head southwest, but it would be a long two hours before they reached the target zone, and they would not find Halsey that day. Heavy clouds had obscured the sea, but they continued on, all eyes searching through any break in the cover for any sign of enemy ships.

At a little after 09:30, three white wakes were spotted, and one of them was a carrier. That was all the Japanese needed, and they started the attack. They did not know it at that time, but they had just spotted the newest addition to the U.S. carrier fleet, the *Bunker Hill* , now the flagship of Ziggy Sprague's task force.

Clifton Sprague had come up through the ranks of Naval Aviation, and had served well as the Air Officer aboard the first *Yorktown* , CV-5, piloting the first two landings ever made on that carrier. Yet he had been in and out of the Naval War Colleges to learn the art of strategy and tactics at sea, and his only real experience had been active participation in fleet problems and related drills on a 16 month tour aboard *Lady Lex*. Before the war, he had a lowly seaplane tender in 1940, the *Tangier* , and finally saw action at Pearl Harbor when his was one of the very first ships to return fire against the Japanese attackers.

It may have been desperation that drove his sailors to their guns that day, for *Tangier* had just taken on a full load of torpedoes and was a disaster waiting to happen. Yet Sprague remained cool, directing the fire of his gunners, even as he watched one ship after another take hits all around him. That action made him a Captain. They were going to send him to Seattle where he was to take command of NAS Sand Point, and his name was on the roster for the new *Essex* class return of the *Wasp* , CV-18, but then he had been bumped up by Nimitz to take over *Bunker Hill* . Sprague thought he would spend long months cutting his teeth with air ferry duty on the light escort carriers, and it was a real break for him to get the *Bunker Hill* , and most unusual for a mere Captain to be given charge of a full task force. But

Halsey had asked for him earlier, prodding Nimitz to let him bring *Independence* and *Princeton* down into the active combat zone, so when *Bunker Hill* was needed, Ziggy found a seat.

Now he would serve under his old student from aviation school, William Halsey. The two men had flown many hours together when Halsey learned to fly under Sprague's able instruction. Now Halsey had sent him to the school of hard knocks, and he was about to get one, when his first hour of real naval combat at sea was at hand. He had 30 fighters up on CAP, 20 F4's and 10 of the newer F6 Hellcats that had arrived with *Bunker Hill*. In the battle that ensued, the Japanese would lose only one of their Zeroes, but the Americans would get through to down ten enemy dive bombers and seven torpedo bombers. Yet 40 of the 65 strike planes in Hara's first wave would also get through to those ships.

Light cruiser *Phoenix* was the first to be hit, a bomb striking her near the fantail. Destroyer *O'Bannon* took a serious blow amidships, and was double teamed when another bomb struck her forward. But the only hit that mattered, to either side, was the single torpedo that found *Bunker Hill*.

It was not U.S. Navy policy to attempt to defeat the enemy attack by maneuver. The Americans posted their supporting ships close by the carriers, and it was that massed firepower that would be the backbone of the US defense. A bit of a maverick, Sprague had already violated that policy by making some amazing turns and maneuvers to throw off three attacking enemy dive bombers, their bombs falling off the port side of the ship. In doing so, he kept a wary eye on his cruisers, but that single torpedo bomber, a B6N, put its fish right on target, and it could not be avoided.

There was a high white wash of water off the port side, then all that water was vaporized by the explosion. Ziggy felt the hard thud, the heavy blast, the roll of the ship, and he knew he had been skewered. He swore inwardly, but remained outwardly cool, a hard look set on his face. An officer of the deck made the mistake of swearing aloud, and Ziggy, who was normally not one to dress a man down for a lapse, simply gave him that look. "This isn't a CVE," he said. "Look to your post."

The navy disparaged the CVE as being three things, all denoted by those three initials: Combustible, Vulnerable, Expendable. But that was not the case for *Bunker Hill*. A light carrier might have been put out of action by that torpedo, but Ziggy had a ship that could take more punishment and still keep

running. He also had a little ‘luck of the Irish’ on this Saint Patrick’s Day engagement, for the torpedo struck in a safe location, far from avgas bunkers and magazines. His damage control crews also knew that this ship was definitely *not* expendable, and they rushed to heal the breach and mend the wound with vigor. There would be minor flooding amidships, but no list developed, and Ziggy knew his flight deck was still squared off and level for ongoing operations. He sent one signal to Halsey. “09:42—*Torpedo amidships—damage under control—CV-17 is H.G.U...*” Those last three initials meant, of course, “*Haze Grey and Underway.*”

When Halsey read it he smiled. Ziggy had taken a punch that had been meant for him, and the gritty senior officer knew that. The Bull sent back a simple three word reply: “*Have at ‘em!*” That message was also received by Ray Spruance, and between the two of them, they would launch a devastating counterpunch against Hara’s task force that would more than balance the scales.

* * *

King Kong had been waiting for news, the singular agony of the fleet carrier commander in a battle like this. All the action was well beyond his horizon, and nothing he could see, so patience was the only virtue he could embrace. He stood stolidly on the bridge of *the Great Phoenix*, carrier *Taiho*, waiting for the runners to come up from the signals room, delivering one morsel of information at a time, just a small piece of the puzzle that Hara had to fit together in his mind as he tried to ascertain what was happening. He had waited nearly two hours for the first piece: “*Sighted enemy Carrier – Attacking!*” Now he waited for results.

A runner came up, saluting before announcing the latest news in a loud voice for all to hear. “*Torpedo hit on one enemy carrier!*” That was all, leaving Hara to wonder how many enemy carriers were even there. Only one had been reported prior to the attack, and it was good to hear that it had been hit, but this could not be the entire American carrier force. Where were the others?

This was his fate—waiting, asking these inward questions, guessing, making calculated assumptions, trying to surmise things from these incomplete snippets of signals traffic. His entire situational awareness of the

battle was reduced to the tapping fingers of a man riding in the wild rear seat of a torpedo bomber, over 300 miles away. Tracer rounds from enemy fighters streaked past his plane, and a heavy flak round exploded close by, sending a hail of shrapnel against the fuselage. He would crane his neck around, straining to see what was happening below. A rake of clouds would open, and there he saw another American ship on fire. His finger moved in a fitful haste: "*Cruiser burning amidships!*" five minutes later that signal would be shouted out on the bridge of *Taiho*, with Hara standing there, gazing out to sea, like a mountain island of calm.

Soon the radar crews would report a hard contact inbound on the fleet. *Taiho* had the newest addition to fleet radar sets, again nearly six months early, the Type 21, with a detection range of 60 nautical miles against aircraft groups. That meant the enemy was just twenty minutes away, and looking for his ships as they approached. All Hara's fighters were already in the air, and his crews were now arming and fueling the second wave strike planes. It would be another ten minutes before they would be lifted up onto the flight deck, which was something he did not want. He turned to an officer and spoke: "Spotting operations are suspended. Aviation fuel and munitions are to be secured, and the hangar decks thoroughly ventilated."

That order was quickly passed below to the hard working maintenance crews, a perfect example of the "hurry up and wait" that lurked in the midst of all military operations. For the carrier, that was particularly true. Hara knew he could not get that second wave strike spotted and launched before the American planes got there, no matter how much he hurried his crews, so he would simply have to wait.

It was a wise precaution, and the time seemed to be stretched thin and taut, like two men pulling on a leather rope. Just when it reached the breaking point of tension, a watchman shouted the alarm—enemy dive bombers!

They were coming off the decks of Taffy 12, commanded by Ray Spruance with *Essex* and *Lexington II*. A cruiser commander, Spruance had been thrust into the cauldron of carrier operations after Jack Fletcher's disastrous losses in the Coral Sea. Halsey had personally asked for that man as well, having faith in his considerable abilities as a sea Captain. The man has seamanship wired tight, said Halsey, and it was a most accurate description of Spruance.

As cool as they came, Spruance was methodical, rational, and careful in

everything he did. Far from Halsey's bawling and sometimes bawdy manner, Spruance was a man of words, quiet, articulate, thoughtful, but rigorously disciplined in day to day operations, with attention to detail in all aspects of his work. He had cleverly plotted the position where he expected to find the enemy carriers, and he had been dead accurate. To make matters worse for Hara, Ziggy had his planes up as well, and they were following those of Taffy 12.

Ray Spruance had thrown every dive bomber he had at the enemy, 53 planes, and 24 of his 31 torpedo bombers, all escorted by nearly two dozen fighters. The dive bombers came in first, seeming to coalesce into fast moving solid shapes emerging from the grey overhead cloud deck. Down they came, the Japanese standard Type 96 25mm autoguns desperately trying to track and kill them. It was particularly ill-suited to that task, with a small clip of only 15 rounds that had to be reloaded after only four seconds of fire. By the time the next clip was fed into the magazine, the gun had to be re-sighted on the target that was moving at a frightening speed in a near vertical dive. So these would fire in fitful spits, and could seldom put out enough firepower to really make a difference.

The larger AA weapons were equally bad against dive bombers, their radar fire control systems slow to respond, taking between ten and twenty seconds to obtain a firing solution. By that time, the target was long gone, and if the ship maneuvered, any solution already obtained based on the last course and speed was useless and had to be recalculated. So instead of relying on the radar, the Japanese tended to fire these weapons in a barrage, the shells set to a specific altitude in one spot in the sky. It was a barrier of flak that the strike planes would have to fly through, but those who made it through were going to have a very good chance in this attack, and there were many.

It would now come down to the skill of the pilots in dropping those bombs, but once they were in the air, spotters would shout the danger to the bridge, and the helmsman was the last line of defense. If he could suddenly steer the ship out of harm's way, (on the orders of the senior officer on the bridge), those terrible 500 and 1000 pound bombs would find nothing but seawater.

But that didn't happen this day, and Hara would be dubiously 'gifted' with the first bomb. It came hurtling down on the aft deck of the *Taiho* ,

exploding on that armored steel, which was now put to a severe test. It held. The bomb did damage, but it had struck one of the thickest segments of the deck, with 80mm of armor, just over three inches thick, almost an inch more protection than the decks of the *Kongo* . That flight deck had been designed to resist multiple hits by 500kg bombs, (1,100 pounds), and it performed as advertised.

While Hara cringed inwardly with that hit, it was more flash and smoke than anything else. Several deck crewmen were injured by the shrapnel, with three killed, but the deck was not penetrated, and the damage control parties were quickly on the scene to hose down the small fire and drag out more emergency deck patch plating.

As for the other carriers, *Tosa* had the older style wooden deck cover over thinner 1.5 inch armor, which would in no way stop such a bomb, and the *Peregrine Falcon* , CVL *Junyo* , was no better off. Not one, but three bombs would hit that ship, and the icing on the cake was the torpedo that struck forward. Two bombs would get the *Tosa* , and another would strike the battlecruiser *Kongo* . When Ziggy's group delivered the final attack, *Junyo* and *Kongo* would both be hit yet again with a single bomb, as would heavy cruiser *Atago* .

Considering that single torpedo that had been delivered to the hull of *Bunker Hill* , the American strike did a great deal more damage. Just as Hara received the news that his own carrier was not seriously harmed, he looked out and saw *Junyo* erupt with fire and smoke. Up went the searing mix of molten steel, fire, and shrapnel laden smoke. The flight deck was smashed, with splinters flying in all directions, some falling as far away as the escorting destroyers churning up the seas and firing all their guns like a pack of angry terriers.

The damage to *Junyo* would be near fatal, her main elevator wrecked, 40% of her boilers serrated and venting hot white steam, and a hole in her lightly armored sides that was shipping water to the point where the carrier went into an immediate list. The ship started settling deeper into the water to one side, as her Captain desperately ordered counterflooding. Many of her planes were wrecked, for those bombs penetrated easily to the hangar decks, where nothing more than thin fire curtains separated one segment from another. They did not do their job. Captain Shizui Isii would signal his ship had been seriously damaged, and was to be considered unfit for any further

operations. It was even doubtful if the *Peregrine Falcon* could be saved at all.

‘Implacable Mountain’ took all this in with stoic stillness, his eyes fixed on the burning carrier off his starboard bow. Then Kong bawled out an order. “Continue arming and spotting—and with all speed!” He had taken a hard hit from his enemy, and before he even really knew if his first right cross had landed, he was going to throw that left hook.

Chapter 6

It was 10:18 when Lieutenant Tomonaga's latest signal arrived: "*Attack concluded—Homeward bound.*" When he received it, Hara was mentally calculating the need to recover friendly planes in about two hours, both from Tomonaga's strike and his CAP patrols. His damage control parties had already certified his own flight deck as operational. *Tosa* had raised flags and flashed lantern signals as well, and he knew that she would need at least an hour to clear damage from those two bomb hits and extinguish the fires. One had damaged her forward elevator, the one most often used by the fighters assigned to CAP missions.

Now Hara was mulling over the status of Nagumo's task force, the Shado Fleet. He had 128 more planes, and Hara knew they must be in the air by now, but the majority of those planes were fighters. In fact, Nagumo had sent many *Shotai* out on long range CAP, and they had been involved in the unsuccessful defense of Hara's ships. There were only 24 of the new Yokosuka D4Y dive bombers on the battle carriers, the planes the Americans would call "Judy." He also had 27 new *Tenzan* B6N Torpedo Bombers. Those planes were in the air, with a small escort, as they hoped to pick up several *Shotai* from that long range cap as they made their approach to the enemy.

But the weather gods would conspire against them that day. In the thickening cloud cover and light rain, the torpedo bombers veered off course, and neither formation ever found those extra fighters, though they did eventually find Halsey. The dive bombers were over the Americans first, coming down through the rain. But these were not Japan's best pilots any longer, even though they had the benefit of all those new planes. They were pounced on by 20 fighters, and savaged as they started their diving run, the four Zeroes with them unable to stop the Americans. 13 were destroyed, another damaged, and flak would get one more. Of the eight planes that actually put bombs in the air, none would score a hit.

Ten minutes later, the *Tenzan* "Jills" finally showed up, the rain heavier now as the torpedo bombers tried to get low to make their runs. Their four

fighters ran into many more defending planes, 29 F6 Hellcats and three F4 Wildcats. They got one of those zeroes, and then proceeded to chop up those torpedo planes, getting eight of eleven. Three torpedoes hit the water, and none found hulls. The Shado Fleet had thrown everything it had at Halsey, and hit nothing.

Hara would learn this a little after 10:40 when a message was received from Nagumo: *“Attack unsuccessful. Insufficient strike planes to launch a second wave.”*

That spoke volumes to Hara, and he immediately knew that Nagumo's planes must have taken very heavy losses. Now, with the weather darkening and thick rain squalls sweeping through the scene, Hara realized this battle was over. He still had no idea what Yamaguchi had done, but would soon learn that his strike wave had been unable to locate the enemy carriers. With reports of carriers in three places, they should have seen something, but flew right into the gap between Ziggy Sprague's Taffy 15, and Ray Spruance in Taffy 12. They never found either task force, and coming 300 miles to see nothing, they were forced to turn and head back home.

That decision led to a nice little sneak attack thrown out by Ziggy Sprague. He had three fighters up on a long range patrol, and they spotted the planes off *Akagi* and *Soryu*, the heart of Yamaguchi's task force. Noting their heading, Ziggy sent up every plane he had left and went after them. They would arrive 20 minutes behind the Japanese planes, all in the midst of recovery operations.

The attack caught Yamaguchi completely by surprise, and it would see all his carriers take hits, two bombs on *Akagi*, which was soon obscured by smoke from the fires, one smaller 500 pound bomb on *Soryu* near the island that did only minor damage, and one bomb on *Hiyo* that also started a bad fire. That was most unwelcome news for Hara, for he now knew that Yamaguchi would be lucky if he could complete his recovery, and that no second strike would be likely from his ships either. Then, at a little after 11:00, Nagumo signaled that he was also under attack.

The raid was coming from *Essex* and *Lexington*, 24 fighters escorting in 33 dive bombers and 23 Avenger torpedo bombers. The latter would see six damaged by enemy fighters and flak, with one destroyed, yet they pressed on through the squall line and into a clearing. They all got their fish in the water, but the American torpedoes were damn slow at only 33 knots. Many hit the

rough sea and detonated as they went into the drink, others were batted off course, and the three that were running true could simply not catch up with their intended targets. The Shado Fleet had fast ships built on cruiser hulls, and those battle carriers could actually outrun the American torpedoes. Their able Captains simply turned their bows on the same line of the American attack, and ran off unscathed.

The dive bombers would do much better. Rain or no rain, down they came, and suddenly ships began erupting with fire. CVB *Ryujin* would get most of the attention, three bomb hits. Thankfully, they were all 500 pounders, and that carrier had tough skin. It had been built out on the *Kii* Class battlecruiser hull, a 38,000 ton battle carrier, retaining a well armored deck that absorbed the first hit. The second had been a near miss that spent itself against *Ryujin*'s 290mm side armor, and the third bomb hit very near the massive 16-inch forward turret, again finding solid deck armor there, and turret armor that was impenetrable. So even though it was hit three times, the *Dragon God*'s scales were simply too thick, and very little damage was done.

That would not be the case for the super cruiser *Kagami* and escort carrier *Gozo Kiryu*. The former took a single 1000 pound bomb right on her stacks, which penetrated to the boilers and sent a massive steam cloud frothing up into the grey sky. Then secondary explosions rocked the ship, damaging hull plates and starting a small leak. The cruiser would survive, but lose about 10% of her flotation to that minor flooding, and see many boilers damaged that would impact her engines and speed.

The last bomb would fall on the much smaller *Gozo Kiryu*, a ship of only 8000 tons. 1000 pounds of mean steel and explosives would practically wreck that ship, penetrating the small flight deck, smashing right through the hangar deck and into the avgas bunker, which exploded with awful fire. In a matter of minutes, the ship was a searing wreck, afloat, but with terrible casualties, and completely out of the game. Nagumo's Shado Fleet had been defanged, and he now signaled Hara that he was withdrawing north.

Kong looked at the glowering sky, the rain now lashing the windows of *Taiho*'s bridge, and thunder adding its angry roll to the whole scene. His second wave was ready on the deck, but the seas were rolling higher, and he knew it would be foolish to send those planes and pilots out into this weather. Though the junior officers urged him to launch, he simply turned to look for his Air Officer.

“Secure from launch operations.”

“But sir...”

“The flight deck will be cleared! Prepare to recover incoming aircraft. All other planes are to be secured, except fighters.”

Hara simply stared out the window, and the silence on the bridge was thicker than the rain. He then slowly walked to the chart room, knowing that he, too, would be fortunate to complete a successful recovery of the planes that would be arriving over his task force in less than one hour. He did not yet know the full measure of the losses sustained by either side, but he could feel the heavy weight of defeat on his broad shoulders, his first setback of the war.

As reports filtered in, the scope of the disaster became more apparent. Eight of the eleven carriers in the Japanese armada had taken damage, though his own ship was still fully operational. Losses to planes and pilots had been severe, and to make matters worse, they could only confirm that two of the American carriers had suffered hits. In effect. Halsey, Sprague and Spruance had simply clobbered the Japanese fleet, and came out of that fight with very little damage. *Bunker Hill* was still in business, as Ziggy had signaled, and the only real serious damage was to *Lady Lex* , which needed some time to repair her hull.

Halsey ordered Spruance to detach *Lexington* and send it to Pago Pago immediately. Then he told Ziggy to head northwest towards Efate, just in case the enemy got any ideas about intervening there. He would take Taffy 11 northeast, hoping to further cover the Fijis, and that move would present Yamamoto with a most difficult decision.

* * *

When the Admiral got the news from Hara, he could read well enough between the lines. His old warhorse had been defeated. The list of damaged ships was piling up, and it seemed likely that one or two of those carriers, most likely *Junyo* and *Gozo Kiryu* , might sink. He was still a full day’s sailing from the chosen landing site at Vanua Levu, with *Yamato* cruising like a massive iron fortress, surrounded by all those troop ships. One of his transports, the *Teisin Maru* , was leaking oil and darkening the sea with a wide black stripe. That would lead any spying plane right to his ships.

Reports were still showing enemy carriers between 400 and 500 miles to his southwest, and he realized now that he would have no carrier cover if he persisted.

This attack cannot proceed, he realized. I am carrying the entire 3rd Infantry Division, and it will be completely exposed. Even if I did manage to reach the landing site, it would be subject to attack by all the American land based planes, and then those carriers.... The only thing to do now is to turn speedily about, and hope to get north before those carriers can close the range. We have obviously taken a severe tactical defeat here, and now my next order converts that into a strategic loss as well. Yet there is nothing else to do. The invasion fleet must withdraw.

That order was given, and Yamamoto could now thank the weather gods that had so confounded his pilots that day. Hopefully, the thick clouds would cover his retreat. Admiral Nagumo was ordered to leave *Gozo Kiryu* with a small destroyer escort and take the remainder of his fleet directly to Truk. Hara and Yamaguchi would take their ships back to Rabaul.

Troops suddenly come in great abundance, thought Yamamoto, but this engagement has changed the entire strategic picture if I cannot get them into battle. Our offensive was completely blunted, a dented sword that had to be sheathed before it could even join with the enemy. 3rd Division will now sit on Rabaul, and quite frankly, I doubt that I can cover it for any further offensive operations in the foreseeable future. Operation *Suriyoko* was over.

The journey home simply got darker the next day, when Yamamoto was informed that the Americans had safely reinforced Efate with yet one more regiment of their Marines, and that Luganville had been struck by carrier planes, the airfield there severely damaged, and the air wing depleted. The brave stand of *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg* had protected 8th Marines, when all of Yamamoto's fleet could not protect 3rd Infantry and allow it to reach its landing beaches. It would come to be called the Battle off Yasawa, the long string of islands off the Fijis that marked the mid-point between the two opposing carrier forces, and it was a clear American victory.

There would be many lessons learned from that battle, on both sides. The Americans would realize that their new *Essex* Class carriers had finally achieved parity with the enemy, and now, with so many Japanese carriers reported hit, Nimitz and Halsey would begin to feel that the US Navy was top dog for the first time in the war. The performance of the new F6 Hellcats was

deemed to be superb, and the US dive bomber squadrons received commendations for both bravery and newfound skill.

Strategically, Halsey now believed he could defend all the turf the Allies now held in the Pacific, and stop any further enemy offensives. In fact, because of Yasawa, New Zealand felt secure enough to again release its veteran 2nd Infantry Division for deployment to Persia, and that would make a big difference in that campaign. The US had control of southern New Caledonia, and with the delivery of 8th Marine Regiment, they would now outnumber the Japanese on Efate two to one, and with much better troops. Nimitz also still had the entire 1st USMC Division in the bank at Pago Pago, and was slowly mustering the transports to move them. The fact that he had this division in hand, with carriers that could defend its transit to a new objective, put the real fear into Yamamoto.

Yet compared to the catastrophe that was Midway in the old history, this battle was not such a severe blow to Japan. While many carriers were hit and damaged, almost all of them would make it safely to a friendly port, except *Junyo* and *Gozo Kiryu* , which both sunk on the 21st of March as they struggled homeward. Perhaps it was to bolster morale, but the Japanese circulated the rumor that the battle had been a draw, claiming they had sunk the *Lexington* , even though Halsey knew it was safe at Pago Pago, and needed only six days repairs to the hull.

The Japanese had plenty of work to do at pierside. *Akagi* would need 38 days repair, and some of her damage to the hull and engines was going to eventually require a trip home to Japan. *Hiyo* would need only 23 days work, as would *Tosa* when that ship reached Truk. So by the end of March, Halsey had all his carriers intact, save for *Gettysburg* , which would be laid up at Suva for some time. But the Japanese would be missing two carriers, particularly *Junyo* , and need to wait into mid to late April to get back *Akagi* and *Tosa* .

One lesson that both Hara and Nagumo could agree upon was that the toughness of ships like *Taiho* and the battle carrier *Ryujin* made a big difference. Both those two ships took bomb damage, but simply shrugged off the hits and kept operating. It put in their minds that the big fleet carriers they had relied on at the outset of the war were much too fragile, and that they would need to get more ships like *Taiho* if they were to win this war.

This changes everything, thought Yamamoto. The troops on Fiji are now

withering on the vine, two of the best divisions in the Army, and I cannot reinforce there for at least a month, let alone land on Vanua Levu to continue to contest those islands. I will be lucky to cover supply runs to Fiji, Efate, and New Caledonia, and our position on Espiritu Santo at Luganville is now very precarious. The Army will now lord it over me, and berate the navy, saying that their gift of five divisions promised to the South Pacific region is sorely wasted. I suppose they will, at long last, have a point.

Morale will be very low when we return to Rabaul. I must do something to bolster the troops. Perhaps I should arrange a tour of all our bases in the Solomons, for they will most likely become the next front if we cannot hold out in the New Hebrides.

He did not know it, but that idea was a dark shadow that could threaten to end his life. He had died while conducting just such a tour, ambushed by American fighters on the 18th of April, 1943. If time and fate had their way, the Admiral had only three weeks left to live.

Then he received two cryptic messages, right in the midst of all this turmoil. One from Admiral Nagano, as he was surprised to learn that Captain Harada and *Takami* never arrived at Yokohama. Then, not two hours later, the special communications equipment given to him by Harada lit up aboard *Yamato* . It was the very man he needed to speak to, and he would receive some most unusual news....

Meanwhile, Yamamoto would not have to worry about resupplying Efate. The two US Marine regiments, and 1st Marine Para Battalion made short work of the 79th Regiment posted there. The Japanese had landed at Havana Harbor in the north, and when they began to push south they ran right into a Marine regiment. Then, news came of the landings on the east end of the island, where the French 2nd and 4th Tonkin Battalions were watching possible landings sites and the one good airfield near Takara.

Colonel Holmes had landed his battalions at Eton Bay and Pang on the east coast. There they quickly overwhelmed the 2nd Tonkin Battalion, took a small airstrip at Forari, and drove up the coast road through the villages of Lamin and Bong. The Japanese sent one of their three battalions to Takara to stiffen the defense there, but it would not hold against the eventual weight of the entire 6th Regiment.

Colonel Hall's 8th Regiment had the hardest fighting in the west, scaling the heights of Mount Erskine to root out the enemy, and pushing up "Ring

Road” along the coast. The *Coup de Grace* was when 1st Marine Para Battalion re-embarked to do an end around, storming Havana Harbor behind enemy lines and pushing out the HQ of 79th Regiment there. Exhausted, out of supply, the Japanese holed up in any hillside cave they could find, and the Marines had the bitter taste of the cold soup they would eat in many of these future island battles. They had to burn and blast the Japanese infantry from each cave and bunker, but by the 27th of March, Efate had fallen.

The rapid demise of 79th Regiment put the fear in to General Imamura that his 78th Regiment, from the same reserve line division, would not be able to hold Luganville on Espiritu Santo. Now he regretted the ill-fated sortie to try and seize Vanua Levu, realizing he should have argued for a much more conservative approach, posting 3rd Division on Luganville.

It was now too late for such regrets. The Battle off Yasawa had, for at least the next two to three weeks, paralyzed the Japanese Navy’s ability to impede anything the US Navy would undertake. Nimitz had 1st USMC waiting for transports, and he was going to use those troops as soon as he could.

Half a world away, other events would conspire to cause a dramatic shift in the tides of this war. This time it would not be bold and aggressive moves on the ground, but the sheer obstinacy and foolishness of a single man—Ivan Volkov.

Part III

April Fool's Day

“ A fool may be known by six things: anger, without cause; speech, without profit; change, without progress; inquiry, without object; putting trust in a stranger, and mistaking foes for friends.”

— Arab Proverb

Chapter 7

The incident that triggered the disaster in the Caucasus was a small thing when it began, but that was the way of time and fate. After a complaint that the troops of Orenburg were sitting in their bunkers west of Maykop, and doing nothing whatsoever to aid the battle against Russian forces in the Taman region, the 3rd Orenburg Army was finally ordered to attack. Their line was originally strung out along the Pshekha River, about 10 kilometers west of the mining and oil worker town of Belorchensk. Just beyond the river, the last relatively fresh rifle divisions of the Soviet 44th Army were dug into their positions through heavy woodland. The line stretched south through Aspheronk and then down to the coast east of Tuapse, which was still held by the Soviets.

Volkov's troops had been unable to penetrate that line for over a year, and they knew they would not do so now either, but for the sake of putting on a show and silencing German objections, they attacked. Things went predictably bad, with the heavy log bunkers of the Soviets embedded with machineguns and small caliber infantry guns, and surrounded by mines and wire. But then Hansen's 11th Army, veterans of Volgograd, fought their way through the big river city of Krasnodar on the Kuban, and were soon coming up behind the Russians.

One by one, those positions were reduced from their weak side, and by the 18th of March, the line had largely been overwhelmed. Elsewhere, the fight for Novorossiysk continued, with the tough Soviet Marines putting up strong resistance in that city, but it was only a matter of time. Volkov's troops had pushed their line another 20 kilometers west of Belorchensk to make their attack, thinking to occupy an outlying oil field near Saratovskaya that they did not think the Germans knew anything about. They would not have known, save for the map Fedorov had sent the German Abwehr, and Hansen had orders to occupy that field before eventually pushing on to Maykop.

Yet now the German complaints had backfired on them. That field was just beyond another small tributary river, the Psekups, which flowed north to the Kuban, and it was there that the 38th Rifle Division of the Orenburg

Federation finally met up with the Germans they had heard so much about since the outbreak of the war. Ott's 52nd Infantry Korps was operating in that sector, and his 339th and 83rd divisions had just swept through Saratovskaya and were approaching that field. It was on a small hill, marked #69 on the German local area maps, but otherwise not noted as the site of any oil development. Ott had simply been told to secure Hill 69, but when his troops got there, they found it already occupied.

With fighting in the area still mopping up the Soviet bunkers, neither side knew that they were not facing their enemies when the first shots were fired. A forward German patrol was spotted and fired on from the top of Hill 69, with one casualty. It fell back, reported the hill to be enemy occupied, and five minutes later, the Germans put in some well-aimed mortar fire. They were only 50mm rounds, for the Germans had been told not to use heavy caliber weapons if they found the Soviets there. After desultory mortar fire, the Germans were surprised to suddenly receive a radio call in the clear asking them to stop. The hill was occupied by troops from the Federation of Orenburg, it said, and the Division Commander sent orders down to impose a cease fire.

A party was sent forward under the protection of a white flag, and a Lieutenant Schubert, who spoke fluent Russian, negotiated. "We regret the friendly fire incident," he said, but I am told to inform you that our division will now take possession of this hill, and of the village of Saratovskaya to the south. My General asks that you please vacate these positions tonight, and our troops will move in tomorrow morning."

"That will not be possible," said the Kazakh Colonel in charge. "I have orders to hold my position here, and our troops have occupied the entire line of the Psekups River as well."

"But Colonel, we are as yet a very long way from our objective." In this the Lieutenant was revealing something that was best left unsaid.

"And just what would that be?"

"Maykop. Our Korps is to move there to take charge of those facilities, and you will therefore be free to redeploy elsewhere—perhaps on the Volga."

The Colonel folded his arms. "Lieutenant, I believe this may be a question that will be resolved well above our pay grade. It is a matter for the diplomats, and not soldiers to decide. In the interest of continued cooperation between our two respective armies, I must ask you to cancel your planned

occupation of this hill—at least until such time as I receive orders to withdraw. Would that be acceptable?”

“I will take your request to my commanding officer.”

So it began with a small friendly fire incident, that soon became this exchange of words. But the diplomats were very far away. The Lieutenant went back and passed the news on up the chain of command to eventually reach Generalmajor Martin Ronicke of the 339th Division. He, in turn, passed it on to General der Infanterie Eugen Ott, who kicked it to Hansen for confirmation on what he was to do the following morning. Hansen had been told to secure the port of Tuapse, and then advance through Belorchensk to occupy Maykop. His Mountain Korps was to move into the hills south of the oil center, with the German lines anchored on the coast at the small port of Soche. He repeated those orders to Ott.

“But Herr General, shouldn’t we get clearance from the other side before continuing this operation? This could create quite a lot of trouble.”

Hansen had to decide whether to kick the can one more time, all the way to General Manstein’s HQ at Rostov. It was a most unwelcome call, for Manstein had already received orders from OKW for Hansen to do exactly what he had related to Ott, but he was not happy about them.

Irrespective of Manstein’s opinion on the matter, Hitler would remain adamant. His troops had pushed all the way to the Volga, through the Donets Basin and now into the Kuban to the Black Sea Coast. His armies had burned Moscow, leveled Volgograd, and all while Volkov’s troops had failed to mount a single successful offensive anywhere on the front. He now viewed Volkov as a devious do-nothing slackard, who had dangled the promise of oil for the last two years, yet always found some reason or another why it could not yet be delivered.

* * *

When Ribbentrop returned with Volkov’s ultimatum concerning the Kuban, Hitler exploded. “How dare that man dictate territorial claims! If he wanted the Kuban, then he should have sent his troops there to take it. We do in one month what his armies could not accomplish in two years! Now he wants to make certain that we are kept well away from all his precious oil, but this will not be tolerated. German troops liberated the Kuban, and all of

the Taman Peninsula, and it will be German troops that will control Maykop!”

Now Hitler looked at the map, the anger still reddening his face. “What is this river?”

Keitel leaned over the map, squinting. “The Urup.”

“That makes a good north to south boundary, running due south from Armavir and right along the same line as this one to the north. Send a message to Volkov. Tell him that all his troops remaining in the Kuban bend region must withdraw behind that line. They have 48 hours to begin this withdrawal. If movement is not observed, this continued defiance will be met with German steel. I will order Manstein to continue his advance one minute after that deadline. There will be no excuses—no further delays. This is a *Führerbefehl!*”

A 48-hour hold was placed on all operations south of the Don, and Ribbentrop was sent with firm instructions to clarify Germany’s position. He met with Volkov again on the 28th of March in a short and tense session.

“I have returned with our response, and signed by Hitler himself this time, so there will be no doubt as to Germany’s intentions.” He handed Volkov the document, which was a formal declaration that all territory in the Kuban and Taman liberated by German troops would now be formally annexed.

“This is outrageous!” said Volkov. Not only had Hitler rebuffed his demand for the Kuban, but he also made an additional claim on the whole of the Taman Peninsula. But that was not all. As Volkov continued reading, his cheeks reddened and the lines on his forehead deepened.

“What? In addition to this insult concerning the Kuban, you now presume to make a further claim to the Maykop District? This is absolutely absurd! That area, as well as the Taman and Kuban, have been our sovereign territory for decades! What gives you the right to make any claim whatsoever on these regions?”

Ribbentrop folded his hands. “To put it bluntly, Mister General Secretary, might. German arms in the field liberated those first two zones, and Hitler’s Directive concerning that territory will stand.”

“Might makes right, is it?” said Volkov heatedly. “You are aware that the entire Maykop District is presently occupied by the 3rd Army of Orenburg?”

“I am well aware of that, and this document now requests the formal withdrawal of those forces from that district to the line specified in

subparagraph four. The new North-South demarcation line will now begin at the Kuban bend east of Kropotkin, then follow the Kuban down to Armavir, which will be a German occupied city. It then follows the line of the Urup River to its source in the high country to the south, before jogging southwest to the coast just beyond Soche. These are the new permanent boundaries established by the Führer himself.”

Volkov could hardly believe his ears. “Is that so? The Führer himself? Well he might have taken note of the fact that this line is well beyond the present German frontier. You were told earlier, and in no uncertain terms, that all these districts were deemed to be my sovereign territory. You were told that the matter of the Kuban was not a subject for discussion or compromise. Was this related to Hitler directly?”

“It was. He dismissed your claims before dictating the document you now hold.”

“My *God* man—do you realize this means war with the Orenburg Federation? Do you think we will sit by and permit this blatant land grab? We will not! I will issue no such order for the withdrawal of my 3rd Army, and I repeat once again my demand that all German forces now south of the Don should withdraw north of that river immediately.”

“Mister General Secretary.... As this latest directive from the Führer indicates, that is clearly impossible. There will be no withdrawal of German forces, and in fact, our 17th and 11th Armies now have orders to advance to occupy the Maykop District in 48 hours. If your 3rd Army remains on its present positions at that time, they will be forcibly removed.”

“Forcibly removed....” Volkov gave Ribbentrop a derisive look. “You may find that more easily said than done, Herr Ribbentrop. This is an insult of the highest order. You yourself negotiated the accord which has governed the relationship between our two nations since 1940. Yet I can see now that Germany never had any intention of remaining a faithful ally of the Orenburg Federation. So here is my response. Should one shot be fired at my troops on the line west of Maykop, a state of war will exist between the Orenburg Federation and Germany. Understand? Then we will see who’s might makes right. I am, this very hour, ordering all commanders in 1st and 3rd Kazakh Armies, and 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 7th Armies of Orenburg, to the highest state of ready alert. All prior demarcation of border zones and areas of responsibility are herewith abolished. Our forces will, as of this day, stand ready to conduct

any operation of war deemed necessary to enforce our just and right claim upon all these disputed territories. Furthermore—I should have you hauled out of that chair and shot!”

Ribbentrop said nothing, knowing that many bringers of bad news had lost their heads through history. He stood up, the matter clearly concluded, and finally spoke. “Mister General Secretary, it is with great regret that I see the fruits of our previous accord shattered over this disagreement. You may kill the messenger here, but it will do nothing to change what I have been authorized to relate to you. I do, however, request diplomatic immunity, and will guarantee the same to all diplomatic personnel from Orenburg presently within German held territory. They will be granted safe passage to any destination they wish. As for the orders you say you are prepared to deliver to your armies, they are duly noted and will be reported directly to the Führer by me personally upon my return to Berlin. May I now be taken to my plane at the airport?”

“Go!” said Volkov. “And hear one thing more as you do, Ribbentrop. I am not called the Prophet without reason, for I have seen the end of this miserable conflict, and I can tell you now that it will end with the victorious forces of Russia burning and blasting their way into Berlin! Your armies will be driven out of our homeland and utterly destroyed! It was only my own blindness that saw an ally in Germany, for you have had your way on the battlefield up until now, and success has many friends. But do not think, even for one moment, that you can truly enforce anything in this document by force of arms. The end of all Hitler’s ambitions will be only one thing—the complete and utter destruction of the Third Reich!”

In that single discussion, the entire complexion of the war in the east had suddenly changed.

Chapter 8

Manstein sat in his headquarters in Rostov, staring at the map. This must be what they are doing this very moment at OKW, he thought. They are standing there around the map table, with Hitler probably drawing in new front lines as he is given to do these days. In their minds, this is a simple readjustment of the front, but it may not be welcomed or wanted by the forces of Orenburg. I must take the liberty of getting a firm order of confirmation before something happens here that we may come to regret. And yet, I can already hear what Hitler will say. He will be so full of himself that we have finally delivered the Kuban and eliminated the last of Sergei Kirov's forces in this region, that he will simply order the nightmare to begin.

Should I set this order concerning Maykop aside and fly to Berlin immediately? Perhaps I could talk some sense into the Führer. Even as he thought that, he knew it might only be a waste of his time and energy. Once Hitler had his mind made up on something, he was immovable. Yet he had shown uncharacteristic flexibility of late. He finally allowed Model to fight his way out of the Voronezh pocket, and some of those divisions were put to very good use here. His sudden reinstatement of Operation Merkur, and this new attack into Syria and Iraq have produced startling results.

Yet the aim of all those operations is clear, just as it is for *Edelweiss*. He wants the oil, and he is no longer inclined to wait for Volkov to ship it to him. He has been emboldened by our many recent successes on the battlefield, and now he sees the Wehrmacht as invincible. So he will stop at nothing. Halder could not restrain him, nor will Zeitzler, and I do not think he will even listen to my advice on this matter.

Even as he thought this, Manstein knew that he had been quietly preparing for renewed operations into the Caucasus for the last three weeks. Virtually every mobile reserve division in Armeegruppe South had already been sent over the Don through Rostov and into the Kuban. 17th and 18th Panzer Divisions had been pulled out of the Taman, and 17th Army had been moved to the Kuban bend area to occupy all the crossing sites: Kropotkin, Kazanskaya, Labinsk. The 29th Motorized had been sent to back 3rd Panzergrenadiers, and now his elite Grossdeutschland Division was

concentrated at Tikhoretsk.

To restore some mobile reserve behind his long defensive front along the Donets, Manstein pulled 22nd and 23rd Panzer Divisions off the line, replacing them with reserve infantry divisions that had been rehabilitating at Kharkov. Lastly, he told Steiner to free up one of his three remaining SS divisions by making any prudent adjustment to his front that he deemed necessary. The division pulled into reserve was the battle hardened 3rd SS *Totenkopf*.

If this nightmare begins, he thought, then I will fight it north and east of the Kuban River. All those fast motorized divisions will break through and go right for Stavropol, the city the Soviets had called Voroshilovgorad. That move flanks Armavir on the Kuban, seizes a major railhead city, and then from there we simply drive south to Nevinomyssk and cut the main rail line to Groznyy and Baku. That isolates everything Volkov has in the Maykop region, and also opens the road east and south to the real prize fields at Groznyy and Baku, for I have little doubt that I will soon be ordered there. That is all of 700miles as the crow flies from Rostov, farther than our drive to reach this headquarters.

Yet the price for this is war with the Orenburg Federation. Is that oil worth the cost in blood? Our lines run parallel to Volkov's from the Black Sea all the way up to the Don bend where we just made that minor adjustment by pulling back to the Chir. This front is the only point of contact with Orenburg. All the rest of his troops are still facing down the Soviets along the Volga, but will they stay there? What if both sides had all those units free to use against us? Yes... that is the real nightmare behind all of this. Six more Soviet armies, and Volkov's 1st, 4th, and 6th armies could be freed up for operations, and if this happens there can be no operation against Leningrad when the winter finally relents.

He shuddered inwardly, knowing the chaos that would bring to the entire war in the east. I could take the Caucasus if Hitler orders it, he thought. It took us only one month to destroy four Soviet Armies in the Kuban. I would go right through these troops from Kazakhstan and a fast offensive, with sufficient mobile forces, will probably not be stopped anywhere forward of Groznyy. However, if Volkov manages to mend fences with Sergei Kirov.... then we get the nightmare. My troops may very well be in Baku when that happens, but something tells me they will not stay there long....

The outcome of the war was on a razor's edge that was now 48 hours wide. OKW secretly signaled all armies in the field bordering troops of the Orenburg Federation to make ready for offensive operations. Planes and messengers were dispatched to Rostov to brief Manstein directly, where he learned that all his assumptions and misgivings were about to become grim reality. It was too late, he knew, to attempt a direct appeal to Hitler to rescind those orders, and so he bowed to the inevitable, signaling Hörnlein in the Grossdeutschland Division a single pre-arranged Codeword—*Edelweiss II*.

The seconds ticked off, their sound becoming louder and louder with each passing moment, and then, on the 28th of March, 1943, they finally resolved to the booming sound of artillery fire. Germany had now opened yet another new war front in the deep south of the Caucasus. Now the panzers would advance in to the rolling steppes replete with sunflowers, abundant grain only now emerging from beneath the last of winter's morning frost, and of course, the oil. It was a vast new frontier, desolate in many places where the dry balkas would creep through desert salt pans, past the old buried bones of previous generations that were gathered in telltale mounds. Eventually the desert would give way to the marshy shores of the far Caspian Sea, and to the south, the land would rise sharply to the towering heights of Gora Elbrus, King of the Great Caucasus Range.

Volkov's armies had held forth in that region for decades, once holding all the terrain to the line of the River Don, and glaring at the Soviet river forts at Rostov. Sergei Kirov's 1940 offensive had pushed them all the way back to the Kuban and beyond, with Maykop switching hands twice, finally recovered by Volkov's late 1941 counterattack. Yet the German army did not fight like the Soviets of 1940 and 1941. Its infantry hit hard, and was backed by good artillery and Stug battalions. Its panzers moved like steel chariots.

After years of simply minding his static borders with Soviet Russia, Ivan Volkov finally had his war. He would soon come to understand the meaning of the proverb that Ribbentrop had handed him—*Might makes Right*.

One minute after the deadline dictated by the Führer, the guns of *Fredrik de Gross*, *Bismarck* and *Kaiser Wilhelm* opened fire on the Georgian defenders of Tuapse. From the sea, the German 132nd Infantry Division was lifted from the Kerch area for an assault, while the inland side of the port was attacked by the 97th Jaeger Division. Tuapse fell that morning. As did Hill 69 near that small oil field, where the Stug Battalion of Ott's 52nd Korps had

ground its way up the slope. The Orenburg 38th Division was driven back on the flanks by 339th Infantry, and the Germans controlled the area by dusk.

Further north along the Kuban, the German 257th Division pushed over the crossing sites at Labinsk, and a small bridgehead was obtained near Kazanskaya, about 10 kilometers west of Kropotkin. These attacks were meant simply to draw the interest of any reserves the Orenburg 3rd Army might have deeper in the Maykop Zone. The real action was to the northeast, where the 57th Panzer Korps launched its attack through Novo Alexandrovka towards Stavropol. It would fall upon the 3rd Kazakh Army, a much less capable formation than the regular army units in the Maykop District. Three of the five rifle divisions on the line withdrew, and of the two that stood their ground, the Timur Rifles took 40% casualties. Further north, the Amir Guard Division was surrounded by 29th Motorized Division and tried to fight its way out of the trap.

The Germans had only hit the outer shell of Volkov's defense in that sector. Anticipating an attack along the lines of what Manstein had ordered, Volkov sent his 7th Regular Army to Stavropol, and they were now hastily marshaling to arms along an inner defense line that stretched from Stavropol to the north. Other measures saw the massive silver behemoths of the Southern division airships climb high to avoid German fighters, penetrating deep behind German lines. They would then descend to deploy their small airmobile company, with a mission to interdict the vital rail lines that would sustain the German offensive.

One landed north of Tikhoretsk, causing a good bit of damage before the Ersatz Battalion of the Grossdeutschland Division surrounded and destroyed the raiders. A company off the airship *Krasnodar* made good on its name by raiding the rail line northeast of that city. It, too, would meet a sad fate when found by the German 503 Heavy PzJag Battalion that had been moving up the road to the crossing bridgehead at Labinsk. A 3rd Company off the airship *Kungur* struck the auxiliary rail line running from Rostov to Salsk.

While this effort was made to interdict German rail lines, Volkov made good use of his own. The last four rifle divisions of his 7th Army moved all day and night, down along the Volga to Astrakhan and then on down the Caspian shore towards Groznyy. This route would eventually turn west to take them up towards Nevinomyssk and Armavir, where Volkov determined the Germans would come.

So in these initial days, and in spite of his foreknowledge of how the old Operation *Edelweiss* had ended, Volkov chose to backstop his forward lines in the effort to hold as much territory as possible. He was perhaps making a grave mistake in choosing to fight for every mile of ground, rather than adopting the strategy the Russian Armies had used in the old history. There they had made a hasty withdrawal, even uprooting and shipping all the oil rigs and equipment at Maykop. They would delay on the line Pyatigorsk, Mineralne Vody, Georgievsk, and then fall back on the Terek River. (See *Map of Manstein's drive into the Caucasus*)

In the Maykop Zone, it seemed that Volkov's strategy was working. His 3rd Army was fighting hard, and its reserve Mech Corps had come forward to deliver some sharp counterpunches against 17th Army. Beyond Hill 69 with that nascent oil field, there was heavy woodland that had stopped Volkov's troops when defended by stalwart Soviet troops. Now they hoped to use that terrain to their own good advantage, and it was slow going for the infantry attacks, particularly since the Germans had already been fighting for a month.

It was the German bridgehead over the Kuban at Labinsk near Kropotkin that became the major problem. The Germans had used three Pioneer Regiments to get the infantry over the river, and now they had deepened their bridgehead to a depth of 15 kilometers. A brigade from 3rd Army's Mech Corps was committed there to try and hold the line, but it was unable to make much of a difference. The German infantry found the weak points in the enemy line, hammered their way through, and then presented the strong points with the option to either withdraw or be enveloped. Cavalry Divisions used to plug holes were quickly pushed back, and the weight of this attack would soon begin to threaten the strong defensive front west of Belorchensk.

Yet that was not even the main German effort, for Manstein assumed that Maykop would fall like a ripe plum the instant he had swept through Stavropol and began pushing to cut the rail line to the south. The German mobile units had all but destroyed the outer defensive line of 3rd Kazakh Army, and now they were fighting with the regulars of the 7th Army. Grossdeutschland Division came barreling right up the road from the Kuban bend east of Kropotkin, and was already closing on Stavropol. 17th and 18th Panzer Divisions were mopping up shattered enemy stragglers and forging on. 7th Army had been trying to watch the entire front from Stavropol north to the Manych Canal, a distance of 135 Kilometers, and it was still waiting

for its last four divisions.

As the Germans pushed to within 12 kilometers of the main airfield at Stavropol, the order was given to fly off the fighter group there to Elista. The 18 planes took off, heading north east towards the wide empty desert region, but not an hour later the drone of planes could be heard again. The remaining ground service crews rushed to man machineguns, thinking the field was under German attack, but to their great surprise, down came another group of 12 fighters, all Volkov's Yak-1's, built with plans he had provided. The bewildered ground crews soon learned they had just flown in from Armavir.

"The Germans have crossed the Kuban north of the city!" the pilots exclaimed. "They have taken Armavir!"

That sleight of hand had been accomplished when the 24th Bridge Column trundled forward and threw up a pontoon bridge on the night of the 30th of March. The following morning, 170th Infantry crossed, soon to be followed by the 81st. This sudden and unexpected attack had completely compromised the defenders at Kropotkin, and those trying to contain the Labinsk bridgehead, and now Volkov's Generals had to make some very difficult decisions. They had stopped the Germans in that heavy woodland just north of Aspheronsk, the best defensive positions they had west of Belorchensk, but now that whole line had been flanked. The rail line that fed them ran back through Armavir, and the defense of the Labinsk bridgehead was now collapsing. Manstein's plan was working.

Now Volkov had to either order his 3rd Army into a defensive hedgehog around Maykop, or to withdraw. In that instance, he would have to destroy all the well sites at Maykop, and lose all that equipment, for unlike his historical counterparts, he had not moved anything south. Unwilling to lose one of his best oilfield developments in less than a week, he opted instead for a limited withdrawal. The Kuban Rifle Corps and all elements of 3rd Army in the Kuban bend were ordered to fall back towards the rail line from Armavir. The last four divisions of 7th Army had finally arrived at Nevinomyssk, and he sent the 77th up the road to Armavir, with the others deploying north to the defense of Stavropol.

Volkov was making a mistake, and the German Army would soon show him that, but he was obstinate. He should have pulled 3rd Army out immediately, abandoning the Maykop District and establishing a new line on the Urup River, which is just where Hitler had ordered him to go. But his

pride would not allow him to do that. His success in delaying the advance of 17th Army near Belorchensk had made him believe that his regular troops could hold, but the forces advancing on Stavropol were not infantry divisions, they were all fast, well hardened Panzer divisions, and one of them was Grossdeutschland.

It was April Fool's Day. It was now his to learn the lessons that had bedeviled his enemy, Sergei Kirov, since Germany crossed the frontier into the Soviet state in 1941. What Volkov desperately needed now was not the arrival of a few more rifle divisions—he needed another army, and more if he could get it to the Caucasus in time. The only way he was ever going to have that option would be if he could somehow demilitarize the long line of the Volga River. In order to fight the war he never expected to be facing now, he needed peace with Sergei Kirov.

Peace with Siberia, if he could get even that, would give him but one army to dispose of, his 8th still holding out at Omsk. What he really needed now were the troops of his 1st, 2nd and 6th Armies. With those he could stop the Germans now, and force Hitler to come begging for oil again—but they were all on the upper Volga. So he sent messages to Leningrad, offering an extended truce, demilitarization of the Volga, and the possibility of further concessions for peace

With Doctorov still dickering with the Siberians, Volkov sent a new Ambassador, the hard-chinned Viktor Ivanov, who had obtained permission to fly by airship to Leningrad. There was no way Volkov would ever go himself, nor would Kirov come to him, so Ivanov would have to do.

A tall, straight backed man who was a former high ranking official in Volkov's intelligence network, Ivanov promised to get the best possible bargain he could. This time the meeting would not be held in a packinghouse, but in the impressive 580-meter expanse of the General Staff building in Leningrad. Sergei Kirov would receive the Ambassador while sitting at his desk, the broad window behind him offering a view of the Triumphal Arch on the Palace Square, where a full regiment of the Palace Guard were staged on parade, complete with a ceremonial band. Behind Kirov, the steadfast figure of Berzin was standing at attention, a man Ivanov knew only too well, for the two men had been rivals in the intelligence business in the past.

Kirov said nothing as the Ambassador was shown in, nor did he rise to shake the other man's hand. Instead, Berzin merely pointed to the solitary

chair before Kirov's desk, some three meters from the desk itself, indicating that Ivanov should sit. It created the spectacle of power receiving a beggar off the street, which was just what Kirov intended.

Ivanov sat, placing his briefcase on the floor by the chair, and regarded his situation with no small amount of inner displeasure. Theater, he knew. It was all part of the game that would now begin. I am made to sit here in the center of the chess board like that first lonesome pawn after white plays out to King 4. Usually I might meet with just another Ambassador, another pawn like myself, but those are two heavy pieces staring at me from the other side of that desk. How to begin a conversation between two nations that have not had any real diplomatic relations for over twenty years?

Chapter 9

He cleared his throat. “Mister General Secretary... Director...” he also paid his respects to Berzin with a knowing nod of his head.

“You wear the years well, Ivanov,” said Berzin.

“As do you, and that is saying a lot considering how hard those years have been for both our nations.”

“Hard years because we made them so,” said Berzin. “What prompts you to make this request for a meeting? Might it be the little flare-up in the Caucasus?”

“Of course,” said Ivanov, not mincing words. “We’ve just been bitten by the Wolf, and that is something you know of quite well.”

“Oh, yes, we know of it. The citizens of Kiev, and Minsk, and Vilnius, Kharkov, Kirov, Bryansk, Orel, and even Moscow all know so very much about it as well.” He let that sink in, silence being his friend for the moment, and Ivanov was respectful enough to hold his tongue. Then Sergei Kirov spoke for the first time.

“What is it you want, Mister Ambassador? Let me guess—you want what you were unwilling to give us for the last twenty years, and all because you wanted other things we have as well—Volgograd, Rostov, and god only knows what else. You also wanted the Kuban, and to try and get these things, you promised to feed the Wolf. He was the one who would get them for you—things you could never take for yourself—but now it seems that little plan has gone awry.”

“It has.” Again, Ivanov would not quibble. Everything Kirov had just said was true, so why pretend otherwise? “We both made a bargain with the Wolf,” he said. “Now each of us feels his bite.”

“Yes, and while you but lick one small drop of blood from your finger, a tiny wound suffered in but a week of fighting, we have lost an arm and both legs—a million dead men, cities razed and burned, our cropland devastated, factories destroyed, our navy at the bottom of the Black Sea. But still we fight on, and with no help from Orenburg, because you chose to side with our enemy, which is something the Rodina can never forget or forgive. You chose to stand with the Wolf, and stood while it wrested the children of

this nation from their mother's arms and devoured them. Am I being too dramatic here, or have I made my point?"

"Mister General Secretary, I cannot undo what has happened in the past. I can only look to what lies ahead, and so now I will ask you to do the same, as hard as it may be—as unjust as it is. But if we are ever to have peace, then that is what we must both do."

"Peace?" said Kirov looking at Berzin. "That is what you want now, is it? He want's peace, Berzin. Imagine that."

"After over twenty years of civil war," said Berzin.

"Yes," said Kirov, "and even though we have suffered greatly, what has Volkov won in that war? He has taken Samara, but only because it would have cost us too many divisions to prevent that. He has tried to cross the Volga and take the great city named for that river seven times, and only now succeeds because of German assistance. So now he can sit there in the rubble and claim his prize at last. He wanted the Kuban, and look who has it now." Kirov smiled. "Why would I give even the slightest consideration to a truce with Orenburg, let alone anything approaching an alliance?"

"Because you need us," said Ivanov flatly. "Because you need the six Armies that watch us on the Volga."

"Yes," said Kirov, "just as we needed the four we saw die in the Kuban."

"They were doomed the day the Germans reached the Don," said Ivanov. "But consider now what you could do with those other six armies if we were to demilitarize the Volga."

"I am still considering what I could have done with the men we just lost," Kirov said sharply. "Don't think to sit there and tell me this was all the German's doing. Orenburg was complicit the entire duration of that campaign, and all to protect your precious oil fields at Maykop. If Germany had been more accommodating, would we be even having this conversation? I think not."

"Possibly," said Ivanov, "but Germany has betrayed us. That much is clear. Make peace with us now and we will make amends. We will join your struggle, and with the full might of all our forces in the field. The Germans want the oil of the Caucasus, but with the three armies we have on the Volga, we could stop them, and with the six armies you have there you could turn and smash your way all the way to the Dnieper. We would cut off their entire Army Group South and destroy it!"

“My....” Kirov smiled. “Such ambitions. Of course, it would be Soviet and Siberian troops doing most of the fighting again—Soviet tanks, Soviet blood. What could you possibly give us in return for the price we have already paid in this war?”

“To begin that discussion, Samara. We are prepared to pull back our forces there, and turn over the city as a goodwill gesture.”

“Samara.... You would give us one city in return for all the others we’ve lost? Will you give us back Volgograd? I think not, for there is little there to give but complete devastation.”

“As you mention this, yes, I am authorized to offer Volgograd as well. We will also abandon the siege of Chelyabinsk, return Omsk to the control of the Free Siberian State, and open the Trans-Siberian rail connection through that entire region. And then, of course, there is the oil.”

“The oil,” said Kirov. “Yes, the oil. If I am not mistaken, you promised all that to the Third Reich.”

“Those shipping orders have all been cancelled.”

“Because Hitler no longer needs to wait on your paperwork,” said Kirov. “He’s already sitting on Baba Gurgur, and Guderian may soon be starting his push for Basra and Abadan. I wonder which they will take first, Basra or Grozny? Will they go all the way to Baku? He looked at Berzin now, but his intelligence Director merely shrugged.”

“Will they go all the way to Leningrad this year?” said Ivanov, with just the slightest edge of desperation creeping into his tone. “You both know they have already made their plans for that operation. It will be called Downfall, and perhaps that is what it will be—the downfall and destruction of the Soviet Republic. But don’t you see? With Orenburg and the Soviet Union fighting as one, there will be no Operation Downfall against Leningrad this year, if ever. So, you can add that city to the others. Yes, with us, you can save Leningrad from the destruction that the world witnessed at Moscow.”

“No thanks to you and Volkov. Were you cozied up to Beria? Did you know about his little plan to eliminate me and burn the capital to the ground?”

“I knew many things,” said Ivanov, “and one of them was that Beria was a decrepit bastard. While I was not privy to his plans at Moscow, what he did there was not a surprise. That was on your watch, Berzin. It’s a shame you didn’t stop him.”

“Oh I stopped him alright,” said Berzin. “I shot the man dead myself, and to do the same to you would be one small measure of justice for all you have done against the Soviet State in this war.”

“But we are not savages,” said Kirov. “We are, however, patriots, and if the Germans do come for Leningrad, we will fight them to the last breath in the last man. But they will not come, because we will stop them. We’ll attack Bryansk, we’ll attack them at Kursk, we’ll attack them at Moscow—in every place they have so rudely trodden upon the sacred soil of the Rodina. And we will prevail—with or without the Orenburg Federation. So you can keep the shattered ruins of Volgograd, and keep Samara as well. We’ll take it back when I get around to that sector, and when we come for it, there will be nothing you can do to stop us. So enjoy your little squabble with the Führer. You can go back and tell Volkov that there will be no peace—not until Soviet troops march triumphantly through the heart of Orenburg itself, and that time may not be as far off as you may think.”

“This is foolish!” said Ivanov. “You *need* us—you need the full might of the nation Russia was before the revolution to have even the slightest chance of defeating the Germans, and you know this. Your pride in this will be the ruin of your Soviet State! Don’t you realize that Volkov could turn about tomorrow and accede to all of Hitler’s demands? We could mend fences there again quite easily, and then where will you be? You will be back in the same cold borscht! Germany will win this war, and then what will become of the Rodina you speak of with such fervent adulation? It will become nothing more than a slave state, your people, your cities, all of it gone to the service of the Third Reich.”

“Mister Ambassador...” Kirov fixed Ivanov with a dark and level stare. “There is a pistol in my desk drawer. It is Berzin’s pistol, the very same one he used to kill Beria. Your claim to innocence concerning that matter was really quite preposterous, for our intelligence is very good. We know damn well that you were involved in that plot, and you are one of the very few, beyond Volkov himself, that survived when I ordered Red Rain in retribution.”

Kirov opened his drawer and took out that pistol, slowly handing it to Berzin, who was still right at his side. “Grishin,” he said quietly. “I believe we have some unfinished business.”

“What?” said Ivanov. “You threaten to kill me? I am here under a cloak

of diplomatic—”

Berzin leveled the pistol and fired.

Kirov looked at Berzin, a wry smile on his face. “What did we just do here, Grishin?”

“We have killed Ivonov, the last of Beria’s rats to escape the trap.”

“Yes, we have,” said Kirov. “It seems I was mistaken about us not being savages.”

“Indeed, sir. A pity. Will there be peace with Orenburg? That would make Zhukov’s work a good deal easier.”

“In time,” said Kirov. “All things in good time.”

Outside in the wide stone courtyard. And as if in answer to the single pistol shot fired by Berzin, a rifle company fired three crisp volleys in salute. Hundreds of miles away, new soviet armies, fresh and fat after the long winter, were slowly advancing to take up positions in the Serafimovich Bridgehead....

* * *

When Volkov received the package from Leningrad containing Ivanov’s head, he was outraged. In an explosion of temper that would have made even Hitler blush, he ravaged the interior of an office within his Staff Command Headquarters on the Ural River. Finally he relented, sitting down, his breath controlled, pulse returning to normal. No one ever dared to approach him in these fearsome moments of rage, but like a volatile chemical, they burned out quickly. His mined cooled to an icy calm, eyes hard as he stared out the broken window at the dramatic stone arch that marked the gateway from Europe to Asia. Then he summoned his Adjutant.

The man stepped gingerly into the room, thinking he would soon become one of the many victims of Volkov’s rage. The shattered glass on the tiled floor, and broken chairs were testimony enough to his overlord’s mood. Yet when he heard Volkov speak, he knew the low, dangerous tone in his voice well enough. The General Secretary had become a man again, albeit a very dangerous one, and he was thinking.

“You have the latest report from the Kuban?”

“Yes sir.”

“Let me hear it.”

Now the Adjutant passed another moment of alarm, for he would be the bringer of bad news, but he forged on. "Sir, the line in the south remains stable, though the enemy has brought up three fresh divisions that were fighting on the coast at Tuapse, and has now relieved their Mountain Corps."

"Where was it redeployed?"

"In to the high country, near Chernigovskiy."

Volkov nodded, knowing the Germans now wanted to use those troops to try and flank the lower portion of his line through those mountains. "Belorchensk?" he asked next.

"The city is secure. The German 52nd Corps has paused along the River Pshish. However, their 4th Corps has reached Dondukov on the rail line to Armavir, and fresh troops have come down from Kropotkin to increase pressure on that city."

"Dondukov?"

"No sir—Armavir. The defense in that sector has been flanked to the southwest near Stanitsya, though that is only a small reconnaissance. But the headquarters of 3rd Kazakh Army at Urupskiy has reported some alarming news."

"Well, give it to me man, don't worry about your head. The furniture died here today, but you may continue to live."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir. But General Gorsov of the 3rd Kazakh reports there are German tanks approaching Urupskiy from the northeast. 18th Panzer Division from their markings. As he has no reserve at hand, he requests permission to withdraw towards Nevinomyssk."

"Damn!" Volkov swore, giving his Adjutant a start. "They must have crossed the Kuban. What about those two divisions of the 7th Army I sent to hold that north bank?"

"Sir, they were engaged with that very same Panzer Division, but the Germans broke off that attack four hours ago."

"And they cross the damn river," said Volkov. "They move like quicksilver! Armavir cannot be held, which means 3rd Army's supply line is cut, and the entire position around Maykop is useless...."

Volkov simmered with that for some time. 3rd Army was being enfiladed from the east at Armavir, and soon the German mountain troops would attempt another flanking maneuver to the south. He briefly passed through the option of sending a message through the German lines to request a cease

fire. He might get far better treatment from his former ally than he had just seen meted out by his fellow Russians in Leningrad.

But then again, they don't see us as Russians, do they? We are nothing more than Kazakh scum to them. Sergei Kirov sits there in the General Staff building overlooking the courtyard where the Tsar's men would promenade. Now he is the new Tsar, but not here, and not in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan. Would Hitler entertain further negotiations at this late hour? No, not while his armies are still making steady progress like this. We've kept them out of Belorchensk and Maykop, but that 11th Army infantry has been fighting for a long month, and is most likely tired and understrength.

That river crossing near Urupskiy has unhinged everything. Now I must either leave 3rd Army there to die, or try to save it. Maykop is lost, but Hitler won't have it. I'll see it burn first. Maykop is lost, but 3rd Army might still live, and I might still be able to keep Groznyy.

When he spoke again, his voice was dark and serious. "Hitler wants my oil, does he? Get a message to fat Gorsov and tell him to take everything he has to Nevinomyssk and hold that place. Then signal General Timalov with 3rd Army. He is to withdraw immediately, across the Urup River and along the road to Cherkessk. Inform him of that river crossing operation and see if he can stop it. Then I want all the rigs, wellheads, pipeline and drilling equipment at Maykop completely demolished. Understand? He is to burn the wellheads."

He who controls a thing, can destroy a thing, thought Volkov. So before control of Maykop slips from my hands, I will destroy it. The only way I can get Hitler to negotiate again is if I can deny him what he wants. I can sacrifice Maykop, but perhaps I can stop them and save the rest. I was foolish to deploy forward as I did. I should have done what the Russians did in the real history, and so now I learn a hard lesson. This German Army is not to be underestimated.

3rd Army was a large formation, following the model for all regular armies of Orenburg. While typical Soviet Armies might have five to seven divisions, those of Orenburg had nine regular rifle divisions, a mech corps consisting of three brigades, an armored car regiment, engineers and artillery. All those divisions would now begin a general retreat, which could be quite messy. They would also be joined by the three remaining rifle divisions in the Kuban Rifle Corps, and Gorlov's remnants of the 3rd Kazakh army that had

been on this side of the Kuban. So now the mad rush was on, all his troops stampeding towards the line of the Urup River, and it burned his neck to think he could have withdrawn them there five days earlier in good order, and with his relations with Germany still intact... But without the Kuban; without the Taman Peninsula; without Maykop. Hitler would still take them all now, he knew, which was the hardest blow.

Sergei Kirov would not make peace, but Volkov might still wheedle a deal with the Siberians. They might give him a cease fire for Omsk, and then perhaps he could take four divisions from the 8th Army and send them to Astrakhan. That, too, was a matter of some concern to him, for Astrakhan was the big supply and depot center for all his operations on the Volga, and the gateway to the Tengiz and Kashagan oil fields. Where would this fast moving German mobile force go next? He had to be ready to oppose any thrust it might make.

Think, Volkov! He chided himself. "What do I need, and what can I live without? I need Groznyy and Baku, that much is certain. I desperately need Astrakhan. As for Volgograd, as much as it was a point of pride to take that place, and a long held objective, the city is actually worthless at the moment, a pile of rubble. So I no longer need Volgograd, and if I abandon it, then I can simply fall back on my original fortification lines east of Beketova. 2nd Kazakh can hold that, along with the Turkomen Corps. Then I can pull all of 2nd Army out of the Don Bend. Kirov's troops won't bother me, because they still have the Germans to worry about. So off we go...

"That is not all," he said to the Adjutant, and slowly dictated his orders. "Send to Rybolkin and the 2nd Army. The bridges at Kalach, Nizhne Chirskaya and Golubinskaya are to be destroyed. His army is to move east of the Volga to the rail depots at Volkovskiy. All divisions in the Turkomen Corps will move to positions along the old fortification line south of Beketovo. There will be no changes to 5th Army dispositions, but all airfields and rail stations west of the Volga should be demolished and mined. This withdrawal should be covered by massed volley fire of all artillery, including all the Volga River forts."

That last bit was just to stick a thumb in Sergei Kirov's eye as he broke the long held clinch the two of them had been in over Volgograd. He was giving up everything he had fought for and gained since the outbreak of the war, and all in the hope that he might still keep everything he possessed

before this conflict started. Whether the Siberians made peace or not, he would trade the rubble of Volgograd for the 2nd Army of Orenburg, and bring it to the Caucasus.

The 1st of April was a very long day.

Part IV

The Hammer

“It’s better to be the hammer than the anvil.”

— Emily Dickinson

*See Maps of “Operation Hammer” 1 thru 3
Available on the book page for Ironfall at Writingshop.ws*

Chapter 10

The events in the Middle East had already had a dramatic effect on the campaign in Algeria and Tunisia. With O'Connor stripped of both 7th and 1st Armored Divisions, as well as 50th Northumbrian Division, his ability to launch an attack capable of pushing through the multi-lined defenses of the Mareth position was neutralized. In effect, his presence at Mareth served only to compel the Germans to deploy several divisions of their own there to keep the back door to Tunisia firmly closed. To do this the Germans had to leave their 90th and 164th Light Divisions dug in on that line, backed by three Italian Divisions.

While Patton had stopped Operation *Sturmflut* with his brilliantly aggressive moves, he soon found himself suffering from the eventual dispersion of his forces. His six divisions were now reorganized into two operational corps. Patton had the 34th, and 1st Infantry Divisions, and 2nd Armored, and he kept his promise to Truscott, giving him command of 3rd and 9th Infantry, and the 1st Armored Division.

Truscott now would hold the center of the American position, which stretched from the vicinity of Souk Ahras, east through the highland country to Le Kef, and then touched Patton's Corps around Bouz Aziz. The fiery commanding General had taken that place with CCA of his 2nd Armored Division, pronouncing it the gateway to Highway 4 to Tunis. Yet Patton had been unable to push on up that highway with just that single combat command at his disposal. The road there led through high mountains, and he would need infantry, which was well dispersed.

Patton's lines stretched down west of the mountain passes on the Western Dorsal leading to Sibiba, Sbeitla and Kasserine, which were all still in German hands. CCA of 2nd Armored was still facing off against the bulk of 21st Panzer Division at Kasserine Pass, the 1st Infantry Division was deployed to screen and defend Tebessa, and the 34th was still in its defensive position well south astride the road leading to Ghafsa.

The American Army was now like a great wave that had rolled eastward, expanding in a wide crest as it went, until all its divisions were in line

abreast, with no real reserve in hand to allow for a concerted offensive anywhere. The arrival of the 337th Division had done much to allow the Germans to stabilize their line in the center, and now Kesselring felt that he could finally hold.

As for Montgomery, he still had his 6th and 10th Armored Divisions trying to take Souk Ahras, but was foiled by the stubborn defense of the Hermann Goring Division and most of 10th Panzer. On the coast, he had forced the Germans to give up the port of Bone, but they had done so only to shorten their lines and consolidate their defense. Kesselring's boast concerning Montgomery was true. Anything the British general could claim as a conquest had been given to him by the Germans. Try as he might, Monty could not make any further progress either.

Then the rains of late February and early March came in one deluge after another, and the roads became ribbons of mud. It was a stalemate, which was exactly what Kesselring had been trying to achieve, like a skillful chess player, knowing he could not beat his opponent, but playing for the draw. After of few weeks of inconsequential probing attacks and artillery duels along the line, a meeting was called by Eisenhower to assess the situation and see what could be done to get the offensives rolling again. Patton, Bradley and Montgomery were in attendance, and for the first time Patton had to voice the same complaint that had been on the lips of the Germans for so long.

"The front is now so broad that we've had to keep both armored divisions right on the line. I've got no Sunday Punch I can throw—nothing in reserve."

"In one sense," said Eisenhower, "that has also forced the Germans to spread out their panzer forces on defense as well. We know what they can do if they concentrate two or three of those divisions on the attack. Now it looks as though the Germans are playing defense."

"And they're damn good at it," said Bradley. "Ike, we could use another infantry division or two. Then we could pull the two armored divisions off the line, and have something substantial in hand to pick one point on the German front and punch right through."

"My thoughts exactly," said Patton.

"Well gentlemen, you may just get your wish," said Ike. "We've been training up Troy Middleton's outfit for the Sicily operation, but if we don't shake things loose here, that will never happen. So I've got authorization to

move the 45th Infantry here to Algeria now, and I can also get you Matt Ridgeway's 82nd."

"An Airborne Division?" said Patton, with a dubious look on his face.

"It was training for Sicily as well," said Eisenhower, so we got this crazy idea. Montgomery wanted that port at Bone, and it didn't look like the Germans would give the place up. Well, he sent in two Commando units for an end around on the coast, and it shook things up. The Germans gave up the port and fell back to consolidate their lines. So we got to thinking about Ridgeway. We've got the transports, and we can protect them. What do you two think about an operation where we plop down the 82nd behind enemy lines—the whole damn division?"

There was a light in Patton's eyes. "I like it, Ike," he said quickly. It's audacious, and I've always said that audacity was good for a first down if you put some guts behind it. You give me the 45th and I can pull the whole of 2nd Armored back. The 82nd will be out there like a good wide receiver, and then I'll run the damn football with Hell on Wheels—right up the middle. You pick the spot, and I'll gain ground for you. I'll get you that touchdown."

"Good enough," said Eisenhower. "Let me show you what we have in mind." He walked over to the map. "I'm sending in the 45th to Truscott so he can take over this segment of the line here, relieving all of 1st Armored and also CCB of 2nd Armored. George, both those divisions go back to you again, and I want you to move down here. There's a secondary road through this narrow mountain spur northeast of Kasserine. That's your axis of attack for 2nd Armored. Then I want Old Ironsides up here on this road to Sbeitla, which is right where we want to drop Ridgeway and the 82nd. He'll cut the main road and rail to Kasserine, and if you can punch through these mountain passes quick enough, we'll put both their 15th and 7th Panzers out of a job. What do you think?"

"It'll be dangerous," said Bradley. "We'll have to make a night drop, and we'll need clear weather. What do you think, George?"

"Magnificent. I wish I had thought of it. Then again, if I had Ridgeway and Middleton last month I might already be in Sbeitla, and then some."

"I'm sure you would," said Eisenhower. "The way we figure this is that if we can grab Sbeitla, the Germans will have to give up Kasserine, Thelepte, and probably Ghafsa right along with them. From Sbeitla, we could go right up this road towards the pass at Faïd to threaten Sfax, or take Highway 3

northeast towards Kairouin and Sousse. We could cut the German position right in two.”

“Will we have enough to do the job?” asked Bradley.

“We’ll get a little help from the British. They’ll bring in an independent infantry brigade to relieve our 3rd Infantry on Monty’s right flank and allow Eddy to move it towards Le Kef. We figure that Truscott could then pose a credible threat in that sector, which will force the Germans to keep it well defended. That’s when we drop the 82nd and then you get rolling, General Patton. We want to kick this thing off by Saint Patty’s Day, so I’ll be moving a lot of new units in. We’re building out this command as 7th Army, and it’s all yours George. I can also give you two more Ranger Battalions, two independent tank battalions, a tank destroyer battalion and engineers, so you’ll have something in the cookie jar. And we’ll beef up the artillery with seven more battalions at the Army level. That’ll give you some clout for that breakthrough operation.”

Patton was elated. Just when things looked to be slowing down in the mud and rain, the promise of all these reinforcements, and an operation sanctioned by Eisenhower himself, buoyed his spirits. “Ike,” he said, “you’re a man after my own heart. But I’d like to make a little request if I might. You say there’s a couple armored battalions at the Army level? Well I’d like to mate them up with some armored infantry, and throw in some of that artillery to boot. That would create another independent combat command—a nice little running back that I can push through any hole we find in the enemy line, and I know exactly who I want for it—Creighton Abrams. If there any man who loves the armor like I do, its old Colonel Abe.”

“Abrams? Isn’t he with 4th Armored in the UK?”

“A damn waste of a good officer if he is. Let someone else do the training. I need men like Abrams here on the battlefield. Now, we’re rooting out the slackards. I don’t know what you decided to do with Fredendall, but now we’ve got our money on some really good numbers. Truscott is top notch and so is Harmon. You get me that infantry and Creighton Abrams, and I’ve got my A Team ready to roll. We’ll get to Sbeitla, and all the way to Faïd Pass.”

“Alright, George,” said Eisenhower, “I’ll see if I can pull some strings.”

Patton would take the old “Blade Force” units that he had been using as a kind of armored cavalry unit, and then move in those two medium armored

battalions, the 70th and 753rd. Then all he needed was some mechanized infantry, and Eisenhower would wheedle away the 10th Armored Infantry from 4th Armored in the UK and have them shipped over while the army waited out the rains. Patton found an engineer battalion, and he already had three new armored artillery battalions at the Army level with the newly arriving 5th Armored Artillery Group. When he rolled all that together, he had his new Combat Command, and Creighton Abrams was going to be the quarterback.

The only concern Eisenhower still expressed was whether the mechanized forces could get through those narrow mountain passes all along the Western Dorsal. "We've got good aerial photography of the whole area," he said. "Job one is to get to Sibiba with a two-pronged attack. I want you to hit them from the north along this road through Rohia, and then hammer at them from the west on the road to Thala. Once we get Sibiba, a detachment can continue down Route 71 towards Sbeitla, and that will put them behind any German defense of Kasserine Pass. The main effort, however, will be to continue east, but that's where I get worried."

"Looks like some tough country that way," said Bradley.

"It is. This big mountain spur here is impassible to armor, but there is a gap you can use between Ket el Amar and El Bechita." He fingered the area on the map. "Now this northern spur here, Djebel Abiod, can be crossed by infantry if need be. The Hathob River flows north around that, and there are some tracks that could be passable to light armor."

"Sounds like we'll need infantry there," said Patton. "I know I've robbed Truscott of 1st Armored again, but maybe I could talk him out of an RCT of the 45th Infantry. They could sweep that area and find routes for the armor."

"I'll see about that," said Ike. "But getting that gap at El Amar will be the main thing. Once you get through there to El Bechita, you've got good open ground to the passes at Faïd. There are two of them. See this long narrow ridge running north and south? This pass at the north end is called Sidi Faïd. That's the rail gap to Sousse. The one down south here is Faïd proper, on the main road to Sfax."

"Won't we want Fondouk?" said Patton.

"If you can take that, all the better," said Eisenhower. "Once we get through the Western Dorsal, we'll have another meeting to discuss where we make our main thrust." He looked directly at Patton when he said this. "And

George, before you get to running off into the blue, I want to know about it.”

“Well hell,” said Patton. “Once you complete a good long pass, you don’t have your receiver stop and ask which way he ought to go. If we get to either port it’s a touchdown.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but you stay near a radio just the same.”

“Fair enough, Ike.”

“Alright, there’s a lot more that goes into this. We’re dredging the port at Philippeville so it can receive liberty ships there, and opening up Bone to receive supplies and equipment. Tank replacements for our forces will come in through Philippeville and load onto transporters to move to Tebessa. GQ thinks we can move over 90,000 tons through Philippeville this month. Beyond that, we’ve received a lot more rolling stock for the rail lines. We can move 40 trains per day now through Constantine, with 10,000 tons each. We also just received 4,500 new trucks through Casablanca and Oran, and we’ll get another 2000 per month from this point forward. That should keep you rolling, gentlemen, so have at ‘em.”

It was a logistical base that would have had the Germans drooling. They barely had that many trucks scattered through all their divisions, and their use of the rail lines remained limited to available rolling stock, which was scant. This tremendous logistical advantage would be the real hammer that would smash the German defense in Tunisia, not Patton’s tanks, no matter how gallant and aggressive they were. The Allies could use even a minor port like Philippeville and move 90,000 tons through it, and this was vastly augmented by shipments to Oran and Algiers. By contrast, in the month of February, the Germans received no more than 25,000 tons through the much larger ports of Bizerte and Tunis, a shortfall of 55,000 tons.

“One more thing,” said Bradley. “Terry Allen’s 1st Infantry Division fights like hell when they get at the Germans, but otherwise they run around like drunken schoolboys. I’ve had complaints from every Mayor in Algeria, and when that division moved through Tebessa, they practically razed the whole damn city. Discipline starts at the top...” Bradley let that hang there, and Patton’s eyes narrowed with this, for he was fond of Allen’s fighting spirit, and Bradley hadn’t run this one by him before voicing it like this, right before Eisenhower.

“You’re asking me to replace Allen?” said Ike.

“I think we ought to take a look at that,” said Bradley.

“Now hold on here, Brad, we never discussed this.” Patton was quick into the ring on this one. “Allen’s got the kind of fire in the belly I need out here. He did a damn good job holding the line at Kasserine and Tebessa.”

“Right, and then they tore the place apart.”

“Come on Brad, it wasn’t that bad. Hell, I’ll personally see that anyone who suffered damage unrelated to combat gets full restitution. You’ve got to remember that fight was against Rommel, and two good Panzer Divisions.”

“Well those troops have more than fire in the belly,” said Bradley. “They’ll sniff out a bottle of whiskey better than a bloodhound could, and half the time they just run amok. I know Allen’s as good as they come, but he doesn’t train or drill those troops any more, and frankly, the whole damn division has a big fat chip on its shoulder.”

“Who would you want to replace Allen?” asked Eisenhower.

“What about Huebner? He’s a straight shooter, and a damn good soldier too.”

“George?” Eisenhower looked at Patton, always the diplomat.

“Ike, I think we should stay with Allen. I know that division has been a little loose, but when it counts, I can rely on those sons-of-bitches to get the job done. That’s all that matters. Now I’m not one to tolerate loose discipline, but I’ll admit I’ve given the 1st Infantry a lot of latitude. Tell you what.... I can put on my war paint and scowl with the best of them. What if I hash this out with Allen after this operation? You don’t whip a dog before you put him into a fight. Once this settles down, you give me a week or two and I’ll tighten things up with the Big Red 1. This isn’t the time to relieve a man like Allen, not on the eve of battle. What do you say, Brad?”

“George, you *can* scowl with the best of them, and if you think you can straighten that bunch out, be my guest. But if we do get to Tunis and Bizerte anytime soon, I don’t want 1st Infantry anywhere near them. I’d like to see both cities still standing when we get ready for the jump to Sicily.”

“Leave it to me,” said Patton, and Eisenhower deferred any change of command pending the outcome of this new operation. Patton was correct—changing the man at the top just before a fight wasn’t the best idea, but he privately took Bradley aside and told him he would consider what he asked.

No one knew it at the time, but this little affair was another small point of divergence, and one that would matter. Allen was supposed to go back to the

States, get his face on the cover of Time Magazine in August of 1943, and then take command of the Fighting Timberwolves—the 104th Infantry, the following year. That unit would become one of the toughest and hardest fighting US divisions of the war. Allen would make sure they lived up to their motto: “Nothing can stop the Timberwolves!”

In this history, he would never meet them.

Chapter 11

The plan Eisenhower had laid out was unorthodox and daring, though it was not where the Americans had hoped to attack in March. Their original plan had been to secure Ghafsa, El Guettar, and then to demonstrate to threaten Maknassay further east. It was Ryder's meeting engagement with Rommel's 15th Panzer Division that had unhinged plans on both sides. After that sharp check, Ryder's 34th Infantry Division had taken up defensive positions and dug in, its advance on Ghafsa clearly not possible. But this had compelled Rommel to leave most of 15th Panzer there, while the rest of the division had to move south through Gafsa to stop the advance of the French.

With 7th Panzer near Thelepte, and most of 21st Panzer at Kasserine, those three divisions had formed a solid defense against any move of the kind initially anticipated. Stopped at Kasserine, it was Patton's bold shift to the northeast in the effort to reach Bou Aziz that had set up the opportunity now to be pursued in Operation Hammer. That move had forced the Germans to cover all the passes through the Western Dorsal, and this task had fallen to the 21st Panzer Division while both 7th and 15th Panzers still remained to the south. None of those passes were strongly held, except Kasserine.

The main body of 21st Panzer remained at Kasserine Pass—four Panzergrenadier battalions and four companies of panzers. The closest pass was the Douleb Gap, about 25 kilometers NE of that force, manned by a company of pioneers and one panzer company. A similar force held further northeast at Sibiba, and the division recon and AT battalions held at Rohia, the pass closest to Bou Aziz. Once reconnaissance confirmed the passes were lightly held, Eisenhower saw his opportunity.

The lightning strike by the 82nd Airborne was debated by Eisenhower's staff, and General Mark Clark. Some thought the risk too high, for the Germans still had potent fighter defenses, but the plan to surge Allied fighter support was laid in, and Eisenhower eventually opted to take the risk.

To prepare for the attack, the 34th Infantry was finally ordered to pull back and assume defensive positions screening Tebessa. This allowed Terry Allen, chastened by Patton, to deploy his 1st Division on the ridgeline opposite the Germans holding Kasserine. Allen was expected to attack that

pass as part of the plan, with 1st Armored on the secondary road from Thala to the north, and Harmon's 2nd Armored striking from Bou Aziz through the pass at Rohia.

All the American armor had been in reserve, largely deployed on the road that Patton had used to race for Bou Aziz, and all these passes connected to it. The element of surprise could therefore be maintained until the night of the attack, when the armor would leave their reserve positions and begin to move to the passes. The transports were positioned at airfields very close to the front, Tebessa, Les Bains, Le Kouf, each to embark one regiment of the 82nd. All the artillery would be lifted from further back at El Boughi. In all there would be 9 battalions of paras dropped, with one engineer battalion and two artillery battalions.

It would be the largest Allies airborne operation to date, a brief hop of no more than 100 kilometers from the nearest airfield at Tebessa, and the gamble would pay off handsomely. A few German fighters at the airfield east of Kasserine got up to cause a few problems, but they were quickly pounced on by the thick roving bands of Allied fighters. Ridgeway's men largely got through intact, though three transports were shot down. Yet by dawn that day, the German supply hub at Sbeitla was completely surrounded by the 82nd Airborne Division. The only question now was whether Patton could get to them before the Germans could.

But the new man on the scene, Walther Nehring, was shocked by the reports coming in that morning. The first was a frantic radio call saying that there were American troops at Sbeitla. He assumed it was a commando raid, until the full scale of the attack was reported twenty minutes later. Then, when von Bismarck reported that all the passes on the Western Dorsal were under heavy attack, the situation became clear, and very disconcerting. Von Bismarck's entire division was engaged, but there was no action at all in front of Funck's 7th Panzer Division near Thelepte. So he immediately called to order a *kampfgruppe* assembled and sent to Sbeitla at once.

That would send a motorcycle recon battalion, one company of panzers down the road, through Kasserine and on to the airfield 15 kilometers northeast. There they ran into 3/509 Para battalion, which had landed and stormed that field in the predawn hours, shooting up several Stukas before the remaining planes could take off. A battery of SPG artillery and 1st Battalion of the 6th Panzergrenadiers was right behind those lead elements, and

Ridgeway's morning would start to heat up very soon.

Yet that move was nothing more and an expedient measure, the least Nehring could do given the shock and surprise of this attack. He was going to need something more than a *kampfgruppe*, and now the withdrawal of the US 34th Division would figure heavily in the outcome of this battle. It basically left 15th Panzer free in the south, and Nehring had already ordered it north the previous day, as the Italians had sent up the Littorio Division to keep an eye on the French southwest of Ghafsa.

One look at the map told the division commander, Heinz von Randow, what the Americans were planning. Randow, like von Bismarck in the 21st Panzer, was living a charmed life. Both men had lost their lives to land mines by this time in the war, but here, they were both still alive and well. Now he saw that he could take the main road through Kasserine, following the KG sent earlier, but instead, he shifted his division onto a secondary road that led due east from Thelepte. It would swing around a ragged mountain ridge and then approach Sbeitla from due south. That was where he wanted to make his counterattack.

No one had ordered him to do this, but the move was a typical example of how experienced German officers would exercise their own initiative and react with lightning quick reflexes in a crisis. If the Americans took the considerable risk of making this parachute attack on Sbeitla, then it was clear to Randow what they wanted to do. From that town, Highway 13 led directly to Faid Pass, continuing on to the coast at Sfax. Randow therefore wanted to interpose his division east of Sbeitla, astride that road, and also controlling the key junction at Kern's Cross, where Highway 3 crossed Highway 13.

The American Army had built up like water behind a great dam, he thought. Those mountain passes through the Western Dorsal are the spillways, and if that dam breaks, then they can sweep right down the valley into the coastal plain. It is an audacious plan, one that Rommel would appreciate if he were here, and I know exactly how he would move to stop it. Everything will rest on my division at the outset. I must establish a good blocking position, and then get after those paratroopers. So I will send the Pioneers and a battalion of infantry down this road and up through Kern's Cross to cover the easternmost flank. Von Funck is already moving up through Kasserine. It's as good a plan as we can devise for now, but we will have to watch our left, particularly at Ghafsa.

One of the spillways had collapsed. The weight of Harmon's 2nd Armored Division, had broken through the defense at Rohia, and now a torrent of mechanized wrath was flowing down the narrow river valley of the Hathob towards Sibiba. There the river would run almost due east and up over an arcing series of highland ridges again, a secondary levee that could become a very difficult obstacle. There was but one narrow gap in that wall of stony hills, at a place called Ket el Amar, which was being defended by the Recon Battalion of 21st Panzer.

The Americans brought up engineers to cross the river to the southern bank, and began to organize an attack with a company of engineers, armored cav backed by Shermans. At the same time, the 157th RCT had found a track leading east north of the river where it flowed above the easternmost portion of the ridgeline, Jebel Abiod. It would be tough going, through that narrow river gorge flanked by the ridge to the south, and heavy woodland to the north, but if they could get east that way, they would eventually reach Highway 3 where it ran southwest from Fondouk towards Sbeitla. They would be joined by 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions under Colonel Darby, the best scouts they might have.

The torrent pressed relentlessly on when Sibiba fell and the scant German defense there retreated south. CCA of 1st Armored pursued them aggressively, while CCB kept hammering its way through the Douleb Gap. Tanks would push through there, hastening along the narrow road that led down onto the valley floor. They would arrive just in time to support the hard pressed men of the 82nd Airborne, now under attack by a KG from 7th Panzer from the west, and Randow's 15th Panzer from the south.

The plan was working.

By the 17th of March, the Americans had all the passes through the Western Dorsal except Kasserine, moving south and east, engaging any Germans they encountered, and flowing around these boulders in the flood, hell bent for Patton's stated objecting—Highway 3. When the General received news that 2/82nd Recon had reached the gap at Ket el Amar, he could smell the victory he was after here, and ordered the special reserve Combat Command under Abrams to follow 2nd Armored.

Von Bismarck was at the town of Kasserine when he learned the Americans were now well behind his position at the pass as they pushed down from the Douleb Gap and Sibiba. The KG that von Funck had sent was

already dueling with tanks that were now moving to support the American paratroopers. Reports were scattered and sometimes fragmented, but a shot up Luftwaffe fighter soon landed at the airfield at Thelepte, reporting to von Funck there, and he was quickly on the phone to von Bismarck.

“My front is stable,” he said “but the Luftwaffe says there is a massive enemy column up at Ket el Amar! It stretches all the way back to Bou Aziz! Can you stop it?”

“Stop it?” said von Bismarck. “Most of my division is at Kasserine Pass. I’ve only got the recon battalion left up that far north, and it’s trying to fight its way out of that gap even now.”

“Look... This is serious,” said von Funck. “Randow is moving his division up south of Sbeitla. He’s trying to set up a defense east of that town, and I think that is where we need to be now. Unfortunately, that damn American Airborne Division is blocking your retreat through Sbeitla. If you try to take the direct route, you’ll be fighting on three sides the whole way. I think you should fall back through Kasserine, and then come south to Thelepte. We can then follow the route Randow used and take the secondary road east through Bir el Hafey on Highway 3. And we have to move fast! If Randow can’t deal with the situation, the American’s will push all the way to Faid Pass.”

“Does Nehring know about this?”

“He must know something, but I only just learned of that big enemy column a moment ago, and right from the Luftwaffe pilot who flew that recon mission. I’ll see if I can get to Nehring and inform him, but we had better move now. I’ll need to recall my Kampfgruppe, so move quickly.”

“This is a big move... It will mean we give everything up west of Sbeitla. What about the Italians?”

“I’m ordering them to Ghafsa.”

“You are ordering them? What about Nehring?”

“I’ll confirm all this with him soon enough. Just get moving!”

Von Funck hung up the line, realizing that he was taking a risk by precipitating this general retreat, but he instinctively knew that he could no longer hold where he was, airfields or no airfields. This was time to maneuver, not sit on objectives. He pulled on his gloves, grabbed his map satchel, and walked briskly out the door to give the orders that would set the rest of his division in motion. There were three Luftwaffe squadrons

providing most of the close support at the two airfields flanking Thelepte, and he told a staff officer to get word to them immediately.

It was a big move, the artillery going first before the front line troops. He was gratified later when the first dusty columns of von Bismarck's troops began to arrive from Kasserine pass. He would order the KG he sent north to act as a rear guard delaying force astride the main road. Otherwise it was up to the fine art of German mobile finesse to carry off this move, a lightning quick redeployment to the east, and on a moment's notice.

Von Funck found a Kubelwagon and collared a driver. We could have held Kasserine and Thelepte indefinitely, he thought. But this attack over a hundred kilometers to the north has just taken them both. These Americans are smarter than we realized, bolder, more aggressive than anyone at OKW ever thought they could be. General Patton must be behind all this. There will have to be a day of reckoning with that man. He beat Rommel at his own game, putting on quite a show, and now this attack has our entire Korps running for the exits!

Nehring was at the other airfield, but as von Funck started east, he saw him come riding up in another staff car. "What is happening?" he said, clearly upset.

Von Funck related everything he had learned, and told him how he advised von Bismarck.

"You ordered all this on your own initiative?"

"Someone had to act. Time is of the essence in a matter like this."

"My God! Are those von Bismarck's troops? Very well, Herr General. You can write the report to Kesselring tonight. Understand? And when Hitler finds out that we just handed the Americans Kasserine and Thelepte, it will be your name on the order!"

He drove off, also heading east on that same road, and von Funck gave the man a half sneer as he went. Where were you when I was running with Rommel to the French coast, he thought? Yet Nehring's threat frightened him more than the Americans ever could. He was not in Hitler's good graces—in fact the Führer had a particular dislike for von Funck. He had served as adjutant under another man who had fallen out of favor, Werner von Fritsch, and he later went to Spain as a liaison to Franco. Hitler seems to have painted von Funck with the same distaste he had for the Spanish leader, and barely tolerated him, only because he was said to be a highly skilled officer.

So it was that the shift first initiated by General Randow to get east of Sbeitla, now became a general retreat of the entire southern front. Von Funck's timely order may have been in the interest of trying to save the front line in central and southern Tunisia, but he would end up trading his career in the army for his impetuous initiative when Hitler found out what had happened. While German forces advanced everywhere else, in Iraq and the Caucasus, the report that von Funck had retreated from Kasserine, leaving the place unfought, sent the Führer into a rage. The General was recalled to Germany the following week, and OKW sent another man to Tunisia to lead the 7th Panzer Division. His name was Generalmajor Hasso von Manteuffel.

Chapter 12

The crisis precipitated by Operation Hammer was now going to force a most uncomfortable decision upon the German defenders in Tunisia. Kesselring called a meeting with von Arnim and Nehring to discuss the situation, knowing the inevitable before he even opened his mouth. The other two men knew it as well.

“We simply cannot defend this way,” said Nehring, the man on the spot now that it was his forces giving up ground in the south. “I’ve been able to establish a new line, but the panzer divisions are holding fronts over 30 kilometers each. I would want them holding half that—in fact, I would prefer they weren’t on the line at all, held in reserve to counterpunch.”

“We both know that isn’t possible here,” said Kesselring. “We have only four infantry divisions worth the name north of the Mareth Position. Two hold the north coast, and two hold the position between Souk Ahras and Bou Aziz. Luckily, that has been the quiet sector.”

“Yes,” said Nehring. “But the Americans are throwing all their armor on this one segment of the line after taking Sbeitla. That airborne drop was quite a gamble, but they broke through the Western Dorsal passes to link up. Now they want the pass at Faid.”

“Can you hold them?” Kesselring eyed the map.

“For a time, but it is slowly wearing out these mobile divisions Rommel was kind enough to leave me. Meanwhile, O’Connor is pounding away down south at Mareth. How long will that position hold?”

“It should be able to hold indefinitely,” said Kesselring. “That’s where all the rest of our infantry is, two German and four Italian divisions. The question is, should we leave them there? We have already had to pull out the Littorio Armored Division to help cover Ghafsa, and the Italians have sent some of their San Marco Marines west as well.”

“Ghafsa?” said Nehring. “Why in God’s name do we need that? It made sense to hold it for *Sturmflut*, but no longer.”

“Ghafsa covers Highway 15 to Sfax,” said Kesselring. “And that port receives Siebel ferry boats out of Tunis to help supply the Mareth line position.”

Nehring shook his head. "I do not wish to sound like a defeatist, as some have already accused me of this back home, but we don't need Mareth either. If I had my way, I would draw the line right here." He fingered the northernmost point of Patton's operation, and moved it due west to the coast—right at the port of Sousse.

Kesselring nodded. "I came to that conclusion three days ago. I just wanted to see if either of you would suggest the same thing. Von Arnim?"

"Nehring is correct," he said. "His entire position is holding a front simply to deny the enemy terrain—all of southern Tunisia. If we gave that up, and moved to the line he suggests, then we shorten our entire defensive front here into a much tighter bridgehead, and one we actually have a chance at holding."

Kesselring smiled. "I hope you both realize that I was recently directed to begin planning another spring offensive for April."

Nehring actually laughed this time. "Out of the question," he said. "At least as long as we are trying to hold our present positions. If we were to pull out to the line I described, then we could also get the Panzer divisions off the line and ready for such an offensive. As it stands, this is impossible."

"Now we come to the real problem with all of this thinking," said Kesselring, and he summed it up in one word. "Hitler."

Von Arnim nodded agreement. "He just sent the 16th Panzer Division to Rommel so he can muddle about with it in Syria," he said with obvious bitterness. And I can tell you that he will not permit the withdrawal Nehring suggests."

"But what if the three of us all sign on to this demand?" Nehring pressed his point. "I'll tell you right now—if this Patton breaks through up near Faïd, then that withdrawal will become a necessity. Quite frankly, if we don't move as I suggest, they will cut us right in half. I'll end up having to split my panzers into two groups, with the 15th and 7th trying to screen off Sfax and points south, and the 21st trying to hold that line I suggested. The problem will then be the fact that we will lose overland road and rail connections to the southern pocket. Everything will have to go by sea into Sfax and Gabes. It will be a disaster."

"Agreed," said Kesselring. "So how can we do what we all know we must, and without losing our heads in the process? You saw what happened to von Funck."

They passed a moment of silence before von Arnim finally spoke. “The Italians,” he said quietly, a conspiratorial tone in his voice. “Nehring has put his finger on the right spot. We must prevent an enemy breakthrough to the coast through Faïd Pass. Hitler chooses to feed Rommel in Syria. So be it. We need infantry, and we have two good divisions sitting on the Mareth line. So I see no alternative other than to recall them to stop this new American offensive.”

“But the Italians won’t be able to hold O’Connor,” said Kesselring.

“Precisely.” Von Arnim just looked at them, saying nothing more, and they both knew what he meant. The Italians would not hold. They would be forced back, and the Germans would have their scapegoat. All they had to do was pull the two German infantry divisions from Mareth, and the rest would be inevitable. The Allies would eventually force the Italians back, and they would have no recourse other than to reach the line Nehring suggested.

“I can see the look on the face of General Meese right now when I tell him I must issue orders for the 90th and 164th to move north.”

“We have coddled them for years,” said von Arnim. “They were all but beaten by O’Connor in Libya until we sent Rommel over. Now they’ve been moaning and groaning about the loss of Libya, so we promised them Tunisia. Well—let them hold it. Where are the divisions Mussolini promised us? He sent us half the Centauro Armored Division, a parachute outfit and a few battalions of Marines.”

“The Giovani Fascisti has just been moved out of reserve to Sfax,” said Kesselring, “but I don’t think we’ll see them shipping over any more armor, for what it’s worth.”

“Then tell General Meese to send that division to Mareth,” said Nehring. “We must get another German infantry division up here, and right now. ‘I don’t intend to leave 15th Panzer Division where it is now either. I need it to stop the main enemy offensive. They are just screening it off with infantry, so I want to move it north. After that, let the chips fall as they may.’”

“You won’t have von Funck to blame this time,” said Kesselring.

“To hell with that,” said Nehring. “If I don’t move it, Patton will break through somewhere along this 100-kilometer front and then we’ll be to blame instead of the Italians, because that will force us to give up all of southern Tunisia. I agree with von Arnim. We should pull our troops out of Mareth, and let the Italians hold. If nothing else, they can at least fight a delaying

action there. They could fall back to Gabes, hold there a while, and then move north. But they should not try to hold Ghasfa any longer, it's out there on a limb, and if they do get more than a French division pressing them, it will fall in a few days anyway."

So that was to be the German plan, a nice little conspiracy to pull their infantry from Mareth and then blame the loss of Southern Tunisia on the Italians. Hitler could rant all he wanted, but he would have only that one complaint to put against Kesselring—why did he withdraw German troops from Mareth? Smiling Al already had his answer—because it was a military necessity in order to prevent the entire position from being cut in two. If that were to happen, and two bridgeheads formed, he wanted no German troops trapped in the south.

* * *

After linking up with the 82nd airborne at Sbeitla, Patton had pushed his combat commands hard. The 82nd had now pushed as far as Kern's Cross, supported by companies of Tank Destroyers. North of that position, all of Ward's 1st Armored Division was attacking up the rail line and Highway 3 towards Fondouk. In fact, the entire American line now extended parallel to that highway, just a few kilometers west. Patton already had elements of the 157th RCT from 45th Infantry seven clicks from Fondouk, but that force had run into German Tiger tanks to block their advance. Kesselring had been moving the few Schwere companies he had about like war elephants, and two had been sent to prevent the fall of Fondouk.

From there all the way south to Ward's division, Patton was keeping up relentless pressure. Just north of Ward he had Task Force Abrams at El Tarig, and then came Harmon's entire 2nd Armored division. Virtually every tank the Americans had in theater was involved, at least 600 Shermans, another 150 M5s and scores of Tank Destroyers, the new American M-10. It was like water behind a dam, and slowly, he was wearing down the German defense.

To make matters worse, the other two regiments of the US 45 Division had pushed up Highway 4 from Bou Aziz and taken the mountain town of Maktar. That had been the redoubt held by KG Huder, along with an independent infantry battalion, but they simply could not hold against two full regiments. This left a massive gap in the German line between Maktar

and Fondouk, a distance of some 60 kilometers, and it was now screened by only three battalions.

The Germans were in desperate need of infantry.

The 164th Light had been relieved on the Mareth line by the Italian 80th La Spezia Airmobile Division, and it was the first to board the trains just north of Gabes. It would hasten north through Sfax, then turn northwest on the rail line running parallel to Highway 13, bound for Faid Pass. The armor was defending the lowland, but infantry was needed to hold the thin ridge that jutted north from Faid like a stony sword. The stronger 90th Light would be right behind it, but this would still leave nothing for that gap between Maktar and Fondouk.

At his wits end, Kesselring gave orders for the 20th and 24th Marsch Battalions to move from their positions on the northern coast. He would attempt to throw together a Kampfgruppe, ordering the Tigers on the line with the 337th Infantry to move to Maktar, and then bringing up that infantry in support. There was no place on the front that was not under some pressure, and in need of reserves that simply were not there. Nehring is correct, he knew. We should get everything back into one bridgehead in the north. Then I can call it Festung Tunis. Hitler will like that.

The Axis forces had now created two armies. Kesselring commanded 5th Panzer Army in the north, and Meese had the 1st Italian Army in the south. As the Germans predicted, the Italians had no plans to try and hold Ghafsa without direct German support. They immediately began pulling back, with one group passing through the defile at El Guettar, and another screening the secondary roads to the north of the mountain ridges in that region. The rail line ran east to Maknassi above this terrain, and the Superga Mountain Division was holding in that sector.

Without those two German infantry Divisions, the line at Mareth came under increasing pressure. O'Connor saw the German troops pull out, and then quickly ordered up the 4th Indian to back up the units he already had forward on the line. Now he reasoned that he could mass 23rd Armored Brigade and simply break through, and he was correct. Trento Motorized Division had already abandoned its positions on the high country to the west and it was motoring north, ostensibly to support the Italian positions there. The remaining three Italian divisions would not hold long. Which would soon lead to a general withdrawal towards Gabes.

In Patton's sector, 82nd Airborne was on the road from Kern's Cross, coming right for that town when they encountered a kampfguppe from 15th Panzer near Lessouda. Both sides quickly started an artillery duel while Ridgeway sent out patrols to try and gauge the strength of the defense. It was found to be a full battalion of Panzergrenadiers, backed by tanks, a pioneer company, and artillery in Faid Pass. Behind it, on the first trains to arrive from Mareth, the 164th Light infantry had finally arrived. US aerial recon saw them along Highway 13, and photographed many more troops and vehicles behind the long north to south ridge line that connected Faid in the south with Sidi Faid in the north. This barrier stretched for some 30 kilometers, the last bulwark of defense before the Allies would reach the coastal plain.

The Germans had finally concentrated. Those troops were the bulk of von Bismarck's 21st Panzer Division, with von Manteuffel's 7th Panzer to their north holding around Sidi Faid. Patton came riding up the road along Highway 3 and came upon Task Force Abrams at El Tarig a little over 15 kilometers behind the front lines.

"Abe, what's your situation?"

"There's no room on the line," said Abrams. "So Harmon told me to wait here in reserve."

"No room?"

"Yes sir. They've got both 1st and 2nd Armored Divisions side by side, and things are packed in tighter than sardines in a tin. I've got to radio Harmon just to get permission to move east on this road."

Patton nodded. Harmon knew what he was doing, and just looking around, he could already see the great mass of service vehicles, munitions and fuel trucks, artillery carriers and other vehicles cluttering up this rear area. But there was Abrams, as good a cavalry officer with the armor and they came, and he was just sitting. In fact, the advance thus far had been so restricted that his troops had fought only one brief engagement. He looked at his map.

"Abe," he said. "I may have another job for you. Are your boys fueled up and ready to roll?"

"Yes sir, we've just been sitting here."

"Alright, here's what I want you to do. Middleton has two RCTs of the 45th up here, and he just took Maktar. There's a big hole in the German lines

up that way, but now the Germans are trying to plug it with some of their heavy armor—Tigers. Middleton asked me for tank support this morning, and you've got the job. So I want you to move back the way you came through Ket el Amar to Sibiba, and then take Route 71 north through Bou Aziz. That's where you hang a right on Highway 4 to Maktar. Got that?"

"Yes sir. We can move right away."

"Outstanding. I'll square things with Harmon. You just get your tanks rolling and when you get there, give the bastards hell."

Abrams saluted, and he was on his way.

The entire battle was becoming fluid in many places now, yet the main effort of Patton's attack was encountering increasing difficulties. The Germans were now concentrating their three Panzer Divisions on defense near Faid, and that pass would not be taken easily. To make matters worse, the rains were bringing more misery and mud.

Patton's order to Abrams was going to heavily reinforce the effort along Highway 4, into the weakest sector of the German position. But Abrams learned that if he moved east, along a road skirting the flanks of Djebel Kessera, that he could then push into the Ousseltia Valley, towards the Karachoum Gap and eventually Highway 3. It was a game changer that would compel the Germans to abandon their defense at Faid Pass and move rapidly north.

It would also mean that most of Southern Tunisia would simply have to be abandoned, and the Italians clearly perceived their peril, making rapid withdrawals from Gabes behind a thin rearguard. Germany had promised them Tunisia to compensate for the loss of Libya, then summarily gave them all of Southern Tunisia, but they could not hold it alone.

These developments saw the gravity of the battle shifting north. Hitler would learn of the withdrawal to Gabes, the loss of Ghafsa, the battle shifting to Faid Pass, and he was predictably angered by the situation. Yet von Arnim's ploy would work. Kesselring would simply send a message indicating command in the south had passed to the Italian 1st Army, and that it was the Italians who ordered the withdrawals. His forces were now concentrating to secure the main bridgehead in the north, and little by little, the Allies were creeping ever closer to their old historical rendezvous with the Germans at Tunis in May of 1943.

Part V

Eisenfall

“Strike! While the Iron is hot!”

—Blacksmith Proverb

First attributed to Richard Edwards, 1566

Chapter 13

Rommel stared at the map. Here I am again, he thought—another desert, another battle. Here I sit, another 550 miles from Cairo, which is the same distance I would have had to travel from my Gazala line positions southeast of Tobruk. When I began that retreat, I never thought I would ever get this close to the Nile River again. What a strange and hard circle Fate has circumscribed for me. How poignant to be here again, and with this second chance after the bitter disappointments of Tunisia and Operation *Sturmflut* . So now I am to strike another blow at the British with Operation *Eisenfall* , Ironfall, and with a force about the same size as my old Panzerarmee Afrika, only with much more infantry.

I had so little time in Germany with Lucie and my family. A month ago, I was sitting in my Mammuth command vehicle, listening to the rain on the roof, with our guns being the thunder. Seeing Germany again, and my dear Lucie, was good for my soul. Yet even there, all I could think of as I tried to take my rest were the men I left behind; the looks on their faces when I boarded that plane to depart. Something tells me I will see them again one day. My old divisions have a way of finding me, following me in this war. God knows we cannot stay there in Tunisia for very much longer.

I am told Hitler sacked von Funck! That was inevitable. He laid low and minded his business, but it seems he took the reins in this new American offensive, and neither Nehring nor Hitler liked it. Now Manteuffel goes to the Ghost Division, a very capable officer. Who knows, perhaps one or two of those divisions will fight for me again.... Assuming they can be safely evacuated from Tunisia.

And now, what of my place here? Another desert, and I am told that this one is as desolate and arid as Libya. So what do I have in front of me now? The British have dug in on a line from Tartus on the coast, then south of Homs and on to the highlands near Palmyra, and their flank is hanging in the air. There is nothing off their right flank but the empty desolation of the Syrian Desert. They say the Bedu roam that wasteland, looking for any forage or scrub they can find, wandering like spirit nomads, ghosts in the night. Well, I have seen desert. There I was, getting fat and lazy in Tunisia. That place was so well watered that we never had to haul in water with the

truck columns.

Rommel pulled off his gloves, sitting at the small wooden table where a map was laid out by his new Chief of Staff Major General Siegfried Westphal. He would miss Bayerlein, but knew Westphal to be a competent man. Kesselring sent him over from Italy, and Rommel passed a brief moment wondering whether Smiling Albert was simply using him to keep an eye on his own doings. He was the youngest man to make Major General in the Army, and good for him, thought Rommel. Now I will put him to work.

He looked over the map, noting the positions of the many infantry divisions presently holding the front. Most were mountain divisions under the capable leadership of General Ludwig Kübler. But there was also a line infantry division, the 31st, with the 34th still arriving on the trains. It would have been there by now, but Rommel made a special request that the 101st Panzer Brigade be sent first. He wanted to flesh out his real offensive force, III Panzer Korps under General Hermann Breith.

The 101st Brigade was a unit that had seen brief service in 1941, with two Panzer Regiments, but now it was completely reorganized, an aberration, as these brigades had not been built out until 1944 as an expedient measure to create fire brigades on the Eastern Front. The panzer battalion, KG Lauchert, had two companies of Lions with the high velocity 75mm gun, and one Schwere company of the newest VK-90 Lion Kings. That tank had been in competition with the *Königstiger* for the coveted mass production factory floors. Due to the success of the VK-75, the prototype was approved in late 1942, and a small run of that tank was produced, only 36, before Hitler saw the Challenger II and ordered sweeping changes to the design.

So these tanks, the VK-90s, with an all new 90mm main gun, would be the Last of the Mohicans for that model. The redesigned Lion King would see its armor increased from 100mm to 140mm, and its main gun bumped up from the new 90mm, which was now cancelled, to an all new Pak 44/80 128mm main gun that would become the standard for both the Lion King and the Royal Tiger. That was the same gun that would eventually find its way to the dread *Jagdtiger* heavy tank destroyer, so its adoption was very practical, owing much to the fact that there were naval guns made of this size, and much tooling already existed, making for quick production. It was capable of penetrating 230 millimeters (9.1 in) of 30-degree sloped armor at 1000 meters, compared to 165mm penetration achieved by the 88mm gun.

At 2000 meters it could penetrate 200 millimeters (7.9 in) compared to 132mm for the 88, and at 3,000 meters it could still defeat 173 millimeters (6.8 in) where the 88 was no longer effective. So this gun marked a dramatic improvement in Panzer firepower, though the real Big Cats that would use it, *Königsloewe* and *Königstiger*, would not take the field until later in 1943. For now, the VK-90 was at the top of the heap, its new 90mm gun equivalent to the 88, but with better striking power out beyond the 2000-meter range. The new Pak44/80 was unique in that it had its PzGr.43 HE Projectile accompanied by up to three propellant charges. One or two charges could be used when the gun was firing as an artillery piece, but all three would be used when it was in the AT role.

Rommel smiled when he read these reports from Westphal, realizing that his long suffering in the desert against the Challenger II, and his remarkable capture of that single abandoned enemy tank, had done much to spur this development. Now we finally get a tank that has a chance against that monster deployed by the British, he thought.

The 101st Panzer Brigade was a fusion of KG 100 under Major Eberhard Zahn, a bright eyed handsome young officer that had commanded the 33 PzJag Battalion of 15th Panzer in Tunisia. When Rommel learned Hitler was granting his request for this Brigade, he specifically requested Zahn for the Panzer element, knowing he was an energetic and skillful young officer. Zahn had been born in 1910, so he was a man of 33 years, though he looked much younger, and that gift of youth would see him live to be 100 years old, into the 21st Century in the year 2010 when he finally passed away just 36 days after his centennial.

That was the steel in the new brigade, and the flesh and bone were provided by two battalions of Panzergrenadiers under Oberst von Lauchert and Major Breidenbach. Rommel intended to use that unit as a spearhead, to be followed by the powerful Wiking SS Division, but as he looked over the map, he was still not satisfied.

16th Panzer Division... It would have two Panzer battalions of three medium companies, each with 3 light Leopard recon tanks, 15 medium Lions with the 75mm gun, and three of the new VK-90's, with an all new 90mm main gun. It was the Lion's answer to the competing Tiger-I, and was a superior design in some respects, with better hitting power and maneuverability. That was only 126 tanks, but the division was augmented by

the inclusion of 24 StuIG 33's, nine Nashorns and a dozen more Marder III's in the PzJag Battalion, making for a total of 171 AFVs. It then had two Panzergrenadier Regiments of three battalions each instead of the normal two, along with the recon battalion, Pioneers and artillery.

This is a fine division, he thought, but it has been positioned right behind 31st Infantry Division—probably by necessity. It is there to face down all that armor the British have been bringing up, but that will mean I may not have the services of that division when I start Eisenfall. I don't want my Panzer divisions playing a defensive role, not even to make a well-timed counterattack. The British brought up that armor because they intend to use it to try and retake Palmyra, but I don't want 16th Panzer there. I want Hillebrand's division with me when I move south....

So he reached for paper and pen, drafting a personal letter to the Führer, a final request. What he wanted, if it could possibly be found, was yet one more Panzer Division. He knew that after receiving the 101st Panzer Brigade this would likely be denied, but he made a fervent appeal.

My Führer, I have arrived in Syria to take command and make preparations for Operation Eisenfall. Yet seeing that the British have now moved considerable armored forces from their 8th Army to this sector, I note that this will force me to deploy my 16th Panzer Division in a defensive role. This will mean I will only have one strong division to move south as planned.

Your gift of the 101st Panzer Brigade gives me the spearhead I was hoping for, and no man could ask for a better division than the Wiking SS. Yet if I had but one more Panzer Division, I would finally come to feel that you have done all in your power to give me the tools I need to forge the victory you desire here. My Führer, I stand as one of many who have come to you with such a request, but if fulfilled, I promise you Damascus, and more. Know that I would never make such a request unless I believed it to be a military necessity. You heard my plaintive call for years in the desert, and I made do with whatever I was given. Yet put this sword in my hand now, and I will not fail you. With earnest sincerity and appreciation for all you have already done for me—Erwin Rommel.

The Führer had been ranting about the Italians, noting their many lapses on the battlefield, their useless air force, their navy refusing to sortie its big ships. He had ample ground there to sew his wrath. When he finally settled down, Keitel handed him the note from Rommel.

Hitler would read that letter, sighing heavily. This request seemed at first to be an eerie echo from Rommel's long retreat in North Africa. Then he remembered that he had already discussed this issue with Zeitzler, and agreed that Rommel would need three mobile divisions for his work in Syria, so this request was something he intended to fulfill. What to send?

There it was, pulled from the East front many months ago, and refitting in Germany. He had thought to position it in France behind Calais, but realized that the division could be put to much better use in the hands of a man like Rommel. It was the 2nd Panzer Division, a good veteran unit, and so he waved all thought of Tunisia away, his eyes still dark with anger. He would not throw good money after bad there. Instead, he quickly sent word to Rommel that his last wish would be granted.

The newly rebuilt 2nd Panzer Division scheduled for deployment in France will be sent to you immediately, and every effort will be made to see that you are well supplied. I have every confidence that you will now give me all that I have asked of you in return—Adolf Hitler.

Rommel was elated. The initial timetable for *Eisenfall* was to launch the offensive on the 15th of March, but Rommel had only just arrived, and now he wanted to wait for 2nd Panzer. 34th Infantry can come last, he thought. It can arrive on the trains after I kick off the offensive. But what will the British do in the meantime? They will certainly see the trains moving all these panzers to Homs. So I will continue to position things to make it seem like I am building up on defense behind the 31st Infantry Division. To that end, I put my experience in building a good defensive Pakfront to use here, just as I did in North Africa against those heavy British tanks. I will position 88s in heavy bunkers, with panzerfaust teams, machineguns, and heavy weapons support, and all behind wire and mines. Let the British face the legacy of their own tank designers.

Then, on the 25th of March, the hot iron falls. The 101st Panzer Brigade will spearhead the attack here, south of Palmyra, and east of these rocky hills. There is only a single British infantry division there, and I will go right through it when the Wikings follow up that attack. Then I give the order to swing the other two panzer divisions east through Palmyra, and south in the wake of that attack. We will follow the rail spur that was built to service ore mining in that region, and then take the road southwest to Damascus. There will be good high ground on my right to post defensive kampfgroupes, and

on my left is my old friend—the desert.
He smiled.

* * *

The British did not fail to see the deployment of these new heavy forces on the rail lines heading south, and they had been making preparations of their own. The 46th Infantry Division was on the line opposite the German 31st Infantry screening the most direct approach to Palmyra. That was the sector Wavell had used to make his spoiling attack, which had delayed the movement east of two of Guderian's mobile units. Being a mixed division, that unit had a full tank brigade as its disposal, and behind it was the 25th Armored Brigade.

31st Indian Armored Division still held its left flank, but coming up from Cairo was the newly reconstituted British 1st Armored Division, all the forces that O'Connor had detached from his 8th Army. Its two Armored Brigades were simply renamed the 1st and 2nd, and then the 7th Motorized Brigade rounded that division out. Behind it, just off the transports coming in to Beirut from Benghazi, was the 50th Northumbrian Infantry Division.

"We've finally got the troops in hand to mount an offensive," said Alexander. "Now we've all of five armored brigades, and the Northumbrian division gives us a little more push. I'm calling it Operation Gladiator. It has a rather nice ring to it, eh?"

"I wouldn't be too quick to start pushing here," said Auchinlek, in Beirut to confer with Alexander on all that was happening in Iraq. "That's Erwin Rommel over there on the other side, and he's now got three good mobile divisions. Don't think he'll sit on his backside like he did in the withdrawal from Libya. He'll come after us, mark my words."

Auchinlek was a very astute man.

Chapter 14

On the 25th of March, Operation *Eisenfall* began. Rommel had massed his three mobile divisions on the road stretching from the T4 Pumping Station, through Palmyra and on to T3. To British aerial recon, it looked like an immense iron spear on the ground, with the tip at T4 ready to strike through the outer shield of the 31st Infantry division. Warned by the Auk, Alexander had positioned his forces accordingly, with the 25th Armor Brigade in reserve, well behind the 46th Infantry Division where the attack was expected.

But Rommel seldom did what he thought his enemy might expect.

South of Palmyra, its lines scattered along the long rocky outcrop of Jebel Leptar, General Miles' 56th "Black Cat" Division held the extreme right of the British position. That was where Rommel was going. He did not have his three divisions lined up to follow one another west as a great spear. Instead, he had them all abreast for a big move due south.

2nd Panzer opened the attack against the 46th Division, but at the far right of its lines, very near the sharp range that aimed northwest towards Palmyra. The attack would be made against the 139th Infantry Brigade under Brigadier Vickers, which was screening the rail line that looped through difficult ground in the "Basiri Gap." That was a rail spur that serviced mining operations just south of that range, and Rommel's first objective was to capture the rail station at Al Basiri and make it his forward depot for the drive south.

To assist this operation, the whole of the 7th SS Prinz Eugen Mountain Division would scale that ridge and push for the rail line beyond its southern edge. It split northeast of the gap, with the two ridges looking like hands of the clock. The big hand, pointed at 1:00, was aimed right at Palmyra. The little hand was Jebel Leptar, pointed a little shy of 3:00. That was where Rommel sent the 16th Panzer Division, right around the end of that 3:00 ridge. Beyond that to the east, was the 101st Panzer Brigade and then the Wiking SS, both moving south to attack the 56th London Division. The iron was falling hard on Miles, and he and his men had already felt its bite when they were initially pushed out of Palmyra by Guderian.

The main German attack would fall on the 169th “Queens Brigade” under Brigadier Lyne, on the extreme right, and the 168th Brigade under Davidson to its left. Against each of these two brigades, Rommel was sending a full reinforced panzer division, with the 16th hitting Davidson, and the Wikings hitting Lyne. The results of that attack would not be hard to predict, and the field phones were soon ringing loudly at Major-General Eric Miles’ HQ in the small village of Al Ulayaniyah.

Like most men who had risen to command at his level, Miles had won his DSO and Military Cross in the First War, and was “Mentioned in Dispatches” five times, so he was no slouch. He was a Brigadier in France and Belgium, and suffered through the evacuation at Dunkirk. After a brief stint with the 42nd Division, they gave him the 56th, and sent him to Sir Edward Quinan’s 10th Army forming up in Persia. It was there that his 56th Division was moved from Iraq to Syria, where its acquaintance with German panzer divisions had left it bruised and needing rest.

By now it had time to refit and receive replacements for the two battalions that had been largely destroyed in the previous action at Palmyra. But the hammer was falling again, double loaded this time, and Miles sent an immediate message to Quinan: *My Division heavily engaged east and south of Jebel Lebtar. Situation doubtful.*

Doubtful indeed. It was Rommel, doing what he had demonstrated time and again in Libya. He would find a flank and turn it as the first action of any major offensive, and if Richard O’Connor had been there, he would have seen what was happening immediately. Unfortunately, O’Connor was over a thousand miles away, his troops assaulting the Italians at Mareth after the Germans pulled out their infantry there. The good news had come in earlier that day—the Italians were retreating! By Mid-day, so was Miles and his 56th Infantry Division.

Now Alexander and Quinan had to decide how best to react. “We’ve been hoodwinked,” said Quinan. “Rommel hit Miles on our flank.”

“So it seems,” said Alexander. “And here it looked as though he was about to come head and shoulders against General Freeman and the 46th.”

“He’s hit Freeman too,” said Quinan, “again, right on his easternmost flank.”

“Well that looks to be a spoiling attack,” said Alexander.

“No, I think he wants to cut off the Basiri Gap. Then we won’t be able to

send anything through to help out Miles, and he'll be stuck over there on the other side of this ridge all on his own. What's it called?"

Alexander squinted at the map. "Jabal Ghanim. Sits there like a damn brick wall, and yes, the gap is our only way to get Miles any help, but should we? All we might send is the 25th Armored Brigade, but even then, I don't like that fight. Miles said he's been hit by at least two good German Divisions. One more brigade won't help all that much. To my mind, he's on the wrong side of the fence, and we ought to pull him out of there."

"Well he can't move south," said Quinan. "There's nothing there but the bloody Syrian Desert."

"Yes, but if he can fall back towards the southern end of Basiri Gap, then he can use this road on the far side of Jabal Ghanim. In fact, we'll need him there in any case. That's the road to Damascus."

That fell like too much lemon in the tea, and both men could feel the tension rising. "You think he might be after Damascus?" asked Quinan.

"Possibly, but more likely a turning maneuver," said Alexander. "If he tries to turn our flank, we've got that nice brick wall there."

"Why would he do that?" said Quinan. "Damascus would be a real prize, and this is Rommel..."

Yes, this was Rommel. When you could take something of value, he would, and he was a master of the indirect approach in battle, and right in his element here. That Syrian desert that Quinan assumed to be so impassible for Miles to use in any retreat, was as good as a four-lane highway to Rommel. He had seen all that and worse in Libya, though he did not yet have the time to really brief his troops on how they must fight in the desert.

"Damascus," said Quinan.

"That's a far throw," said Alexander. "Larminat's Free French Division is posted there if he tries it."

"That won't be enough," said Quinan. "50th Northumbrian just passed through Rayak on the way here. We could stop that column and turn it about for Damascus."

Alexander thought about that. He had summoned the 50th when it arrived, because he wanted to use it to open his own big offensive, something that had taken long hours of meticulous planning. Now here was Rommel, stealing his thunder and spoiling the show. They were all set to kick off in 48 hours. He was going to bring up the 50th, and all of 1st Armored, and then push right

for Palmyra again, only this time heavily reinforced.

A stickler for details and fine-tuned arrangements on the field, Alexander did not like being upstaged like this. His enemy wasn't doing what he wished, and there was a part of his mind that wanted to see this whole affair as nothing more than a spoiling attack on Rommel's part. This is what he voiced next to Quinan.

"By Jove, they must have gotten wind of our operation. Just when we're getting ready to tee up, Rommel picks on Miles and threatens to turn our flank. Why, its 140 miles to Damascus from the German positions now, over 220 kilometers."

"Well sir," said Quinan. "The Brandenburgers ran all the way from Aleppo to Baghdad, so I wouldn't put it past Rommel to make a run for Damascus."

"But what if he's simply trying to foil our plans? This could be nothing more than a demonstration."

"Then I'd say he's doing a bang up job of that." Quinan folded his arms, and a runner came in at that moment, saluting with a message in his other hand.

"Sir, General Wordsworth reports he's getting some heavy artillery fire, and the Germans have been reoccupying some of the high ground they gave up last week."

"Thank you, Corporal." Alexander took the message, somewhat perturbed. "Oh, and in the future, there's no need to announce your message. Simply deliver it."

"Sir!" The chastened Corporal saluted, and wisely withdrew.

Wordsworth had the 31st Indian Armored Division, though it was mostly infantry, with two brigades on the line, and its small tank brigade in reserve.

"There's your spoiling attack," said Quinan. "This bit on the flank against Miles is the main push. I'll stake my first born on that."

"Even so," said Alexander, "we still have the option of going forward with our own offensive. I could throw five armored brigades at T4 in 24 hours, and the Northumbrian Division was my follow up force. I hate to see all those plans go into the ash can."

"Yes sir," said Quinan, "But we ought to be flexible here."

"I understand, but if we carry on, we can set Rommel back on his right foot. He dances to the center of the ring, and wants me to chase him. But if I

bore in, get inside and start body punching, there's no way he can dally about with any idea about going south to Damascus. I say we just go forward with Operation Gladiator. Let's make him dance to our tune—not the other way around.”

“So do we bring up the 50th as planned?”

“I should think so. No sense getting unnerved by this attack.”

“Well he'll be all of two days getting up here. In that time, Rommel could be well on his way to Damascus.” Quinan seemed a bit edgy.

“Nonsense,” said Alexander. “But do get word to General Miles. Have him fall back on Basiri Gap, and screen that road, just in case.”

“Very good, sir.”

As commanding Generals often get their way, the British would decide to call Rommel's bluff. Alexander immediately felt buoyed up by the decision. He was attacking, and all on schedule with his well-planned operation, and not forced instead to start moving divisions all about the desert in response to what his enemy was doing. He took a deep breath, and smiled, hands on his hips and ready for the fight ahead.

And he had just made his first big mistake.

* * *

Rommel was the first to see it.

He was in his command vehicle when the latest recon report came in. There was a long column of British infantry in the central valley coming up through Baalbek to Al Qusayr. British Armor was also spotted moving up towards the front beyond T4 the previous evening. The British were planning to answer his offensive with one of their own.

In anticipation of that possibility, he had set up a strong Pakfront forward of his infantry, and collected the PzJag battalions from various divisions at the one place he thought they might strike—the T4 Pumping station, just as they were reported to have done so before. Time was now of the essence. Fortunately, the 31st Infantry Division was just off the trains at Homs, and this would be more than enough to stop this attack. In the interest of caution, he would also send orders to the 101st Panzer Brigade to halt south of Palmyra, just in case. But Wiking and 16th Panzer would still continue with their planned drive south. That attack had broken through the British flank

guard, and was ready to roll.

Alexander had been on the road from Baalbek, where he had seen off the tail end of the Northumbrian Division. He was eager to get to Al Qusayr, where his forward HQ had been established, wanting news of the offensive that launched that morning, right on schedule. He did not have to wait to reach his headquarters. A jeep was coming south, sirens wailing, command flags flapping in the wind, with a staff Lieutenant Hill looking for the General. He pulled up in a cloud of dust, leaping from his vehicle and rushing over the Alexander's staff car with a stiff salute and more news than Alexander wanted.

"Sir," he said. "Word from Miles and the 56th on the right. He's been overrun."

"Overrun?" Alexander waited.

"Yes sir. Only one brigade made it back to the ridge road as ordered, and the Germans are through Basiri Gap."

"I see... And Gladiator?"

"Heavy fighting along the main front sir. No definitive news there yet. You'll likely learn more at HQ. I was sent to inform you concerning General Miles situation."

Alexander now had good reason for concern. Miles was on the wrong side of Jabal Ghanim, the 'Brick Wall,' and the news that he had only managed to get a single brigade back to the road was deeply disturbing. It spoke of power on that flank. Quinan had been correct.

"Lieutenant. Has 1st Armored been committed?"

"Yes sir, all but 2nd Armored Brigade. It moved cross country to reach the front last night and got a bit jumbled. They're sorting it out."

"And the 50th?"

"They moved up right behind the main attack sir, as ordered—one brigade forward; two back."

"You've a radio in that jeep?"

"Yes sir."

"Well they damn well ought to put one on my staff car. Go and get a message off to General Briggs. Tell him to hold 2nd Armored Brigade in place pending further developments. That goes for the whole of 50th Division as well. And where is General Quinan?"

"He's at HQ, sir."

“Very well. I’ll be there directly.”

Alexander wanted a map. The next gap in that Brick Wall was 50 kilometers south, on the road to Mihassah. My God, he thought. What’s happened to the Black Cats? If General Miles had the presence of mind to get there, he could at least use that last Brigade to cover that pass. It seemed that in spite of his determination not to dance to the enemy’s tune, this was something more—a full orchestra! Whatever Rommel was sending round his flank was on a rampage, and it went right through Miles as if he wasn’t even there. Two brigades lost...

God help us, he thought. That man is going for Damascus after all. Unless Quinan has already broken through, I may have no recourse other than a major change of plans now. I’ve gone and thrown everything up north.... But there’s still that Provisional Brigade that came in from Crete, and Boy Browning. Something might be done yet.

Damn! This is maddening.

“Driver!” he said sharply. “Get us to the bloody HQ, and be quick about it!”

Chapter 15

From long years of experience, Rommel knew that he needed three good panzer divisions and infantry support in any major offensive. Advances could proceed at breakneck speed, but with every mile gained, there was an open flank somewhere that would be exposed to enemy counterattack.

In this case, he had been forced to commit his last infantry division to backstop the front at T4, but he was not concerned. That ‘Brick Wall’ Alexander referred to in his planning was going to be his infantry. If it protected the British right flank, it would also serve to guard his own left. The last of the British 56th Division had retreated hastily down the road he wanted, undoubtedly towards the small pass near Mihassah.

Once I get there, he thought, I’ll be half way to Damascus. The terrain is not good on that second leg. There’s a lot of stony ground ahead, broken by wadis coming off that long bony ridge that points the way to the city. I’ll just have that one good road. Wiking Division went cross country, south of this lava field that screens the Mihassah Pass, but there’s a much bigger one up ahead, truly massive, so there will be no way to swing south around Damascus on any wide envelopment. General Gille will have to turn west soon, and then pick up the same road I have 2nd Panzer on now.

The next break in the terrain south of Mihassah is this town here—Ad Dumayr, another 70 kilometers southwest. There’s an air strip there that could be useful, and the rail line from Damascus passes through that town. I must get there before the British can reinforce that area strongly.

He smiled.

I am doing what I have heard the American General boast about—Patton. I am holding them by the nose at T4, and kicking them in the ass with my Panzer divisions. But I’ve been doing this all along. I would have done it all the way to Cairo in Libya and Egypt, if not for that damnable heavy British armor. Strange that there has been no sign of it here. They sent it to Syria before, when the Wiking division was deployed here earlier, but not a whisper of it this time....

* * *

Brigadier Lewis Owen Lyne was a tall, heavy set man, quick to smile, a bully boy for the Army since he joined in 1921. Yet he looked like half a man when he came stumbling in to the HQ hut at Mihassah, looking for General Miles. His Brigade was gone, the 169th, all men who had the special distinction of being designated "The Queen's Brigade" back home. They took that moniker with them to Syria, but that is where it died. It was Lyne's troops who took the brunt of the casualties when Lübke's 2nd Panzer attacked south of Palmyra, and now it was his Brigade to go down to a man in the wild stampede of the shattered right flank of the 56th. When Rommel did the kicking, Lyne was in his way.

The morale of the Brigade had been low to begin with, now it was nonexistent, and it showed on Lyne's face when he found Miles and made his report. There was a bloodied bandage on his right arm, but it did not stop him from saluting. "Sir," he said, his voice catching in his throat until he mastered himself and went on. "I regret to report that my Brigade has been overrun. The HQ staff and a few men from the artillery were the only ones to get out, and now that I'm here, I wish I'd gone down with my men."

Miles looked him over, sympathetically. "How's that right arm?"

"Just a scratch sir. It's nothing." It was a little more than nothing, but Lyne was giving his CO the stiff upper lip.

"Well, it won't be any consolation, but we lost the whole of Davidson's brigade as well. Brigadier Birch and the 167th were the only troops that got out looking anything like an organized force. Damn if we didn't get our hats handed to us in this one. The Black Cats have been run right off the field by the wolves. Three bloody Panzer Divisions, and that SS Mountain Division came up over the Jebel country as well and damn near cut the road behind us. The whole bloody line went pear shaped on me. The flank is a complete shamble."

"I'm sorry sir," said Lyne.

"Not your fault," said Miles. "If I had known what was coming at us, I would have pulled back much earlier. The SS Motorized division got completely round your right."

"The men fought hard, sir, but we just couldn't hold them."

Miles nodded, pursing his lips. "The whole division is hopping about on one leg now, but I still need you. Davidson got back as well, but he's not on

his feet. They've brought up a Provisional Brigade, all the chaps that made it off Crete. It's yours. Find yourself a staff car and motor on down to Ad Dumayr. That's where the Brigade is assembling. We'll get you some help as soon as possible."

Lyne was surprised to be given anything more than a latrine squad to command, but he saluted again, still trying to find himself after what he and his men had just been through.

"Have that arm looked at," said Miles, "then get yourself a good meal before you leave. You'll have the French behind you at Damascus, but I'm afraid you'll be all we've got down there until Alexander can shake some armor loose from Gladiator. Do what you can to delay them on the road. Fall back to Damascus if you must, but we need to hold there. Understand? And Lyne... I'll put in a good word for you with the brass up top—held in the face of overwhelming odds, and such. That sort of thing will look good in the dispatches. So, chin up and off you go. Here's your second chance."

Third chance, thought Lyne as he saluted again, this time with a bit of a wince. He would later go on to command the 7th Armored Division and lead it into Germany in another telling of these events, but for now, he was still a dispirited and troubled man, the wound to his right arm being the least of it. And his ordeal in the Syrian Desert was far from over. Lyne could already see the storm cloud of dust being kicked up by the Germans to the northeast. They were coming on like bad weather, and he forsook any thought of food, looking to find a jeep as quick as he could.

He would not have much time to rest at Ad Dumayr either, for the SS Wiking Division had swung around that smaller lava field to the north and was already finding the road south of Mihassah. In fact, he would not have any time at Ad Dumayr at all. It would serve as a good delaying position, with hills to the left and a lava field on the right. But that field was no more than 10 kilometers wide at that point, and it might be passable.

When he reached Ad Dumayr, Lyne found himself in command of five new battalions, all men who had been in Creforce the previous month. "Well, gentlemen," he said to his battalion C.O.s on arrival. "Don't feel bad about be run off Crete. Rommel's chased me half way across the Syrian Desert, and that's his dust up that road, so stand lively. We'll dig in here and hold as long as we can, but if hard pressed, I have orders to fall back on Damascus. I'll want the recon troops on the far right. All the line infantry should dig in

between those hills and the lava bed.”

They were all the rest of that night digging in, while Lyne kept a nervous watch to the northwest. He knew the Germans operated day and night, and the last thing he wanted was to have a column of enemy tanks come barreling into his lines in the dark. Each battalion had no more than four Mark-I 37mm AT guns, and they had been relatively useless against the latest German tanks.

The morning of the 28th, word came that the company of French Armored cars that had been out on forward recon was attacked and driven off by the Germans, who were now only a little more than 15 kilometers from Ad Dumayr. Where was the help Miles had promised him? At noon he had his answer, but it was not what he expected. His new Provisional Brigade was right astride the main road and rail line from Damascus. He heard a distant train whistle, but then all went silent. Then he learned a train had come up from Beirut through Damascus, but stopped a few kilometers to the rear.

An hour later he heard the distinctive tramp of marching feet on the paved road, and got into his jeep to ride back and have a look. There came a column of infantry, rifles slung over their shoulders, and tins, canteens and helmets rattling as they marched. A young officer came up, wearing a red beret, and the Lieutenant saluted smartly.

“Lieutenant John Frost,” he said coolly, “1st Paras are here.” The man smiled.

“Airborne?” said Lyne.

“No, we came up by train this time. Too many fighters about to go jumping out of a plane. The whole brigade’s behind me. I’m just out on point. Where do you want us?”

Brigadier Lyne broke into a broad smile. “I don’t suppose you brought any six pounders?”

“Half a dozen or so,” said Frost. “But few trucks.”

“Marvelous. You see, we’ll be looking at a bloody Panzer Division soon. Possibly tonight. They tore up the 56th something fierce when they came around our flank, and I’m posted here with the Provisionals to try and slow the bastards down. Now, my men are dug in well astride the main road, but I’ll want you chaps on the right.... Out there.” He pointed east, across the dark, stony lava bed that reached up towards Ad Dumayr. “I’ve got a single battalion out there now—44th Recon. Can you reinforce them?”

“Good enough,” said Frost. He took off his beret, and replaced it with his helmet, then looked over his shoulder and whistled. His arm indicated where he wanted the column to go. Then he tipped the rim of his helmet with a wink, and marched off. Frost and his men took up a position just off the flank of Lyne’s main line, right next to the 1st Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. That was the regiment that went by the nickname of “The Thin Red Line,” only it was khaki and olive drab now. Fitch had 3rd Battalion to the immediate right of Frost, but Dobie took 1st battalion south of the recon troops Lyne had already posted.

General Miles had told the Brigadier that he had his second chance, and it would be just his luck that the Wiking Division had taken the lead, the same troops that had cut up the 169th Brigade. Frost had his men in position, though the ground was so rugged and crusty hard that there was little in the way of digging they could do. The Paras took advantage of any undulation in the terrain, finding small rises to deploy behind, and setting up their MGs and Mortar teams. But Colonel John Frost had never seen the like of the men he would face that day in their desert camouflage uniforms.

His position was hit by 2nd Germania Battalion, with a Motorcycle recon company and a battalion of tanks in support. Needless to say, the few Piats he had, 3 in mortars and Vickers MGs were not going to stop those panzers. His line was hit with tanks, and forced back until the British brought up their 601st Tank Destroyer, with a dozen Achilles TDs mounting the 3-inch main gun. It was a good weapon, (76mm), with enough penetration power to defeat any German Mark III or IV tank. Later it would be upgraded with an even more powerful gun, the QF 17-Pounder that could penetrate 140mm of frontal armor at 500 meters.

Lyne’s Provisional Brigade put up a good fight from their prepared positions, until 4th Royal Sussex Battalion broke and retreated back to his HQ post. Red faced and shouting, he rallied the men and reformed the companies. Then he saw what had driven them back. 1st Battalion of the Wiking Panzer Regiment had 16 Lions with the 75mm main gun, 17 more Pz IV-F1’s, and 18 lighter Leopards with 50mm guns.

Soon both Dobie and Fitch were engaged to the right of Frost’s position, though no attack had been put in on the 44th Recon Battalion of the Provisional Brigade. The Germans were picking their targets, massing both tanks and highly skilled supporting infantry at selected spots in the line. Frost

was just unlucky enough to have been “selected.” That handful of 6 Pounders had never made it up to his front. They were still back near the rail line waiting for trucks, but there were a few Deacon 6-pounders mounted on truck beds with that Achilles battalion, and they rolled his way to give him some much needed AT gun support.

Unfortunately, the German tanks fired back and made short work of them. Of the dozen that came up, only five were left in twenty minutes’ time.

* * *

Alexander had finally realized that this was Rommel he was up against, and the man would seldom come at you where you expected him. The wily German General had been completely undeterred by operation Gladiator, and he had raced south towards Damascus behind the long mountain ridge, cutting his rail line back to the city. Cut or not, he could still use it to get troops south, and he had ordered Keller’s 1st Armored Brigade and the 150th Infantry Brigade of the Northumbrian Division to move as quickly as possible by rail.

They were arriving on the morning of the 29th, as Combe’s 2nd Armored Brigade was in the thick of a big fight with 2nd Panzer Division. Rommel had ordered those troops to attack northwest into the valley to try and cut the main roads south and isolate Damascus.

Everything was cascading south and east to Ad Dumayr, where Lyne’s Provisional Brigade and Frost had held out a full day in their blocking positions. But slowly, the great weight of the Wiking Division was building up behind that dyke, and organizing for an attack the following morning. Behind them, the first regiment of the 2nd Panzer Division was arriving, having been relieved of its position defending Mihassah Gap on the ridge line.

The German attack pushed Dobie’s 1st Battalion off the flank of 44th Recon, and it was soon clear that the Germans had seen this sector as ripe for envelopment. Fitch, with 3rd Battalion, was driven into Frost’s lines, and had only five squads left. While Lyne was fighting to hold his position, he could see that the Paras were simply too lightly armed to hold his flank. His situation was further complicated when he learned that the Germans had pushed northwest to Al Qutayfah, cutting the road to Damascus from the

north. Now any help coming down by road or rail would have to get through the 16th Panzer Division, and he was alone to face the wrath of the Vikings.

He would have to fall back, realizing the Free French were still behind him, and that might be enough if he got his troops back to their lines. That night he would fall back 15 kilometers down the road to Adhra, which was still 20 kilometers from Damascus. The rail line diverged south away from Ad Dumayr, eventually swinging south of Damascus. So he got his Provisional Brigade set up between Adhra and those cold steel rails, with the Paras now out of the lava beds and into a dry lakebed. Behind them there was more cultivated ground, with many small farms fanning out from Damascus.

That night Rommel pushed a supply column down the road to Ad Dumayr, making that road and rail junction his new forward depot. The ground rumbled with the arrival of the three Schwere companies attached to the 101st Panzer Brigade. There were 34 of the VK-75 Lions, and 15 of the rare new prototype model, the VK-90 with the new experimental 90mm main gun.

Once it had been the British to stun and awe their adversary with tanks so advanced they could not be stopped. That season was ended, and as a consequence, Germany had put tremendous effort into its Armor development programs. All these new tanks were the result.

Behind those tanks came the rest of 16th Panzer Division. Rommel was going to now use 16th Panzer to hold off all of Alexander's reinforcements, and then double down on his main drive for Damascus by throwing on 2nd Panzer.

Alexander was also rushing anything he could find to Damascus by road, rail and airlift. That amounted to the 2nd Brigade of 1st Para Division under Brigadier Downs, and Number 2 and 4 Commandos also came in by rail from Heifah.

The battle for the city had begun.

Part VI

Foolish Fire

*“ Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp ,
Or what's a heaven for?”*

—Robert Browning

*See: Damascus-Map2
Available at www.writingshop.ws*

Chapter 16

The night of March 30th Rommel ordered Lübbe of 2nd Panzer to build a Kampfgruppe and send it on a wide envelopment of Damascus. They would make their way through the dry lakebed, battling the soft ground and the darkness, but for Rommel, this was par for the course. He had made these night maneuvers over the shifting sands of Libya for the last two years, and he knew how to read the ground, and direct his columns along the best routes.

Air reconnaissance showed that the free French Division had been deployed just east of the city in a defensive arc, but appeared to be pulling back, even as the Provisional Brigade and British Paras fell back on the city. So Rommel was intent on getting south and then west to enfilade their lines.

General Lübbe assembled a Kampfgruppe consisting of the 304th Panzergrenadier Regiment, one battalion of his Panzers and supporting elements from the Recon Battalion and pioneers. The rest of his division would have to remain engaged against the growing British pressure on the long line of communications back to Palmyra. 1st Battalion of 304th Panzergrenadiers were the first to approach the city, catching British airborne troops fresh off the trains from Haifa at the main railway.

The British were shocked to find German troops this far behind the main front, but Brigadier Down of the 2nd Para Brigade was quick to react. The rail depot, and the main airport behind it, were both vitally important to the defense of the city, and so he committed his entire brigade to drive the Germans back. It would mean his troops would not be able to immediately reinforce the city, where the Wiking SS Panzer Division was forming up to launch Rommel's main attack.

The Germans were approaching the workshops and locomotive hangars on the eastern fringe of the rail yard when they began to receive fire. A Piat popped off and struck one of the leading halftracks, the round landing just short as it exploded in the dry earth. Then the Paras began firing their 3 inch mortars.

Brigadier Downs set up his HQ post at the Police post adjacent to the oiling station for the trains. There were a lot of valuable facilities to protect, a

military barracks where he posted his company of Royal Engineers, an armaments shop, and an important flour mill. 6th Para Battalion held the rail station workshops, with 4th and 5th Battalions deploying to the north to screen the rail yard and occupy the Al Aswad district, the southernmost tail of the city as it reached down to the rail yards. His brigade was fairly well concentrated, on a front of 1500 meters, so that single German battalion was not going to push through on his watch.

Damascus was not the wide concentric sprawl of a city in 1943 that it is today. The main city was still concentrated around old Damascus, which was bisected by the Barada River Canal. It was here that most of the major facilities lay, Parliament, Public Works and government buildings. Just outside the city on its western edge, and hugging the Barada Canal, was the University, Public Gardens and Presidential Compound very near the grounds that would become the first International Expo pavilions in 1954. That area, behind the university, was now the grounds of a military encampment, with the principle ammo dumps and supply stores for the region, garrisoned by three French Marche Battalions.

From the Barada Canal, the city then reached northwest towards the high mountainous terrain of Jebel Qasioun, and washed against its stony flanks, running northeast in a series of settlements that slowly thinned and diminished. Then another segment of the city descended roughly due south from the main city, reaching to Brigadier Downs position at the Rail Yards.

Brigadier Lathbury's 1st Para was in the sprawling fields and orchards just east of that long tail—date farms, almond orchards and olive groves. There was a gap of about a kilometer between his brigade and that of Downs, but Number 2 Commando had just landed at the main airfield, and its five companies were already marching to fill that hole. They were led by a most colorful figure, one Lieutenant Colonel John Malcolm Thorpe Fleming "Jack" Churchill.

No direct relation to the Prime Minister, "Fighting Jack Churchill" as he was called was nonetheless out to make himself worthy of the name. He was a gritty, hard-nosed brawler, given to going into battle with a longbow and a Scottish Highlander's Cleybeg, which was a basket hilted broadsword, always at his side. It was proper dress code for any officer, he would exclaim, and to complete the picture, he owned and often used a good set of Scottish Bagpipes.

He was playing them that morning, a scurl to wake the dead and announce the coming of “Mad Jack” and his minions of doom. Where stealth was often stock in trade for the Commandos, Mad Jack forsook it that day. He wanted the Germans to hear him coming, and think twice about their designs on this city. It would not be taken, he boldly pronounced. “Not while I can wield my Cleybeg with a good right hand.”

This was the British defense in the south, largely screening and holding the long “Cat’s Tail” as the soldiers came to call that segment of the city. The cat itself, “Old Damascus,” was soon to be confronting a rather dangerous wolf. Brigadier Downs would be faced with two more battalions from KG Krefeld of the 2nd Panzer to even the odds, and they were coming with tanks. On their right, following the road that led towards Old Damascus, was the Nordland Regiment of the Wiking Division. Gille had arrayed all three regiments abreast, Nordland in the south, Germania in the center, and Westland in the north.

The four battalions of Brigadier Lyne’s Provisional Brigade were covering most of the main city, deployed along its eastern edge. He and his men had finally redeemed themselves by putting up a very stalwart defense earlier at Ad Dumayr. Behind them was the Free French Division, mostly around the city center and Presidential Compound. They had not yet been built up to a real fighting division, being mostly garrison troops formed into “battalions” that might have the fighting power of a British company at that time.

The best of them was the French Foreign Legion, about 18 squads occupying the stout buildings of the prison, right in the heart of the city. They found the accommodation much to their liking, for many had been recruited from wards and jails all over Europe and the Middle East.

Down’s mortar fire convinced that lead battalion of KG Krefeld to fall back and wait for the rest of its regiment. The real battle would start farther north as the Germania Regiment sought to clear and occupy the outlying settlement of Al Jobar. According to Gille’s map, the Russian embassy was just behind that settlement, right on the road, and he could imagine the mad dash being made there as he sent his men in, the Russians scrambling to burn anything of potential value to their enemy and flee to the city proper.

Just north of the Barada River as it flowed in a tangled web of small tributaries east of Damascus, the town of Al Jobar was being held by 2nd

Highland Light of Lyne's Provisional Brigade. SS *Obersturmführer* Manfred Schönfelder was leading in the Germania Regiment, and he hit the town with a single battalion, supported by a company of the Sturmgeschütz Battalion. He was aiming right for that Russian Embassy.

B Company of the Highlanders could not hold, falling back under cover fire to the embassy, where they saw the last of the staff there speeding away west into the city. The position at Al Jobar had only been meant as a tripwire defense. The Highlanders preferred to hold at the edge of the city proper, where the Barada River would screen their right flank. 44th Recon was on their left, and they also fell back to the edge of the main city, as the overture of this battle began to play. A few rounds of French 105's greeted the Germans as they pushed into Al Jobar, arcing over the heads of the British lines and bucking up their morale when they saw them fall among the Germans.

That was one thing Lyne sorely needed—artillery. His provisional Brigade had not brought any of its heavy weapons when it abandoned Crete. As such, he was a "Light Brigade" in every sense of the word, with nothing more formidable than a 3-inch mortar to throw at the Germans. The French had twelve 105's, and the two Para Brigades had only had brought eight 25 pounders, which was not much for indirect fire support.

The German attack geared up in the morning on the main road to Old Damascus. They took the Russian Embassy, and Germania Regiment wanted to drive right up that main, also fanning out to the north to flank that district. At the same time, Westland put in a hard concentrated attack in the north near the rugged mountains, coming up on the road that would later be called Highway M5 to Homs. That was defended by 4th Royal Sussex Battalion, a segment of the town called El Charkasia. They gave a little ground, displacing several city blocks, but reformed their line, determined to hold.

Most of the weight of the attack was with Germania, where Gille had also concentrated the bulk of all his division assets. He put in the Sturm Battalion, three Companies, and that was augmented by the single company of Panzers he had forward, 12 roaring Lions, with the 88mm gun. Schönfelder had cleared Al Jobar, and was continuing to push on the outskirts of Old Damascus. He was testing the line everywhere, but found a fairly solid front, with a few French units filling in the holes in Lyne's line. So he opted for attrition, massing all his armored vehicles on the road from Ad Dumayr, and

sending them in to support the Panzergrenadiers. Gille radioed to tell Schönfelder he could have the full weight of the Division Artillery.

“I want to make a quick thrust into the city center, so push hard. I’m putting all the artillery at your beck and call. Use it.”

Schönfelder would be happy to oblige. That afternoon he threw his regiment at the line again, and the thunder of those guns punctuated his attack. Lyne’s center was getting hammered, and it was all falling on the Highland Light.

South of Gille’s main attack, below the rump of the main city, Colonel John Frost sat with a bemused look on his face, chewing on a piece of straw he had pulled out of a convenient bail set out for farm animals. Lathbury had posted him to the Date Farm east of the Cat Tail, but he had to give that up and move back to the Almond Orchard when KG Krefeld moved past his flank to the south enroute to the rail yards. His position had been probed early that morning by a battalion from the Nordland Regiment, but no real attack developed.

All that morning and into the afternoon, he could hear the sounds of battle, very heavily to the north near the old city, and also to his south at the end of the Cat Tail. He had his battalion well positioned in the orchards, the men using their spades to dig field positions, but no attack ever came his way. What were the Germans up to?

It was just common battlefield sense, really. Everything the Germans wanted was either south near that rail yard, or along the main road to the old city, so that was where they were attacking. Around 4:00 in the afternoon, he got another message from Lathbury—move your battalion back another 500 meters to link up with the flank of Number 2 Commando in the Cat’s Tail.

That was all it said.

There were olive groves behind him, and so he would pass the word to his companies to get ready to move. They had found the date farm offered a nice sweet addition to their morning breakfast, and the almonds were good on the side for lunch with tea. Now he would get to sample the olives for dinner.

Darkness fell, and the sounds of the fighting subsided a good deal. Even Vikings needed rest, and they had come a long way from Palmyra. Around Midnight, there came a sudden outburst of 20mm AA guns. The mobile flak company had maneuvered close to the northern tip of the 2nd Sussex Battalion, which was holding all the ground south of the Barada River. They

had been posted further east at the edge of the city, but moved back with Frost and Fitch to keep their lines even with those of the beleaguered Highland Light Battalion north of the River. A Company of the 2nd Royal Sussex, closest to the river, suddenly had its positions peppered with that loud AA fire.

The men grabbed their helmets and rifles, squinting into the dark, expecting a night attack to emerge from the buildings to the east at any time, but nothing came. They were getting snookered. That flak unit had just been ordered to make noise, so it would screen a little operation the Germans had underway a few hundred meters to the north on the river. Gille sent in his pontoon bridging engineers, and they quickly threw down a small bridge suitable for infantry. While A Company was hunkering down, fingers tight on the rifles and waiting for that attack, the German infantry of 9th and 10th Germania companies, and the dismounted motorcycle infantry, all crossed that little bridge. They were soon 200 meters behind A Company, flanking the entire line of 2nd Royal Sussex.

‘We’ve been buggered!’ called a Sergeant when he discovered what was happening. “Jerry has snuck right over the bloody river!”

Then they heard the whoosh of nebelwerfers, and the attack that company had been waiting for finally came, only from three sides now, east, north, and west, behind their positions. The men scrambled to move a Vickers, smashing out windows in the building they occupied to get it set up to try and cover their rear. Thankfully, the French had troops from their 13th Demi Brigade, and they came up from the vicinity of the prison to the west to lend a hand. 2nd Royal Sussex was able to hold its positions, but they had just learned a lesson from their crafty enemy that would keep them sleepless the rest of the night.

The only other action before dawn was in the neck of the city that extended up towards the mountains. There, Germania’s 1st Battalion had kept fighting, eventually overrunning a company of 1st Argyll & Sutherland, and flanking the Parliament building. That attack had been meant to try and flank resistance in Old Damascus on the main road north of the river, and it succeeded in doing exactly that. The two tattered platoons left in D Company of 1st Argyll & Sutherland Battalion huddled in the public works building and the heavy concrete walled city health building, their only company being French troops from the 11th Marche that had been sent up to guard the

adjacent Parliament building. The road all these buildings were on led directly to the Presidential Compound, and come morning on the 31st of March, the Germans would shift the full weight of Germania's attack in that direction.

General Gille had been studying the maps, getting position updates hourly, and he sensed that he had the makings of a breakthrough underway. So he did what any good commander would have done. He fed more wood into that fire. It would come from Westland Regiment in the north, which he ordered to suspend its attack against the 4th Royal Sussex Battalion and then send two of its battalions south towards the Parliament district. The road he was on was called Muhamad Ali El Abed, running from the new central bank on the outskirts of the main city, and straight past Parliament to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Presidential residence. If he could get there, he would cut off everything the British had on his left north of the river and canal, which was most of 44th Recon and the 2nd Highland Light Battalion that had taken the brunt of his attack the previous day.

Now the Stugs pulled out, shifting north to use that new avenue of approach, and the Germans were dancing like the fighter who would one day take the same name of that street—dancing into the center of the ring. Gille had attacked on a broad front, but now he wanted to concentrate as much force as possible on that breakthrough zone, all made possible when that single company had been overrun.

The German Stugs blasted away at the public works building, driving out the troops that had taken refuge there, and they would soon have the Parliament building nearly surrounded. The breakthrough was cutting right across the neck of the city extending north, where only a thin screen of French Gendarme patrols protected the embassy district, where nine countries had legations all within a 1 kilometer area on the back of that neck Gille was choking. There was a fire starting close to where the initial breakthrough had been made, and the growl and fire of those Stugs rattled the morning.

Brigadier Lyne was in a hotel on the main city canal when he saw the black smoke from that fire, and got the reports of what had happened. The Germans were breaking through, and if they went much farther, they would overrun the Presidential Compound, gardens and push all the way to the big ammo dumps. He rang up General Larminat at his Army HQ building.

"They're getting through our lines," he exclaimed. "Where are your

men?”

“Don’t worry,” said Larminat. “I have troops guarding the Presidential Compound and residence.”

“Well there’s nothing to stop them from going right into the Embassy District. I’ll have to order all my men up north to fall back to the rail line. Is there anything you can send?”

Larminat had put his best men at the city prison, thinking to make a fortress of that place. It was the very place the Vichy Colonials had imprisoned him when he refused to capitulate in 1940. So he ordered the Foreign Legionnaires to move to the public works building with all speed, and then sent word to order the entire 13th Demi Brigade there as well. The icing on his cake was to tell his artillery to train all their guns on that breakthrough zone.

Lyne could not wait for them, rushing to the scene and crouching low with the men of 1st Argyll & Sutherland Battalion. Frustrated, to see his men hunkered down, he stood up, pulling out his pistol. “Damn their eyes! Here they come, but they don’t know who they’re dealing with. We’re the Thin Red Line!” Pride was always a way to stiffen the backbone of the men, and they were up and fighting again, shouting insults at the Germans as they came.

In the south, KG Krefeld continued its strong attack into the Al Aswad District, the tanks being difficult for the lightly armed Paras of Down’s brigade. Another breakthrough seemed imminent there, but another hero emerged to save the day. Mad Jack Churchill was just north of that area, and he drew out that broadsword, letting it catch a glint of afternoon sun.

“Come on lads!” he shouted. “Let’s have at them!”

He led the way, which was over ground used as a city cemetery, that sword in one hand and a submachinegun in the other, looking like a ghost rising up from the past, and woe betide any grenadier that dared block his path. The issue at Damascus was on as thin a razor’s edge as that sword he had in hand, and the next hours might end this battle, one way or the other....

Chapter 17

The Germans would not stop for darkness or night. General Gille was intent on getting a quick decision, and he continued to push his attack across the neck of the city, primarily focused on two objectives, the Parliament building and Presidential residence on the north edge of that compound. The diversionary attack against Down's Paras in the Al Aswad District on the Cat's Tail would also continue, where the Germans were leaving a path of destruction in their wake as they burned their way from one building to the next.

All these attacks were successful. The Parliament building fell a little after midnight, and German troops stormed the President's residence at 02:00. Then that battle spilled over into the Indian Embassy, which was occupied a half hour later. This attack cut off all of the 44th Recon Battalion and the stalwart 2nd Highland Light, which had been holding the line in Old Damascus. The Germans had reached the public gardens north of the canal near the university, effectively cutting the Provisional Brigade into two segments.

4th Royal Sussex was still in the northern part of the city, with the 1st Argyll & Sutherland, and Lyne had moved to the 2nd Highland Lt and 2nd Royal Sussex Battalions in the central city districts, on either side of the Barada River. Alexander telephoned Lyne direct to the hotel where he had set up his headquarters there.

"What is your situation?" he asked grimly, and Lyne explained what had happened over two days of hard fighting.

"We're holding out," he finished. "But they're using tanks and APCs in strong direct fire support, and once they get enough lined up on a strongpoint, they simply blast it to hell."

"Well I'm sending you help," said Alexander. "25th Armored Brigade is on the trains near Homs now, and heading south—two battalions of Churchills and one battalion of the 7th Motor Brigade. It's all I can spare."

"I'd be happy to get even as much as a service troop company, but those tanks sound marvelous. We'll fight to keep the rail lines clear. I expect they'll be coming through Barada Gorge?"

“That’s the most direct route. There’s an auxiliary rail depot west of the city under Presidential administration. We’ll use that if you can hold the Germans at bay.”

Lyne’s next problem was what to do about his situation in Old Damascus. There was no point holding that sector any longer, and so he gave orders that his troops there should use the small foot bridges and reestablish their lines south of the canal. The French 13th Demi Brigade pulled out as well, and by 04:00, the old city center was abandoned.

The Germans quickly occupied the place, the sound of their boots echoing off the old stucco and brick walls as squads of troops swept through the district. Lyne had to give up a lot of ground, but now his line had the benefit of the canal, and could be anchored on the heavy concrete prison just south of the water barrier. He left the hotel before dawn, setting up half a kilometer to the south in the main city fire department building, which had good communications.

Just before sunrise on April 1st, the Germans were still fighting to secure the rest of the Presidential Compound, but they had reached the western edge of the city, and were now only 200 meters from the big ammo dump. The sound of aircraft overhead craned a few necks upwards, and set off some German 20mm AA fire, but it was not tactical support.

It was transports, all landing at the main airstrip under cover of darkness, and with the whole five companies of Lovat’s Number 4 Commando flown in from Haifa. Lovat walked calmly into the hangar, and put in a call to see where his men were needed. When Brigadier Lyne learned of their arrival, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Get to the Ammo depot, very near the military barracks. Jerry is right on top of it, and I don’t think the French can hold them off much longer.” So the Commandos fell in and marched up through the outlying town of Kafer Sousse, expecting to reach the barracks by sunrise. Lovat eventually found General Larminat at his HQ, his men arriving in the nick of time to take up positions at the Ammo Depot. The French had been hastily carting off crates of ammo to the Custom Sheds and warehouses further south, for they could not hold the depot with all that explosive material about. The arrival of those five companies of Number 4 Commando made all the difference. By mid-day, April Fool’s day, Gille called Rommel to inform him of the situation.

“We’ve cleared the old city and most of the government buildings. I’m

afraid there isn't much left of them now. But I had to focus most of my strength on that sector, so we haven't been able to take the main rail yard in the south, or reach the airfield. They flew in another battalion last night."

"But you have the city center?"

"Most everything above the main canal is ours, except for the districts up near the Jebel. That means Barada Gorge is still open, and I can't get anything back there to put a cork in the bottle. Can you send me anything more of 2nd Panzer?"

"Not likely," said Rommel. "I thought this thrust at Damascus would break their nerve and send them retreating south from Homs, but they've held on. They broke off their offensive at T4, but a lot of those troops have pulled out to deploy along our flank from Palmyra to Damascus. Yet we are masters of the old city, so run up our flag over parliament and get me a photo for the Führer. This was one promise I needed to keep, and I am going to tell him we have Damascus."

"This fight isn't over," said Gille. "The city is likely to remain contested for days. I don't think I can clear them all out with just my division."

"Not necessary," said Rommel. "*Eisenfall* was a success. I'm counting my chickens, even if they haven't all hatched. Hitler can use a little the good news, eh? Guderian has Baghdad. Now we're in Damascus!"

"But where do we go from here?" asked Gille.

There was a moment of silence from Rommel. "A good question," he said at last. "Carry on Gille. You did not let me down."

Gille looked at the phone receiver when the line went dead. Rommel had not answered his question, and that would be hanging in the air now, waiting for some resolution. They had come all this way, some 225 kilometers, a little more than half way to Jerusalem, but the British refused to budge. They would not give up Lebanon or Palestine without being pushed out, mile by mile, and that was going to be the deciding factor in this battle—sheer intransigence.

Before dusk, Lyne ordered his engineers to blow every bridge over the canal near the public gardens, and he concentrated the 44th Recon battalion at the university. Word came that 25th Armored Brigade would be through Barada Gorge by dusk. The British had hung on by the skin of their teeth, and Lyne and his Provisional Brigade would be commended. He was "Mentioned in Dispatches," and given a promotion to Major General acquitting himself

completely after the loss of his brigade earlier in the fighting. In the old history, he would go on to command the 59th Infantry Division, and then take over the 50th Northumbrian Division at a most important time and place—Normandy, in June of 1944.

Boseville's tanks, the 25th Armored Brigade, would reach the reserve rail yard and move into the upper city through the embassy district, massing to prepare for an attack back across the upper neck of the city, which would cut off the German push near the Ammo Dump. Gille had to send word to KG Krefeld in the south that he now needed all his panzers, and so the infantry there fell back on defense. That was going to end the German assault towards the airfield, and they detached the Panzer Battalion, which joined the Wiking Recon battalion to form a hard hitting mobile group.

The result would soon become a stalemate. Gille had the center of the board, but could not find checkmate at Damascus, nor could he push any of his pawns to the 8th rank. So he, like Rommel, would accept the situation as a pyrrhic victory. Rommel would get his soon to be famous photograph of the Nazi flag flying over the ruin of the Parliament building in Old Damascus. Hitler would get his bragging rights, but little more. The road to Damascus was a road to nowhere....

* * *

Where would Rommel go from here? That was the question of the hour. *Eisenfall* had theoretically reached its principle objective at Damascus. Just as Guderian had taken Baghdad. But the intractable British simply refused to see their situation as one of an army in retreat, and least of all, an army that had been defeated. It was just another battle, another temporary setback they were pledging to redress in good time. And as far as Lyne was concerned at Damascus, Rommel wasn't going anywhere, save over his dead body.

The Desert Fox had outfoxed Alexander with his sudden flank attack, but found the 'Law of Overstretch' would now constrain any further moves south. It was another 160 Kilometers to Amman in Jordan on that flank, and 250 to Jerusalem. Gille's Wiking Division did not have the strength to fully reduce Damascus, let alone those other distant objectives.

Rommel came down himself to see Gille and evaluate his prospects on the night of April 1st, April Fool's Day. As he stared out into the marshlands

southeast of the city, he thought he could see the shimmering glow there that was known as *Ignis Fatuus* in the old Latin, “Foolish fire,” the night mirage that tempted wayward travelers on. It was called many things in different cultures. The British called the phenomenon “Pixy Light,” the work of Fairies, but it was nothing more than luminescent marsh gas that night.

Yet seeing it, Rommel thought of the legend of the will-o’-the-wisp, and he now knew that Cairo, that other foolish fire that had always haunted his dreams, was still nearly 700 kilometers away, over unfought desert sands, ragged hills, and barren lava beds the old fox would never tread upon.

So I won’t get to Egypt on this road either, he knew. The only question now was whether the Führer would realize this any time soon. Rommel knew that his entire position in Syria was now nothing more than a flank guard for Guderian in Iraq. He kicked the British out of Baghdad weeks ago, consolidated for ten to 12 days, and then pushed south. But Guderian had a long way to go as well. The British are fighting a very stubborn delaying action there, and I know for a fact that an army in retreat can always outpace one on the advance by simply throwing out small blocking forces in the rear guard.

It is 500 kilometers from Baghdad to Basra and Abadan. That is another will-o’-the-wisp fantasy in the Führer’s mind. Guderian has the force to get there, but even if he does, what then? The British will be waiting there in a good strong defensive line, and Guderian will look over his shoulder and realize his ammunition must now come 1000 kilometers from the Turkish frontier, and that is after it has already traveled 1500 kilometers through Turkey to Istanbul. A supply line 2500 kilometers long! That is the same distance as the road from Tunis all the way to Cairo and the Suez Canal in North Africa.

To think that I could reach Cairo with three mobile divisions was simply foolish. To think Hitler could do anything with the oil in Abadan, even if Guderian could take the place, was also foolish. We are both out in the deserts to simply annoy the British... And how long will it be before things heat up again on the *Ostfront*, and Hitler comes calling for his Wikings and Brandenburgers?

Manstein is also out chasing the shimmering fire of the Führer’s dreams. He had to fight like a tiger last winter to keep Zhukov at bay along the Don sector. Has he forgotten that? What in the world is Manstein doing in the

Caucasus now? He cleared out the Kuban, and then went right on through Volkov's troops to get after Maykop. Unfortunately, for this he gets war with the Orenburg Federation. The Führer's choices boggle the mind at times. Yes, they will be a real headache for Ivan Volkov, and a most unexpected gift for Sergei Kirov.

* * *

The man with that headache was pacing, the heat of his anger and distress becoming a visible sheen of sweat on his brow. Things had gone from bad to worse. Volkov had been moving unit after unit into the Caucasus to build up the mass he knew he would need to have any chance of stopping the Germans. His 3rd Kazakh Army was all but destroyed, but 3rd Regular Army, and troops from the 7th and 5th Armies, had managed to fall back and deploy in a wide arc centered on Mineralne Vody and Pyatigorsk. The left was anchored on the mountain country to the south, and the right on the thickening course of the Kuma River as it wound its way towards the Caspian Sea. As that line firmed up, it was beginning to look like it would finally hold, and well west of the Terek. But the Germans had other ideas.

The German infantry of 11th and 17th Armies pressed doggedly behind the retreating enemy, slowly taking up portions of the line that had been held by the German Panzer Divisions. Then, almost overnight, all those mobile formations swung rapidly north and east, along the line of the Kuma River. There were few crossing points there, with poor wooden bridges, but the Germans had several bridging regiments, and pioneers organic to their Panzer Divisions that could also facilitate a river crossing. The Kuma would be no more of an obstacle than any of the other rivers they had crossed to come to this place, much to Volkov's chagrin.

When they did cross, the following day near Budennovsk, they did so with swift, well-practiced precision. The Kazakh troops had been relying on the river itself to hold the greatest portion of that line, but now the Grossdeutschland Division lead the way, with 17th and 18th Panzers to either side, and the 29th Motorized in reserve. By the 18th of April they had created a bridgehead 30 kilometers deep, and Volkov's generals were frantically detaching every mobile of mechanized unit they had from the armies on the front and sending them east to try and stop that advance.

This would become a swirling battle between both mechanized forces on the arid steppes of the Terek District, all the land between the Kuma in the north, and the Terek River to the south. Volkov would now learn just how good the German Panzer Divisions were, and how bad his own mobile formations were by comparison. Volkov's few tank brigades were still using old BT-7, OT-7 and T-60 tanks for the most part, though he had designed and built one new modern medium tank, which he called the T-44A, to give it a notch up on the Soviet T-34. It was roomier, had much better off road performance, better 120mm frontal armor and a copy of the highly successful Russian 85mm main gun. It would have been a tank that might match the German VK-75 Lions, but he had only one small problem—there were just 24 of his new medium tanks on the entire front.

The Germans had continued with Manstein's strategy of the indirect approach. By constantly moving east over the broad empty steppe country, they outflanked any defensive line that Volkov's Generals struggled to build in the south. Now that strategy had led to a most difficult situation for the Armies of Orenburg. The German 3rd Panzergrenadier Division had followed the long Manych Canal south and east from Divnoye, and then threw up a pontoon bridge. This was the report Volkov received on the 15th of April, as the battle for the main bridgehead over the Kuma was heating up. General Karimov, a heavy set grey bull of a man, with a barrel chest and thick neck, was ordered to report on the situation. He was commanding the entire Caucasus Front, and now it was his turn to be the bringer of the bad news.

Chapter 18

“The Germans have a light mobile division over the Manych Canal,” said Karimov, “and it has already cut the rail line to Astrakhan in two places.”

“What? That rail line is vital! Without it we have to rely on seaborne shipments to Makhachkala and Baku.”

“That is the case, but we have virtually nothing in reserve to defend that area. I sent both security regiments from Astrakhan, the last two in the city. Now we have finally moved two 5th Army divisions north to help out, but that sector remains a critical vulnerability in our entire defense. To hold it adequately, I will need to pull more infantry out of the Terek River line, most likely from 5th Army, and the front near Mozdok is already thinned out with the need to shift forces to contain the German Kuma Bridgehead.”

“Are we holding there?” Volkov was still pacing.

“Barely holding. We’ve thrown all the mechanized brigades from every field army into that fight, but it is like feeding wood into a sawmill. Mister General Secretary, a decision will have to be made as to where we now attempt to establish the main line of our defense. Unfortunately, we have two widely spaced objectives to defend. In the South, Groznyy and Baku are both well established strategic supply sites for our oil production. But in the north, we have Astrakhan, and the new developments at the Tengiz and Kashagan fields. It may be that we will soon have to make a difficult choice.”

Volkov stopped in his tracks, giving him a hard look. “You mean chose between the north or south? We cannot defend both?”

“Well, if the German Army would be kind enough to pick one or another, and let me know, then yes, I could defend it. Unfortunately, they have established themselves in a good position between both those objectives. At the moment, their effort seems to be focused on Groznyy, and outflanking the Terek River positions. If they break through our defenses along the Kuma Bridgehead, then everything west of Groznyy is compromised. All the defenses in the Terek River bend are useless in that event.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?”

“Fall back here.” He pointed to the map. “Establish the line about 20

kilometers west of Groznyy, anchored on the heavy woodland in the high country. Then it follows the line of the Terek, all the way to the Caspian. There the terrain also favors us, because the heavy marshland makes it unsuitable for their mobile divisions.”

“Very well. Then do this.”

“I will order it,” said Karimov, “but that will soon dangle the same question before us. Once the Germans fully appreciate the nature of the terrain in the eastern Terek region, then what will they do with their mobile divisions? They will first bring up their infantry to face off against us on that defensive line I just outlined, then they have but two options. The first would be an attack here, just east of Groznyy, between Gudermes and the bridge south of Kargalinskaya. That is a given. It flanks Groznyy, and leads directly to the main road and rail through Makhachkala and on to Baku.”

“And the second option?”

“North,” said Karimov, a warning in his voice. “In fact, the entire mobile Corps could disengage and head north at any time. Remember, they have already bridged the Manych Canal. If they send yet another division over to go after the main rail to Astrakhan, we may not be able to stop them. In that event, all forces presently committed here will be cut off. Yes, we will still have sea communications over the Caspian, but the German Stukas will make short work of that in due course. Furthermore. If they choose a containment strategy on the Groznyy-Terek line, they could take that entire Mobile Corps, or a good portion of it, right up to Astrakhan....” He let that sink in before he spoke again, emphasizing the grave danger.

“Then we lose everything. We will lose access to all the oil in the south, and at present, I have nothing but cooks, barge handlers, stevedores and service troops at Astrakhan. Those fields, and the developments at Tengiz and Kashagan are ripe fruit for the taking.”

“God almighty....” Volkov had no good standing with the deity he invoked, but he now realized the full gravity of the situation he was facing. The Germans already had Baba Gurgur and Maykop. Now they could bottle up all his oil at Groznyy and Baku, and seize the fields around Astrakhan. Karimov was not being dramatic when he said they could lose everything. “What could we do to prevent this?” he said. “And you damn well better have a plan.”

“I have no more armies, unless you would order me to give up Volgograd

and move the 2nd Army to Astrakhan. Yet that would open a vast hole in our lines for the Soviets to exploit. They may not be able to do so in the short run, but the southern Volga would be undefended. We would have to pull back the 1st Kazakh Army, which is now opposite the Italians between the Volga and the Manych Canal, and that means yielding the entire Kalmyk Steppe region, making the Volga our new defense line. Yet before that happens we still have the option to pull out as much as we can and try to swing it north of the Kuma and Manych Canal—to try and defend Astrakhan well south of the city, and also hold Elista. Unfortunately, every division we move is one less to hold the line I showed you earlier. But we must choose, Mister General Secretary, North or South. We cannot adequately defend both. Choose one, and we may have a chance at holding on to something here. Astrakhan would seem the better objective to try and hold, since it is very likely that Grozny will fall, and Baku will be cut off, even by sea routes over the Caspian.”

Volkov clenched his jaw, his eyes dark, brow deepened with anger. “Damn the German Army,” he said in a low voice. “Damn Hitler and his rapacious appetite....” He waited, leaning over the map. Then, without even looking at Karimov, he gave the order.

“Save Astrakhan—by any means possible. Save it, or I will have your head!”

Karimov would have his work cut out for him. He looked for the troops he needed to accomplish it anywhere he could find them. The 71st Division, part of 7th Army, had been forced to retreat over the Manych Canal at Divnoye. Now it was part of the defensive group around Elista, and together with the 11th Guards Rifle Division there, he had two strong and fresh divisions he could quickly move by rail. If he could extricate the bulk of the 7th Army from its positions in the south, then the north might be held.

The danger point now was a narrow 40-kilometer corridor near the confluence of the Kuma with the Caspian Sea. The thin rail line traversed that corridor, crossing the Kuma near its marshy delta on the Caspian, and proceeded north to Astrakhan. As far as Orenburg was now concerned, and particularly for General Karimov, that 40-kilometer bottleneck was the most important ground in the Federation.

The General began extricating any intact mobile brigade he had and shifting it in that direction, and was also pulling all the divisions of the 7th Army out of the Terek defenses, and looking for ways to get them to the

threatened zone. The question now was whether he would have time to do so before the Germans either broke through or decided to shift north over the Manych Canal as he feared.

To make this sudden shift, he still had to keep something on the line in the Kuma Bridgehead sector, and for this he relied on the Army of the Kalmyk, a second-rate formation that he knew would not hold long. It was his intention to order those troops to begin a withdrawal to the Groznyy line. His aim was to try and save and move as many regular Army formations as possible.

At the same time, he summoned an Air Vice Marshall in charge of the Southern Sector, and told him to do everything possible to interdict the German supply line over the Manych Canal. To that end, the airships *Taskent*, *Taraz* and *Sarkand* transported their airmobile companies behind the German lines and landed to conduct raids, if only a demonstration of the vulnerability of that LOC. The Germans had clear air superiority, but those airships could climb to heights where no German fighter could follow, and then they could choose just the right time in the dead of night to quickly descend and deliver their assault squads.

The rail line was a life saver, in spite of attempts by the Luftwaffe to interdict it. By the 19th of April, Karimov had labored mightily to save his own head, and as much of the army as he could. He now had eight rifle divisions and four smaller brigades north of the Kuma to begin operations aimed at uprooting the German 3rd Panzergrenadier Division. Three more divisions were being moved from Armenia and Georgia, and now only the 3rd Army was still trying to hold the line near the Terek, with scattered elements of the Kalmyk Army along the Kuma Bridgehead line. That position would soon collapse, and a full-scale retreat to Groznyy would begin.

* * *

General Manstein was also looking at the map, quite pleased with what he had accomplished in just a few weeks. His infantry was moving on the Terek, and his 1st Panzer Army had performed brilliantly, unhinging every enemy defensive line with its skillfully executed maneuvers. The enemy finally saw the danger, and they have massed everything they could find to try and stop

me, he thought. 3rd Panzergrenadiers got over the Manych Canal and put the fear of the Lord into them. Now they are scrambling to defend Astrakhan.

At the moment, my mobile forces are about equidistant from those two widely spaced objectives, Astrakhan and Baku. It's clear that they don't want me moving north. They have compromised what might have been a very solid defense here in the south to try and protect the approaches to Astrakhan. So it seems that someone, most likely Volkov, has made his choice. He isn't stupid. He can read a map as easily as I can, and knows that he cannot hold both cities. I am 40 kilometers from cutting his armies off, so he is trying to pull as many divisions out as he can now.

As for Baku, I may eventually get there, but it will not be as easy as it looks. On one side are the mountains, on the other side the Caspian Sea. As send 11th and 17th Armies south, with each mile we gain, the open terrain is compressed a little more by that geography. The will be attacking into a funnel created by those mountains and the sea. With every mile, the enemy defensive front compresses, and it can therefore be held with fewer and fewer troops. It will be no place for my Panzer Divisions, as there will be no room to maneuver there. So how to proceed here?

I have orders to take Baku, but they say nothing about Astrakhan—at least not yet. That city is a major oil producing site, and also acts as the gateway to more developments and resources on the North Caspian shore. Success has many friends, and Hitler must be elated that his miracle worker has delivered the Caucasus as promised. How long will it be before I get orders to move on Astrakhan?

I do not wish to go there, and frankly, it would take a major effort to just get over the Manych in force. That river is impenetrable over most of its length, kilometers wide and surrounded by deep water marshes. It can only be crossed in three places, the Manych Canal where it meets the Kuma River, the road and rail bridges at Divnoye, and the sector near Salsk and Proletarskaya. The first two are defended, and we control the last.

So how would I operate if ordered to continue to prosecute the war against Volkov? I would attack at Divnoye in conjunction with a drive on Elista from the north and west, where the Rumanians are posted. Volkov uses Elista as a forward depot and air field, so I will have to take that place soon. There are no good German troops available. Could the 3rd Rumanian Army do this? We shall see. Perhaps I could stiffen that force by adding in 22nd

Panzer Division, but that unit is in deep reserve. Otherwise, I would have to shift a division from the south, and this seems my best option at the moment. Thus far, the Russians have been accommodating. We know they've been building up, but do they have plans to attack along the lower Don? If so, where might they come? I may need to leave 22nd Panzer where it is.

There were always questions like this in his mind. The long hiatus of winter was ending, particularly in the south, and he knew that operations would soon begin again. In late 1942, Georgie Zhukov had thrown one offensive after another at the Germans between Volgograd and Kharkov, but Manstein, with the able services of men like Steiner and Hermann Balck, had parried each and every one. Steiner had fought to hold open a corridor to Model at Voronezh, butting heads with strong Soviet armies south of Kursk. Then winter imposed its freezing hand on the battlefield, Hitler gave up Voronezh, and Manstein went south to eventually learn he would now have to fight both enemies and allies alike.

The campaign had been a complete success, and now he could sense that things were winding down towards an inevitable conclusion. His 17th and 11th Armies would grind their way into Grozny, of this he had no doubt. Whether they could then go all the way to Baku remained to be seen, but Manstein had no intention of using his five mobile divisions there. His effort now was to get to the most favorable position possible, and then find a way to extricate those valuable troops, just as he had done after reaching Volgograd. In truth, he did not really wish to go to Baku, nor did he want to keep any of these five good mobile divisions in the Caucasus, but orders were orders.

First things first, he thought. I must take Grozny and then move aggressively for Baku, but I need to reposition my mobile forces to a more central location. As for 3rd Panzergrenadier Division, its position north of the Manych Canal is becoming somewhat precarious. So I will order General Graser to consolidate and then simply defend that bridgehead. I am not going to Astrakhan by that route, some 250 kilometers. If I must drive on Astrakhan, then I will move mobile forces to Zimovinki by rail to get them all north of the Manych. From there, the only obstacle will be the desolation of the Kalmyk Steppe—balkas, stone fields, salt pans, marshes, deep sand. It is no place for an army, and even when we cross it, half of Astrakhan is on the other side of the Volga. My panzers might get there, but that is the last place I would want to send them. In fact, I want them back north of the Don

as soon as possible. Let us hope the Führer is satisfied with Groznyy and Baku....

Part VII

Red Star Rising

“ Men rise from one ambition to another: first, they seek to secure themselves against attack, and then they attack others.”

—Niccolo Machiavelli

Chapter 19

Manstein had good reason to want those mobile divisions north of the Don. Winter had finally released its icy grip on the land, and three weeks of mud had passed with the Spring thaw. Now, in mid-April, the ground was drying out and the Soviet Army was planning two Spring offensives, hoping to catch the Germans before they could complete offensive preparations of their own. All things considered, the Soviets were facing a much more difficult task than they had before them in Fedorov's history. The German forces arrayed under Manstein's command were considerably stronger than they were in the old history.

To begin with, there had been no disaster at Stalingrad. Manstein pulled his best Panzer Divisions out of the fight for Volgograd, and sent in ten infantry divisions. When those troops had reduced the Soviet defense there to a tiny strip along the Volga near the factory district, he then turned over the whole operation to Volkov. All those divisions, along with many extracted from the Voronezh pocket, were now the forces he commanded in the Caucasus. That campaign had achieved startling results, overwhelming the weary and supply starved divisions the Soviets had left behind there, and then driving Volkov's forces all the way to edge of Groznyy.

The German army had proved itself to be a potent and dangerous force. It had not taken the staggering losses it sustained in the real history at Stalingrad, and instead of desperately trying to patch together a front that had been completely shattered between November of 1942 and February of 1943, Manstein commanded forces and lines of battle that were solid, well provisioned, and backed by strong reserves.

In the real history, the SS Panzer Korps was only now beginning to form as a strong cohesive fighting force that it would become, but in these Altered States, Steiner had commanded those divisions from the outset of Operation Blue, driving all the way to Volgograd, and then forming the backbone of the defense against Zhukov's winter offensives. He had a hardened and highly skilled force, and for the last month his three remaining divisions had been in reserve, receiving new tanks, equipment and replacements.

So the Spring of 1943 found the German army unbroken, raging through

the Middle East, and yet still as strong as ever on the *Ostfront* . Paulus was alive and well, and his 6th Army had never died the agonizing death it experienced at Stalingrad. That saved 40 German and Axis allied divisions from destruction, and made a major difference in the prospects for 1943. Even as Manstein focused his own attention to the battle in the Caucasus, the Don Front was strongly held by good German divisions, with a few weak spots that had been filled by Luftwaffe Field divisions formed into several Korps. The whole region was still looking for a definitive battle that might form a turning point in this campaign, and both sides were churning through possible offensive plans for the Spring.

Through the long winter months of January and February, the opposing armies had dug in and worked to replenish their forces. Now the Russians were again ready to go on the attack, and Zhukov had outlined a grand offensive scheme he wanted to launch in April. The plan was both daring and complex, and it would test the limits of the Soviet commanders' ability to coordinate large mobile forces in the field over multiple fronts.

He met with Sergei Kirov and his intelligence Chief Berzin at their headquarters in Leningrad to explain the plan. "Kharkov," he said at the outset. "That is the primary objective."

"Not Rostov?" said Kirov.

"Old hat," the General replied quickly. "We'll return to that sector in good time, but we must have Kharkov if we are to ever have any chance of getting over the Dnieper."

"The Dnieper? Isn't that a far reach for us now?"

"It is, but it must remain the primary strategic objective of our effort this year. We tried to liberate the Donbass last year, but failed; so now we will strike the line farther north. The liberation of Ukraine will begin by seizing one of its greatest cities, Kharkov."

"Show me how you want to proceed," said Kirov, gesturing to the table map.

"Very well," said Zhukov. "Manstein is deep in the Caucasus choking Ivan Volkov, and that is a gift we never expected to receive in this war. While the political situation has ruled out alliance with Volkov, given the military reality of the situation, that is what we have now. Our forces cannot coordinate with each other, but we have one common enemy, and so we must take every advantage of that. Last winter, our forces were strongly

concentrated here after the reduction of the Voronezh pocket.” Zhukov pointed to the region southwest of Voronezh near Kursk. “We pushed hard for Bryansk, but the winter conditions prevented any real concerted effort. Now, with the Spring, we are ready to try again, only this time, it will be Kharkov.”

“With Rokossovsky?”

“Correct... And Vatutin.”

“Can we manage an offensive from two fronts at the same time?”

“We will soon find out, but I have every confidence that we can succeed. To begin with, this is not the army the Germans defeated with their Operation Barbarossa. Both our Generals, and the troops they now command, have gained much experience, particularly in the use of our armor. Last year we enjoyed one advantage in that our tanks were found to be superior to those of the enemy. They hit harder, moved faster over open terrain, and we were able to get them out in sufficient numbers to matter. Our Tank Corps concept was only just being introduced at the time of the Tula operation, now it has been adopted across the entire army. We no longer operate the armor in packets embedded within the Rifle Division armies. Now over 80% are fielded in these new Tank and Mech Corps.”

“So the task is to learn how to coordinate them in an offensive,” said Kirov.

“Correct, but we cannot yet fight as the Germans do.”

“What do you mean?”

“They avoid frontal engagements, concentrate everything at the point of penetration, and often utilize the strategy of the double envelopment to create a battle of encirclement.”

“Yes,” said Kirov with a shrug, “a million of our soldiers learned that they hard way.”

“We cannot fight as they do,” said Zhukov. “Our strategy must be adapted to the structure of the army, the capabilities of our soldiers and Generals, the terrain we fight on, and our objectives. So I have begun to attack on a broad front, with multiple thrusts, or perhaps one or two large offensive pushes. The Germans fight to destroy our forces, and do not mandate terrain objectives. They gain ground only after destroying our armies, as we have seen. By contrast, we are fighting to liberate the Soviet Union, and so recapturing terrain is our principle objective, and we seek to destroy the

enemy because he opposes us as we pursue that purpose. They seek a decisive decision with each operation, we instead seek to wear our enemy down by mass and attrition. This is why we pushed to develop more artillery. Now our armies will be supported by two or three times the number of guns in our offensives compared to 1941. We break through with the shock of those guns and the massing of our armor.”

“But they have managed to stop us at every turn.”

“True, but they pay a price for that. While they are rapidly introducing new and better tanks, their forces are now fighting on many fronts, and it is no longer easy for them to concentrate for big offensives. So our strategy must be to keep up relentless pressure, and this is why we attack in the south. There the terrain is broken by a series of parallel river barriers, the Don, Donets, and Dnieper. Our plan is to attack on a broad front, but with concentration in key areas to achieve breakthrough and threaten envelopment of their forces. Their natural defense would be to withdraw to the next defensible position—the next river—which then gives us all the terrain between those two walls of water. Our objective here is to move from the Don to the Donets, and liberate everything in between.”

“We could not do that in the south last year.” Kirov remained understandably skeptical.

“True, but things have changed. Their invasion of the Caucasus took twenty divisions with it, and many will have to stay there for some time. Last November we tried out the concept of the massed Shock Group—multiple armies focused on a strong concentric thrust. They stopped us, but had to use their very best mobile divisions to do so. This time we play out that strategy with multiple thrusts, aiming to overtax their defense.”

“Do we have sufficient forces for this?”

“We do. I have reorganized the offensive power of the army into several Operational Shock Groups. They are generally composed of one Shock Army, and a new Guards Army forged from the veteran divisions of the first two years of fighting. A Tank Army could also be substituted for one of the other armies, or added to an existing group to create more striking power for deeper operations. Three Groups have been assembled for this operation, and renumbered so all the armies assigned to a given group would share the same numeral designation. The front will still be held by the regular field armies, and these Shock Groups will move up just prior to the onset of the attack.”

“So you will not attack from the Don Bridgeheads?”

“Only as a feint. The Germans must cover and hold Rostov to protect their position in the Caucasus, so any attack from our lower Don bridgeheads will be certain to produce a strong reaction. I will use that against them this time, and launch a spoiling attack threatening Rostov. Last year we fought hard to reach the Oskol River. That is where our main attack will come from now, and with the objective of liberating all the ground between the Oskol and Donets. Phase II is to then force the upper Donets along a broad front, all with the aim of taking Kharkov. Phase III, should the opportunity present itself, might be a deeper penetration beyond the Donets.”

“Show me on the map.”

“Very well, we start where the enemy expects us to come, the lower Don. That attack will only be meant to pull in the enemy mobile reserves, and then it will be withdrawn. But while it is underway, the real operation begins here, east of Prokhorovka. I have planned a series of successive blows against the German. This is the 2nd Army along the Psel south of Kursk, and on its right is their 4th Army defending the line of the Oskol River. I will attack them both, and with three primary objectives. The first is to eliminate these two German 2nd Army strongpoints at Oboyan and Prokhorovka. This will launch first, conducted by the 5th Shock Group. Initially, it will seem to be a local operation, but a day later we will throw two more shock groups over the Oskol River—here, between Novy Oskol and Valuki, at the southern end of their 4th Army’s line. This is the main push for Kharkov, and it will be further augmented by a special mobile group under General Popov, which will push for the Donets. I am designating this whole operation as *Krasny Zvezda*. ” (Red Star).

Kirov cast a wary glance at Berzin, but said nothing. That was an eerie echo of the name given to Popov’s ill-fated operation east and south of Kharkov in the real history, intending to flank that city and drive on to the Dnieper. Called Operation Star, it had overextended itself, and was eventually defeated by a stunning counterattack put in by Manstein, his famous “Backhand Blow.” It was as if Zhukov had read the same “material” that Kirov and Berzin had been using to guide them through the war, though they knew that was clearly impossible.

“And the third objective?” asked Kirov.

“Assuming all goes well and the opportunity presents itself, Poltava. After

reducing those strongpoints, the 5th Shock Group will move on Kharkov as well, and once it arrives there, all forces will reorganize and form one concerted thrust at Poltava. Kharkov then becomes the forward depot to support our operations against Poltava, and we use that city as a springboard to the Dnieper this summer. This attack will then threaten to cut off everything the Germans have to the east, the Donbass, Donets Basin and the Caucasus. You see? We will not have to fight for the Donbass this year, though I will launch a spoiling attack there, intended only to pull in enemy reserves. Once we have Kharkov and Poltava, the Germans will simply have to give all the rest to us to avoid being cut off. We will not have to grind our way through the heavy built up industrial region of the Donets Basin, because once we reach Poltava in force, that sector is completely flanked. We can go right to Kremenchug, or anywhere east of that city, and threaten to cross the Dnieper.”

“I see.... And General, what will the Germans do about this?”

“That remains to be seen, but we will keep considerable reserves in hand to deal with it, the 2nd Shock Group.”

When the General departed for the front, Kirov gave Berzin a strange look. “Uncanny,” he said. “He comes to us with the same plan—the same name, and even with Popov leading that thrust in the south!”

“It certainly has a very dark rhyme to it,” said Berzin.

“And a dark ending as well,” said Kirov. “What if this General Manstein does the very same thing he did in the Material? Popov’s attack becomes a disaster. I don’t see how this attack can succeed. The German 6th Army is still in the Donbass. Shouldn’t we destroy it first, as in the Material?”

“Zhukov seems to think we can bypass it,” said Berzin. “And he may be correct.”

“Assuming that, do you believe the Germans will just sit there while we go raging into Kharkov and on to Poltava?”

“They might do exactly that. You forget Hitler. He went to war with Volkov for a very good reason—he wants that oil, and now that his troops have reached Groznyy, he can smell it. Maykop was just the appetizer. The fields at Groznyy are much bigger, and from there, he can see both Baku and Astrakhan. He won’t give any of that up easily, so he’ll hold on to the Caucasus at any cost.”

“But that means they will also have to hold the lower Don region to cover

Rostov, and the Donets Basin as well. Isn't Rostov the more important objective now? It was in the Material."

"Perhaps," said Berzin. Rostov was already secured by the time this operation was launched in the Material—but only because of the German defeat at Stalingrad. That was Zhukov's intention last winter with Operation Saturn. Then he played that wildcard with Operation Jupiter, and it shifted the gravity of the whole campaign further north. The Offensive aimed at Bryansk did the same thing. It concentrated most of our offensive power in the Voronezh sector. Moving those armies about is no simple matter. So Zhukov plays the game from where he stands, and in that light, this plan makes perfect sense. Remember, the army was fairly well spent when Operation Star was launched in February of 1943 according to our documents. That isn't the case here. General Winter was so severe this year that he forced us all to sit and wait. Now the army is well rested, and with fresh troops and the best tanks and equipment we could give them—not those hand-me-down Matilda's Popov had from the British Lend Lease Program. Things could turn out differently, and if this plan does work, it would compromise all the German positions to the east of Dnipropetrovsk, just as Zhukov suggests."

"Yes..." said Kirov. "If it works. I'm a bit nervous about this one. See if we can scare up something more in the way of a reserve. This General Manstein is not to be underestimated."

Chapter 20

The sector chosen for the northern attack was just east of the city of Prokhorovka, an old Cossack rail station on the Moscow Kharkov rail line that was built by an engineer named Prokhorov. The town was in ruins, many homes and buildings burned out rubble, but it had been fortified by German Engineers, and was protected by a thick belt of minefields.

About 12 kilometers to the west on the River Psel, was Krasny Oktyabr, (Red October), which was chosen as the breakthrough zone for 5th Guards Army. About five kilometers southeast of Prokhorovka, the heavy defensive works thinned out at another red town, simply called Krasnoye. That was now the nest of KG Schubert an independent unit in Model's new 2nd Army. His 305th Infantry Division held Prokhorovka, and KG Schubert was the last unit under Model's direct control at Krasnoye. From there, the German line would stretch southwest to the Oskol, with the 4th Army under General Heinrici. So Schubert was right on the seam between the two armies, commanding a small *Kampfgruppe* composed of three more battalions, the 161st Panzerjager, 21st Armored Car, and 221st Pioneers.

Oberst Kristen Shubert had passed an uneasy night, his well-trained ear certain that he could hear the dull rumble of distant vehicles moving in the night. He asked for the latest Luftwaffe recon report, but learned that no enemy forces had been seen on the roads to the north that day. Yet he could not shake the feeling of inner anxiety the morning, after a fitful and restless six hours of sleep. So he resolved to visit the forward edge of the town, touring the bunkers and having a look for himself. It was not long before when he saw the dark lines of Russian infantry emerge from the misty steppe land north of the city, and immediately ran to the nearest command bunker to get to a radio.

"Artillery!" he shouted. "There are swarms of Red infantry coming at us!"

The code word launching the attack was very simple that morning, and it was sent in the clear on the radio: "*Red, Red October!*" It was more than a battle cry hearkening back to the Revolution. In fact, it was announcing the names of the two villages singled out as breakthrough zones. The enemy coming at Schubert was the 5th Shock Army, meant to be the eastern pincer

for this initial operation aimed at eliminating the Prokhorovka strongpoint, and 5th Guards Army was moving up to begin the attack to the west at Krasny Oktyabr.

The Pioneers had no organic artillery of their own, and nothing more than mortars, which were already starting to pop off and range in on the advancing enemy. But Schubert put in a call to 2nd Army Artillery, which he knew was positioned in range. Soon the rounds of 10.5 and 15cm guns were starting to fall, mostly on the 24th Rifle Division. Then calls came in from 10th Luftwaffe Field Division, positioned just outside the town to the west. They wanted help, and Schubert knew this attack was more than a simple poke and prod against the line when stragglers from that unit began filtering into the town near his bunkers. There was power behind this operation. He could feel it in the rumble of the earth, hear it in the dull growl of heavy engines, and the movement of many trucks. The woodland to the north was suddenly teeming with enemy infantry.

That power was the entire 5th Shock Group under General Rokossovsky's Voronezh Front. Wherever a breakthrough was needed, Zhukov called on the Rock. He would lead with a strong attack from 5th and 15th Guards Rifle Corps, six guards rifle divisions in all, and this was only the leading edge of the storm, meant to find, engage and fix the positions of the enemy on the line. Behind them came the breakthrough wave, Koltzov's 5th Shock Army, and behind it was Rybalko's 5th Tank Army, with three tank corps. This last army was not moved up to the front until the night before the attack, and every effort was made to conceal the buildup in the dark woodland east of Prokhorovka.

There were two other Soviet armies in this sector, Kharitonov's 6th Army to the west covering the German fortified town of Oboyan, and Kazakov's 69th to the southeast. These forces were mainly to be tasked with holding the shoulders of the breakthrough zone, but they were strong formations, particularly the 6th, with six rifle divisions and a number of independent brigades and cavalry units. It would begin making attacks along the lines of Model's 5th Korps to keep it from maneuvering to oppose the breakthrough sector. The rifle divisions made attacks all along the line, as far west as Oboyan, which had been a fortified strongpoint held by the Germans all winter. Once a breakthrough was obtained near Prokhorovka, the main axis of the attack was to be southwest, skirting past Belgorod, and then on to

Kharkov. In making this maneuver, the Russians would be threatening all the divisions in Model's 2nd Army to the west, which was now on the line in a wide arc above Belgorod, stretching all the way to Sumy like a great steel shield.

As Zhukov had explained, the attack was intended to seem like an isolated event. And it wasn't Model that Zhukov was really threatening, but 4th Army under Heinrici. Only the western pincer would launch from the vicinity of Prokhorovka. The real danger would come when the second pincer launched from the Oskol, on the southern end of 4th Army, a much stronger attack. At the same time, a second operation dubbed "Operation Comet" would make a strong spoiling attack on the Middle Don to hopefully pull in mobile units behind the front there, and prevent them from moving northwest against Operation Red Star.

There was no question that the little town of Krasnoye would fall, as it did on the morning of April 10th when Oberst Schubert and his pioneers were forced from their nest as the heavy guns of the 5th Tank Destroyer Brigade began pummeling their positions with 122mm HE rounds. Falling back from the village, they soon were met by elements of the German 305th Infantry, which had been posted as local reserves. Schubert's little Kampfgruppe was well scattered now, but he learned his second pioneer battalion had not yet been attacked.

Krasny Oktyabr also fell just before dawn, and that became the most serious breach in the line. The 24th and 25th Tank Corps were waiting to push through, and the growl and rattle of the tanks joined the boom of artillery as they attacked. A frantic call came in from General Oppenländer of the 305th Infantry to his 5th Korps commander, General Siebert at his HQ, and it was necessarily brief—Russian tanks had broken through west of Prokhorovka and his HQ at Komsomets was being overrun. That was 10 kilometers *behind* Prokhorovka, where the rail line snaked its way northeast towards the town. (*See map for 5th Shock Group Operations*).

"They hit us on both flanks! Word is that we'll have a breakthrough on the right as well. I must go, they are right on top of us!"

Siebert knew Oppenländer to be a steady hand, which was why his division had been posted in that fortress town, but it was clear that this was something more than anyone expected that morning. He barked orders to get any local Korps assets moving to Komsomets, then he got on the telephone to

Model.

Reports kept migrating up the chain of command, and eventually went directly to Manstein, who was busy looking over maps on the battle for Groznyy when the signal came in. Initially, he was not overly concerned, since the action seemed confined to the vicinity of Prokhorovka, and appeared nothing more than chest thumping from the other side. Yet the question always lingered when a quiet sector of the line suddenly became active. Was this something big, or merely a local head butting as often happened along the extended front?

Reports began to come in, slowly filling out the details of what was happening. It looked like an operation to pinch off one of the dimples in the line. That could mean the Russians were trying to tidy up the front, which meant Oboyan might be next. Seeing that Model's 5th Korps under Siebert was involved, he decided to get on the telephone and contact the 2nd Army Commander at his HQ.

"Model? What is happening up there? Are the Russians trying to spoil my party?"

"Someone rang the doorbell early this morning," said Model. "A strong attack has developed since. They overran Schubert's KG this morning, right on the edge near the Army boundary with Heinrici. Now they have their foot in the door and a strong right shoulder pushing hard."

"Tanks?"

"At least three corps reported. One is trying to get around Siebert's flank near KG Schubert, and two more have broken through west of Prokhorovka. They've reached the rail line and spoiled Oppenländer's breakfast."

"Then you believe they are just trying to isolate the bastion at Prokhorovka?" Manstein probed for Model's assessment of the situation.

"You know Zhukov," said Model. "When he commits a full tank army, he means business. This is no spoiling attack. It has some depth. We have reports of units from three separate armies already involved, and one is a Guards formation."

"Anything happening further west along your lines?"

"Not yet," said Model. "I've been watching my other flank, but there's no activity there. Thus far, this appears to be an isolated attack, but with a lot of mechanized units. It could be a prelude to something more."

"Any word from Heinrici?"

“Nothing. His 56th Infantry Division was just to the right of this attack on Schubert, but aside from some pressure there, his entire front is quiet, all the way to the Oskol River, and then down to Valuki—dead quiet.”

“Which is somewhat strange,” said Manstein. “This may be a bull, but so far it only has one horn if they intend anything more with this.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Model. “24th Panzer Korps is long gone, off to Germany for the refit. My problem now is that I’ve had to put damn near every division on the line to hold the front, so I’ve very little in reserve.”

“Dietrich is at Kharkov,” said Manstein.

Sepp Dietrich was indeed posted there, and with all of his 1st SS Leibstandarte Division. “If this is something big, then tell Oppenländer to give them Prokhorovka if they want it. You have my permission to make any adjustments to your line that you deem necessary. I’ll notify Dietrich. Otherwise, hold your front. If those tanks continue south, then they want Belgorod; and if they want that, then they’re after Kharkov.”

“A pity they sent all my Panzer Divisions home last month to refit,” said Model.

“Not all of them. 22nd Panzer moved back to Poltava to get ready for the trip home, but it looks like that will have to be delayed. I’ll alert them to the trouble, but for now, let’s see what develops. I’ll contact you tonight.”

Oppenländer’s situation became more serious hour by hour. Both the red villages had been taken, his flanks penetrated and pushed back, and he was perhaps two hours away from finding his whole division in a pocket centered on Prokhorovka. Siebert finally got hold of him again by radio, finding that he had moved his HQ just east of the rail line near Belenkino. That was where most of the divisional and Korps support artillery had been positioned, which had been firing nonstop for the last hour. With permission to withdraw in hand, he now had to decide whether he could pull the maneuver off. Oppenländer and his entire division, had escaped the carnage of Stalingrad, finding this post with Model’s 2nd Army to be a lucky reprieve from the heavier fighting—until now.

It seemed that fate was capricious and vengeful, and was conspiring to put the division into a little pocket all on its own. Moving men from long held defensive bunkers was never easy. His division would become scattered, exposed to attack the whole time, and it would likely be days before he could

get it back in any semblance of order. Yet if he left the men in place, they might find themselves in an enemy POW camp soon, or worse. He decided to stand his ground, ordering his division to assume all around defensive positions and ride out the storm. The division artillery was sent north, into the pocket that would now form. The Korps artillery he sent south, hoping there would be better use for it when the Army came back to relieve him. Oppenländer then ordered his staff north towards Prokhorovka, saying nothing to their wide-eyed stares. When a staff Lieutenant complained under his breath, he turned on the man with an angry rebuke.

“That is our division fighting up there, and we will fight right alongside them. Understand?” The General had seen far worse in the first war, and he had the medals on his chest to prove it.

Model was a whirlwind once he knew what was happening. Heinrici’s 12th Korps near Prokhorovka was already starting to fold back its left flank, with 56th Infantry there still under heavy pressure. The 305th was already pocketed, and there was now a gap in the front 20 kilometers wide. The only division Model had in reserve was the 102nd, but it was well to the west, south of Sumy. His right flank was now Siebert’s middle division, the 294th, and Siebert himself was already motoring northwest with his HQ to avoid being overrun. His problem was that “Festung Oboyan” was now sticking out like a sore thumb where the River Psel made its turn to the southeast. As long as he was charged with holding that city, he would have to hold that flank. The first thing he did was to put in a call to General Hell in the 7th Korps, the center Korps of the three that made up 2nd Army.

Learning that Hell still had a single regiment of the 299th in reserve, he ordered him to send it east immediately to shore up Siebert’s right flank. Then he looked to Schmidt’s Korps for the one major reserve he still had in hand. Friesner’s 102nd Infantry Division was behind Sumy, and he told Schmidt to send it to Siebert.

“I know it’s a long march, but the situation demands it.”

“General,” said Schmidt. “I just unloaded my latest supply delivery at Nizhnaya. That’s what Friesner’s men were doing. I’ll put them all right on that train and simply send it east.”

“Perfect!” Model was elated. “That rail comes right to me here at Tomarovka, and this attack might be heading my way. So send it here, Schmidt. Heinrici has a division screening Belgorod, and with the 102nd we

might just be able to throw up another defensive front. Get it moving as soon as you can. And if you can spare any Sturmgeschutz Battalions, send them as well.”

What Model really needed now was the power to counterattack, but that would only be possible if he could mass at least three infantry divisions, or get his hands on a Panzer division. Knowing the 1st SS Division was at Kharkov was a good consolation, but all that had happened up to this point was but a prelude.

At dawn on the 11th of April, the other shoe fell. Zhukov launched his second pincer from the Oskol River between Novyy Oskol and Valuki. The attack in the north would be made by Shurkin’s 63rd Army, and the Popov Mobile Group, with two Tank Corps and a column of three motorized brigades. To their immediate south, in the center of the breakthrough zone, the entire 1st Shock Army under Yerenenko would focus on one point in the line near Volokonovka, and just south of that, all of Kuznetsov’s 1st Guards Army would cross the river. This force had 1st Guard Tank, 1st Guard Mech, three Guards Rifle Divisions, the 81st Motorized, six other rifle divisions, and a lot of heavy artillery. It would be strongly supported on the left by Morozov’s 3rd Shock Army, and down near Valuki, where the five divisions of 3rd Guards Army would force a bridgehead there. Gagen’s 58th Army held the southern flank of this intended breakthrough zone, and Shurkin’s 63rd Army would hold the north shoulder. This was a much bigger attack than the attack near Prokhorovka, and once it got over the Oskol River in force, there was good open country to the west.

The full scope of Operation Red Star would soon become apparent. (*See map for Red Star General Plan*).

Chapter 21

Manstein had been keeping one eye on the situation in the north, while he monitored the progress of the assault over the Terek River east of Groznyy. The sector west of that city was a maze of heavy fortifications, and he had been hammering at them for three days. Yet his real hope was on the cross-river operation east of Groznyy, as it would unhinge this defense by threatening to flank the entire city. He had every confidence in Model's ability to handle this attack near Prokhorovka. Then he got the news of the second Soviet offensive.

So... The other horn of the bull, he thought. They always come in pairs. It is obvious that they are now attempting a pincer operation against 4th Army, but that is an awful lot to chew on. Heinrici has seven decent infantry divisions, and they are well rested. Model's army is even stronger, completely rebuilt over the winter, with three strong infantry Korps—ten divisions. If this attack had come in February, he would also have all of 24th Panzer Korps in reserve, but for now, the 22nd division will have to do.

Model is concentrating his reserves near Belgorod and his HQ at Tomarovka, right in the danger zone; always on the scene where the trouble is. It would put him in a position to counterattack that northern pincer if it continues south, but he'll need panzers. Yet this attack over the Oskol is a matter of some concern. It seems a good deal bigger than the one in the north.... So they are trying to pocket 4th Army, and this pincer is strong enough to move on Kharkov as well. That will be a tall order. Do they think they could really pocket the whole of Heinrici's 4th Army, and take Kharkov as well?

The answer to that got more complicated when the enormity of Operation Red Star emerged from the misty eastern shores of the Oskol River. There, the morning stillness was broken by the roaring thunder of the Breakthrough Artillery Division assigned to prepare the offensive. This division alone had 48 mixed guns in the 122mm to 152mm range, and another 48 super heavy 203mm howitzers. It would be joined by all the various army artillery, the thump of the mortar brigades and the hiss of well over 100 Katyusha rocket launchers, well over a thousand guns.

Covered by that intense bombardment, the line of the river was soon seething with Soviet infantry. Pontoon Engineers were dragging pre-assembled bridging units down to the river, where battalions were already crossing with assault boats. They were screened by woodland along the river, which stretched in a wide bend from Novyy Oskol, down to Valuki, where it made a sharp turn to the southwest, passing through Urazovo before flowing down to Kupyansk. It would continue south, eventually meeting the Donets about 10 kilometers southeast of the major crossing city of Izyum. One day Zhukov hoped to take that, but not this day.

The iron was falling on the weakest sector of the German line, held by the 1st Luftwaffe Field Korps with three “Divisions” that were really regiments in actual size. To their south as the river flowed to Valuki, the Osttruppen gathered from the 2nd and 4th Armies were patched into the line to fill gaps. The massive storm of steel and men that Zhukov was now throwing at this thin line was certain to break through, and from there, golden opportunities lay ahead, the first prize being Kharkov as planned.

The attack created a huge rip in the line, thick with rifle divisions, motorized battalions and then the powerful tank brigades crossing the bridges in the pre-dawn hours. By sunrise, the bridgehead over the Oskol was 7 kilometers deep and nearly 30 kilometers long from north to south. The Osttruppen were native Russian “volunteers,” mostly pressganged into makeshift battalions and used to watch rear areas and report on their brothers in arms engaged in partisan warfare. They were turncoats to be sure, but their ranks were salted with Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Serbians and even dissident Turkomen troops that had fled from Volkov’s regime. Needless to say, when the real heart and soul of the Soviet Army showed up, they had no stomach for the fight, and wanted to divest themselves of any association with the Germans as soon as possible, melting away and pretending to be woebegone peasant farmers simply caught up in the storm.

Heinrici had put them on the line because he wanted to keep at least one good German Division behind his front as a reserve. He had thought the wider watercourse of the river near Valuki would offer them protection, but the Soviets were well prepared to make the crossing. The price Heinrici paid for this oversight was the quick collapse of the line from Valuki north. The Luftwaffe troops were putting up resistance near Volkonovka, but they were being flanked by the Popov group to the north, and 1st Guards Army to the

south. Heinrici had ordered the single German division he had in reserve to move northwest and screen the approaches to Belgorod, so when this second storm broke, he had nothing he could send south to his right flank.

There was one mobile unit that might react, the two Reichsführer brigades at Volchansk, where a fan of several tributary rivers converged to flow into the northern Donets. That was a theater reserve, technically now part of Steiner's SS Panzer Korps, so to use it, he would have to get permission from Manstein. The General had his eye on it that morning as he looked over the map.

Volchansk, thought Manstein. That is where this big attack over the Oskol must eventually go, and then we'll see if they actually plan to cross the Donets in that sector. The Reichsführer is there now, and it would be a good place to send Dietrich. From there, he could also support Model's defense of Belgorod, so that is where *Leibstandarte* must go. With the Reichsführer Brigades, I will have a little iron in hand, but it will take more than that to stop this offensive. I have Hausser's 2nd SS at Izyum, and *Totenkopf* is further south at Donetsk. That is the force I will need, all of Steiner's Korps.

But it was not to be. It is said that bad things come in threes, and that proverb would be proved true the following morning on the Middle Don.

* * *

On the night of the 12th, Zhukov staged his surprise attack with the leading echelons of his main forces assembled for Operation Comet. As one division general after another was awakened in the night, the telephones were soon ringing off the hooks. A picture as black as night began to emerge as staff members in the Rostov HQ updated the large wall map. The entire line of the lower Don, from Boguchar to Bokovskaya, was under attack.

The left flank of that line was not strong, with the Luftwaffe 2nd Field Korps anchored on the river near Boguchar, a reserve infantry Korps in the center, and the 1st Luftwaffe Field Korps on the right. The latter two were under attack, along with the independent 17th Infantry Korps, as well as the 51st Infantry Korps. Those last two formations were under 6th Army control, and so now Paulus would be involved.

What is Zhukov up to here, thought Manstein? This third offensive is very broad, over 150 kilometers wide! And like the attack on the Oskol, they are falling hard on the weak points in the line. This was well planned. Those Luftwaffe divisions won't hold, so that means they will probably break through east of Millerovo by tomorrow morning. That is a key rail junction town, and the last bastion before the Donets crossings between Voroshilovgrad and Belaya Kalivta, and this is undoubtedly where this offensive is headed. If they get over the Donets, then I have Rostov to worry about, and that cannot be permitted.

Very bold, he thought. Yet they may be trying to do too much here. If they had combined these offensives, then they would have had a real bull in the ring. As it stands, they might allow me to defeat these attacks in detail. All this happens just as I was ready to begin my offensive towards Elista. That Don sector had the divisions much more widely spaced, and with very little behind the main line. So this is dangerous. This whole operation so deep into the Caucasus is equally dangerous. Kleist is a good man, and he can handle the army here well enough, but for now I think I must turn my

attention to the Don Front sector, and the upper Donets.

I must first get Model a little help by sending him back his 22nd Panzer Division. That goes to Belgorod, in a good position to assist Dietrich when he moves on Volchansk. Hopefully we can contain that breach in a few days, but that failing, those divisions will be well positioned for a counterattack. Then it is time I spoke with Steiner. It looks like 2nd and 3rd SS Divisions cannot go north as I had hoped. We will need to stop this third offensive. As for this attack planned for Elista, I think it is ill-advised until I determine the full scope of the Russian plan. Who knows, there may be something else out there that will rear its ugly head in the next week. I must be cautious now. For the moment, I will trade a little space for time, readjust line along the lower Don, and then see about marshaling the reserves needed to stop these enemy drives. First things first—I must defend Rostov, and the Donets must not be crossed.

Even as Manstein deliberated, a messenger came in to hand him a signal from OKW. When he read it, all he could do was smile, shaking his head. Hitler wanted to know how soon preparations would be complete for the drive on Astrakhan! This message was obviously old, drafted before these offensives had begun. He called for an adjutant, telling the man to send a reply indicating that, in light of the three Soviet offensives presently underway, he was suspending any operation aimed at Astrakhan until the situation could be assessed and brought under control. Needless to say, still heady with the wine of imminent victory, Hitler did not want to hear anything of the kind.

That afternoon, Manstein ordered *Grossdeutschland* Division to suspend preparations for the attack on the enemy fortress line northwest of Elista, and he signaled General Schilling to put his 17th Panzer Division on the rail line near Divnoye. The war with Ivan Volkov would simply have to wait. He contacted Steiner immediately.

“We have a situation developing that could become serious soon,” he told him. “I want you to move *Totenkopf* from Donetsk to Millerovo immediately.

“What about *Das Reich*? ”

He also had a bull with two horns, but now he had to choose where to place this last piece on the board. If he sent *Das Reich* North to fight with *Leibstandarte*, he could definitely stop that northern attack towards Kharkov. Yet in Manstein’s mind, the greater threat was the attack against Paulus in the

south. So he ordered 2nd SS to follow *Totenkopf* to Millerovo. He needed two fists in that fight, at least until he could get *Grossdeutschland* on the trains. Korps Raus was in deep reserve near Kirovgrad south of the Dnieper, so Manstein could send that to Kharkov to bolster the defense of the city if it became threatened. It only had two good infantry divisions, augmented with a Stug battalion, werfers and engineers, but it would have to do.

* * *

In the south, the situation went from bad to worse, on the line of the Don. General Polsten reported that two of his reserve infantry regiments had been completely overrun, and a huge gap had opened in the line. On his right flank, what was left of it, the entire 1st Luftwaffe Field Korps had collapsed and was retreating to the south. On their right, Schneken's independent 17th Korps had been forced back, the 181st and 182nd divisions suffering heavy casualties. His last division, the 260th, was trying to fight its way out of a pocket on the upper Chir.

The situation prompted Manstein to mate both 2nd and 3rd SS, and now he was rushing the *Grossdeutschland* Division north on the trains through Rostov, and all without stopping a moment to clear this move with OKW. They would begin reaching Millerovo on the 14th, and with those three divisions, he hoped he could put in a credible counterattack and stop this attack.

Then he got news that Hitler himself was coming to the front to meet with him. Like a dark crow circling over carrion, the Führer wanted to personally intervene in the crisis, flying in to Zaporozhe, and requesting that Manstein meet with him there. It was the last thing the General needed at that moment, but he boarded a plane in spite of the urgency of the moment, leaving instructions with his Chief of Staff as to what he wanted done.

When the meeting came, in spite of handshakes and strained smiles, the tension in the room was palpable. Hitler began by asking why the Army intelligence group had not detected the enemy buildup to report it in a timely manner.

"That is a good question," said Manstein, "but I am not the one to answer it. If any intelligence was gathered, it was certainly not presented to me. I had to hear the reports from Model before I knew what was happening, and by

then this offensive was already underway.”

“Well, what is happening? Why has so much ground been lost along the Don?”

“That question I can answer—because four of the ten regiments receiving the attack have all but been destroyed. The enemy began this offensive on the tenth near Prokhorovka north of Kharkov. Since then it has evolved to a series of blows against the line, the second along the Oskol river north of Valuki, and then this attack emerging from the middle Don.”

“Those enemy bridgeheads should have been destroyed long ago. Why wasn’t this done?”

“Because I was tasked with taking Volgograd, and for no good military reason, I might add. Yet I did so as ordered. After that we had to send twenty divisions into the Caucasus that were once on this front preparing to drive the enemy north of the Don. If they were still here now, instead of fighting our former ally, then this attack could not have been prosecuted.”

“Push was coming to shove with Volkov,” said Hitler, wagging a finger. “War was inevitable. There were both economic and political considerations, but chief among them was the oil I have tasked you with securing. It is clear that Volkov has gone running to Sergei Kirov for aid and support. That is undoubtedly what is behind this new Soviet offensive, but it must be stopped.”

“I am already marshalling the resources required for a counterattack,” said Manstein.

“Steiner?”

“Of course, but these attacks are widely spaced. That creates certain difficulties, but also offers opportunities.”

“What is your assessment of the situation?” Hitler seemed calm and controlled, but Manstein could perceive the slight tremor in his hand, a small twitch in his right eye, and a general weariness on the man.

“It is a strong attack, apparently aimed at Prokhorovka as it began, but the real strength is in the center, along the Oskol River from Novyy Oskol to Valuki. I have already sent Dietrich to support the defense of that sector, but this second pincer from the Oskol is a very serious threat. He won’t be able to handle it alone, and before I can stop it, I must first deal with the situation on the lower Don. Steiner will bring the rest of his Korps here.” Manstein pointed out the location on the map. “Millerovo. I have already taken the

liberty of moving *Grossdeutschland* Division there as well.”

“Yes, and I was not happy about that,” said Hitler. “Movement of any major formation like that must be brought to my attention for approval.”

“I am sorry to say that there was no time for that. Moving a division the size of *Grossdeutschland* is no small matter. It requires a lot of rolling stock, and I had to act quickly.”

Hitler was willing to excuse that transgression, but it led to an inevitable question. “What of the operation against Elista?”

Manstein’s answer was not welcome news.

“It will have to be cancelled, or at the very least, postponed.”

Part VIII

De Führer

“ To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, and whose philosophy consists in holding humanity in contempt, is like administering medicine to the dead, or endeavoring to convert an atheist by scripture.”

—Thomas Paine

Chapter 22

Hitler was clearly not happy to hear that. “But there are still four mobile divisions in the Caucasus,” he protested. “Why can’t they proceed with this operation?”

“Because two of them are here, holding the line of the Kuma River to where it meets the Manych Canal. The other two will not be sufficient, and I may need one more of those divisions north of the Don.”

“That should not be necessary,” said Hitler. “Steiner will master the situation quickly enough.” Hitler waved his hand as if dismissing the whole Soviet offensive, the four regiments Manstein had reported destroyed, all of it. Steiner had stopped Zhukov the previous year, and he would do so again. His mind remained fixed on only one thing, the oil.

“How soon will we have the fields at Groznyy?”

“A matter of days,” said Manstein; “perhaps hours. We have three bridgeheads east of the city on the Terek, and that has unhinged the defense west of Groznyy. That is the same general strategy in play with this new Soviet offensive. They want to get over the Donets, and from there, to threaten Rostov. That would put an end to all our operations in the Caucasus.”

“Nonsense,” said Hitler. “You fail to consider the political situation. Volkov has been at war with the Soviets for twenty years. I do not think they will become nice cozy bedfellows now simply because I have taken the prize they were both tussling over.”

“A moment ago, you stated this offensive was staged at the request of Volkov,” said Manstein.

“I was merely being facetious. Sergei Kirov pursues his own war aims, but I do not think they presently include considerations on the wellbeing of Ivan Volkov. The Soviets may, indeed, be trying to get over the Donets, but for reasons of their own, that should be obvious. They want to force us to yield all territory we now hold in the Don Bend, which would then threaten these more important operations in the Caucasus. But they will never get there.” Hitler put on his eyeglasses, leaning over the map. Yet his eyes were not on the ruptured lines along the Don and upper Donets, but on the far

distant fields of Astrakhan and Baku.

“We have done very well up until now,” he said. “Ivan Volkov has learned that we can put steel behind the decrees I put forward. The man presumed to think he would control the oil at Baba Gurgur, but I showed him how wrong he was there with my Fallschirmjagers. Then he presumed to dictate to me concerning control of the Kuban, and all the fields at Maykop. Thankfully, our troops soon put those demented notions to rout. Now we have Grozny within our grasp. Yet how long before we can continue the drive to Baku?”

Manstein took a deep breath, somewhat frustrated with Hitler’s obsession with these distant economic objectives. He wanted to move the session to the crisis of the hour. “My Führer,” he said. “We have the Caucasus well in hand. Volkov’s forces there have little offensive power, and we can generate sufficient mass to move them any time we choose. Even if we were sitting on Baku at this moment, it would still be months before that resource could be developed to a point where it would be useful. The pipelines have all been destroyed, and so it will need trucks to haul the oil, and rail cars. But all of that is many months away. So Volkov and his oil is not the issue here and now. As for Sergei Kirov, the Soviets are another matter. They clearly *do* have the potential to mount an offensive, as that situation map shows. Now, it may be necessary for me to adopt some rather sweeping redeployments to contain, and then defeat, the enemy offensives now underway. That is where our minds should be focused.”

“Sweeping redeployments?” Hitler gave him a look half akin to annoyance. “Tell me that is not just another word for retreat. My Generals are always advocating withdrawal in the face of a crisis. I certainly hope that poison has not infected your own thinking, General Manstein.”

“My Führer, have you never watched a good fencing match? The contestants thrust and parry, they move forward, and yet also withdraw. This is the art of mobile war. Consider this first prong of the enemy attack near Prokhorovka. Both Model and Heinrici have had to fold back their respective flanks, and Model is preparing a new blocking force to screen Belgorod. I am not worried about 2nd Army at the moment, but 4th Army’s position is somewhat precarious. The attack across the Oskol river on its lower right has real power, and it could go all the way to the Donets. That would cut off the entire 4th Army. I have added the 22nd Panzer Division to Model’s bag of

tricks to help out. It is moving out of reserve status from Poltava.”

“That unit was scheduled to return to Germany for a refit,” said Hitler, his mind an amazing steep trap for all the divisions of his army.

“Under the circumstances, it will have to remain in theater. For that matter, if we could get the other two divisions of that Korps back, then we might easily smash this smaller northern pincer. Kharkov would seem an inviting target for the enemy, but I do not believe they can get there from the north. That drive will be lucky to just take Belgorod, but if it is then supported by this central attack from the Oskol River, things change.”

“In what way?” Hitler gave the General a look that revealed the hidden anxiety within him.

“If the two pincers do link up,” said Manstein, “then Kharkov is on the cutting board for the meat cleavers. If they get that, then they have an opportunity to go for the Dnieper. That is the real prize for the enemy now. 4th Army would do much better on the upper Donets than it would if pocketed while trying to hold the Oskol River line. This is what I mean by redeployments.”

“You want to withdraw 4th Army? What about Steiner?” It was as if Hitler had not been listening. The only thing he grasped was that Manstein was angling to move 4th Army.

“Steiner’s last two divisions are needed here at Millerovo,” Manstein reiterated. “And to really do the job quickly there, I will need to muster forces presently operating in the Caucasus. For that I have chosen Kirchner’s 57th Panzer Korps Headquarters, and to this I will add *Grossdeutschland* Division and 17th Panzer.”

Hitler squinted, adjusting his eyeglasses with an unsteady hand. It was clear that he was uncomfortable with any transfer of units from the Caucasus. “Why can’t Steiner deal with this situation on his own? If you move the 57th Panzer Korps, then we have no strong mobile units in the Caucasus.”

“We don’t need them there at the moment. As I have said, the operation to take Elista has been cancelled. Once I get a free hand and stop this attack in the south, I propose to move all those forces to the vicinity of Izyum, and for two reasons. First, in that position they block any attempt to cross the lower Donets. The second reason is that it places them in the perfect place to attack the flank of this second enemy thrust if it drives for Kharkov.”

“If you move 17th Panzer Division from the Caucasus, what will hold the

ground they now defend?”

Manstein was quite direct in his answer, and equally truthful. He said just one word: “Nothing.”

“Nothing? Then Volkov’s Armies will simply rush through those gaps and the entire front could collapse. Then all the Generals at OKW will be pleased, won’t they? We will have your whole operation at Grozny turn into another pocket, and then they can hound me endlessly for permission to withdraw. If I order Model to stand fast, as he should, they will say the very same thing about his army—another pocket.”

“They will not have to do so,” said Manstein, “because Heinrici’s troops will not be there if you allow me to operate as I wish. You are correct in stating that the redeployment of 17th Panzer Division creates a gap in our line in the south, but I will still have 18th Panzer on hand there as a good sheepdog, and there are army assets that can help out as well. Volkov will not attack. It is all he can do to hold the line. As for Heinrici, no one eats dinner alone at this table. The Army is a family, and when it moves, it must do so as a whole. So when I maneuver Steiner and 57th Panzer Korps into position, Heinrici goes with them. I propose that he move to a new line here, and anchor his left on Belgorod. That joins hands with Model and restores the front. There is heavily wooded country due east of that city, and look how it is broken by all these river tributaries flowing into the Donets. That is a very good place for our infantry. The northern pincer will try to use that ground for defensive purposes. Their real hopes are pinned on the central thrust. I believe they will attempt to move through Volonovka to Volchansk, then bypass that city to move on the Donets.... And Kharkov. This will leave their southern flank exposed, and when I move adequate force to Izyum, our counterattack can begin.”

“Can’t it be done without yielding all the territory 4th Army now holds?”

“It cannot. Before I can strike, I must move, and 4th Army must come along with me to prevent the formation of a pocket you were lamenting over a moment ago. So we must move Heinrici’s 10th and 12th Infantry Korps as well, and re-establish themselves on a line here, near Volchansk on the upper Donets. If they could get there quickly, they would be able to help defend Kharkov against this powerful central thrust.

“Yet another withdrawal...” Hitler shook his head.

“Quite the contrary,” said Manstein, moving to parry that thrust by Hitler

as soon as possible. “If Model and Heinrici do not withdraw together, then tis invites real trouble if the enemy breaks through to Kharkov. You pointed this out yourself just a moment ago. So they *must* withdraw. Otherwise, this strong attack from the Oskol River Bridgehead will cut them off.”

“Yes,” said Hitler with some annoyance. “From a bridgehead that should have been eliminated!” His voice was barely controlled.

It was the first break in the icy calm that had lay upon the Führer up until that moment. He had seemed irksome when he discussed Volkov, particularly his obsession with the oil, but now the first flash of anger returned.

“Eliminated! Eliminated! You call this generalship? You propose to give them ground that they have not even had to fight for—ground that it took us weeks of hard fighting to acquire last winter. Can’t you see what they are doing? They want to push us farther from Voronezh and Kursk, and upset all the planning for our summer offensive in this sector. They want us to do exactly what you suggest and pull our best troops out of the Caucasus. That is the real aim of this offensive. And now you propose to give them everything they want, and all because a few reserve regiments were overrun south of the Don! Model and Heinrici should hold their present lines. Steiner will stop this other attack from the Don sector, and then he can turn north with *Grossdeutschland* to deal with the center thrust.”

“By that time the enemy could be in Kharkov,” Manstein said flatly, “or somewhere else. From the latest reports I am receiving, the forces emerging from the Oskol bridgeheads are very strong. It will take everything Steiner has left to stop them, and yes, *Grossdeutschland* as well. Even that may not be enough, which is why I have ordered 17th Panzer Division to prepare to entrain at Divnoye for a move north of the Don. My Führer, we simply *must* maneuver. We cannot sit and hold the line as you ordered during the Moscow counteroffensive.”

“Why not? We still hold Moscow, do we not? My order to stand fast saved that entire front, and I will do the very same thing here.”

“That would be most unwise.”

At that moment, a knock came at the door and an adjutant came in, saluting stiffly as he handed off a message. Manstein read it, seeing there what he expected. Then he turned to the Führer and pointed at the map.

“The Don Front has collapsed south of Boguchar. Schenken’s 17th Korps is now cut off and completely surrounded—what’s left of it. The leading

spearheads of two Soviet tank corps are now reported no more than 50 kilometers from Star O'blesk. If they go another fifty, they will be over the Donets. So Steiner has his work cut out for him, and at present his Korps has not even been fully assembled. As for Paulus, his 6th Army will soon be isolated. 51st Korps is already being flanked, and in my judgement, the entire Army should also move west immediately. Otherwise that infantry will be useless to us in the ensuing counterattack. Steiner might be many days dealing with this, but the whole situation would be greatly relieved if you allow me to order Paulus west to the Donets. That is good ground for defense, and he has sufficient force to prevent any enemy crossing and cover Rostov. Steiner will need infantry to cover his right flank, and that can only come from Paulus."

"So now you propose we yield the entire Don Bend?"

"We don't need it. It is nothing more than empty steppe land. There is no oil there, My Führer." There was just the hint of sarcasm in the General's tone. "Their intentions here are very clear. They are hoping to cut off the entire 6th Army. If left where it is, a stand fast order would play directly into the enemy's hands. The only answer to this offensive is maneuver. It will take some doing, but it is a fine art our troops are more than capable of pulling off. Yes, it will mean we yield hard fought ground as well, for the moment, but that is the only way I can assemble the mass required to smash this attack, and mark my words, if given freedom of action here, that is exactly what I will do. You trusted to my instincts last winter when Zhukov pounded on the Don Front for a long month. Trust me now."

"We prevailed in the winter because we stood firm, and refused to yield," said Hitler with a wag of his finger. "Steiner fought for Oblivskaya, and for Morozovsk. He fought like a tiger! His men would not take one backward step!"

"My Führer, we barely contained those offensives, and I did so only because Steiner had all four SS divisions, and to that I added *Grossdeutschland* and Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division. It took the finest troops in the entire army to stop Zhukov, and we no longer hold that sword. *Leibstandarte* will be hundreds of kilometers to the west, containing what I believe was merely a spoiling attack, intended to bring our reserves there. The Wiking Division is in Syria. Balck's 11th Panzer is in Army Group Center, defending on the Bryansk Front. Now... I need to move Model and

Heinrici, and quickly. Paulus goes west at the same time. Give me this freedom of action.”

Hitler seemed hunched and withered, the quiver in his hand more noticeable, the stress apparent in every line on his face. He slowly removed his eyeglasses and then started to rattle off a litany of unrelated political and economic reasons as to why he wanted the army to hold. “If Paulus goes west, then what about the Italians south of the Don? Then they will be exposed, and that river offers only so much of a barrier. The enemy can build bridges, can they not? Mussolini has been whining over the loss of Libya for months! Can you imagine what he will say if his expeditionary army here in the east is destroyed?”

“The Don is too deep and wide there,” said Manstein, “its banks too marshy for a crossing behind the Italians. The enemy can only cross south of Tormosin, and that can easily be defended.”

“Just as the Don Front was defended?” Hitler gave him a challenging look. “If the Soviets do cross, do you think the Italians will do better than our troops? If they go, then the Rumanians go right along with them, and then we lose everything as far south as the Manych! Of course, if you had been more deliberate in launching that offensive against Elista, this would not be a problem. There would be good German troops there to stop such a move by the Soviets. Losing those allied armies could also lose me Allies. Understand?”

Manstein had to smile inwardly at that, for his troops were in the Caucasus only to wage war on a former “Ally,” and all for oil that might have been easily obtained by negotiation. Hitler was back on his old rhyme again.

“There are political considerations here beyond the military realm,” he said waving his arm. “There are economic considerations as well. If you let the Russians into the vacuum left behind by removing Paulus to the west, and if they cross the Don as I have described, then it will be all the more difficult to get to Astrakhan. That is where the really good fields are now. Astrakhan and beyond.”

The discussion had just come full circle and was back where it began, with Hitler eyeing those distant economic objectives. Nothing he had in hand would satisfy, and yet he wanted to hold on to it with all his might. The solution to his war was ever just beyond his reach. First it was Moscow, then Volgograd, and now he had substituted Astrakhan and Baku for the fruit too

high on the tree. When would it end?

Chapter 23

“**This** cloud has a little silver in it,” said Manstein, pointing at the message he had received. “The good news in this dispatch is that Hansen has taken the oil fields at Groznyy, and largely intact. There is your oil in the short run. With Maykop, Baba Gurgur and Groznyy, we will have all the oil we need. So now will you kindly let me take charge of this battle and win it?”

“Not if you wish to yield the entire Don bend! Some other strategy must be devised.”

Manstein sighed. He had come to know Hitler as a tenacious defender of his own ideas and viewpoints on strategy, but he also knew the one time Corporal, that he had privately come to call “Effendi,” had no conception of the art of elastic defense and battle of maneuver. In Hitler’s mind, all attacks were to be defeated by stalwart defense. The army had to stand firm, and he would substitute his own iron willpower for the lack of anything needed by way of divisions on the ground. Discussions of this nature could go on for hours on end. Halder had been at his wits end, eventually resigning in utter frustration over Hitler’s interference. Now Zeitzler would spend days trying to convince Hitler on the real military requirements for all the new offensives he had concocted in the last several months. This was only round one, Manstein knew, and he had to do a little dancing and jabbing himself.

“My Führer,” he began again. “What I propose is just a temporary maneuver intended to provide me with the infantry necessary to make my counterattack. I want Paulus to move his 8th Korps here, screening Morozovsk, with Strecker’s 9th Korps on his left. Seydiltz-Kurzbach’s 51st Corps is the largest, but it is now being flanked by this Boguchar offensive on the left. So I want to move it here, to Bolshinka. Then, when Steiner finishes concentrating at Millerovo, both those Korps strike north.”

“North? Not northwest? How can they stop the enemy attack if they do not confront it directly? This counterattack makes no sense.”

“On the contrary, it makes perfect sense. A small thrust can be blocked and then rolled back. Yet an attack on the scale of this one in the south must be defeated by an indirect approach. If Steiner tries to block this attack, he only becomes embroiled in a static grind. I have selected Millerovo as Steiner’s assembly point because the terrain around it makes it very

defensible. So I expect the enemy will bypass it to the north and west, most likely through Belovodsk, between Millerovo and Star Oblesk. They want to cross the Donets near Voroshilovgrad. I propose to let them try.”

“What? A moment ago, you claimed this could not be permitted. From there they can go to Rostov.”

“Only if they can cross in force, and stay there,” said Manstein calmly. “This is why my counterattack will swing around the enemy advance and cut it off, and to do that, I move north before I turn northwest. I would have preferred to concentrate three strong mobile divisions at Millerovo, but there wasn’t sufficient rolling stock to move them all at once. Kruger had to move *Das Reich* overland on the roads, and it is presently here, at Star O’blesk. So it will attack towards Kantirmirovka, to the northeast, while Steiner takes the other two divisions right up this road. That is why I need 51st Infantry Korps on the right, to cover that thrust. We defeat this attack by striking through its communications zone, not by trying to block its advance on objectives. They want to get over the Donets, but that will be their undoing if they go there now.”

“Shouldn’t Steiner attack immediately?” asked Hitler, “before the enemy gets anywhere near the Donets?” It was as if he had not heard a word Manstein had uttered.

“An attack now would be premature,” said Manstein. “He would have to make a frontal counterattack, which is a tactic normally employed against minor breakthrough where the shoulders of the penetration are still strong. In this case, the breakthrough is too wide, and the shoulders too weak because of your insistence that Paulus must defend in place. Instead, I want to let them advance, and stick their head right in the noose I am knotting up. When they have extended themselves, then we strike at their line of communications, and cut them off. That approach stops their advance without having to confront it directly as you propose. It also offers us the opportunity to destroy the forces they advance, because they will be unable to retreat. And once I do so, then you have back again all the ground you moan about losing while we maneuver.”

“Why not simply crush their spearheads as they advance?” Hitler persisted, completely overlooking everything Manstein had said about frontal counterattacks.

“Because the enemy is strongest at the outset of any breakthrough. A

frontal counterattack can only be launched after the advance had dissipated and exhausted itself.”

On and on it went, for two long hours. Hitler tacked from his own ill-advised military assessments, then back to the necessity for protecting the Donets Basin, the coal mining region, the thick web of rail lines there. Manstein would argue that any enemy incursion there would only be temporary, subject to imminent destruction, and that rail lines could be repaired easily enough. Hitler wanted to stand in the center of the ring and punch from the clinch. Manstein wanted to move and dance, jabbing all the while, and then deliver his blistering right cross. Hitler could simply not understand that you could win by giving the enemy what he wanted. He could not see the series of intricate maneuvers Manstein wanted to conduct, where timing was essential to coordinate the plan. The two men would discuss and argue the matter until the break for supper, and then on into the late evening, whereupon a new and unexpected arrival would come on the scene the following morning.

* * *

In walked Himmler, his uniform fresh and well pressed, black leather gloves tight on his fists where he clutched a riding crop, and shining boots hard on the wood floors of the dining room. He snapped his heels together and offered a stiff-armed salute as Hitler turned, very surprised to see him.

“My Führer,” said Himmler. “It has come to my attention that troops are needed for an emergency situation on the front. Troops from my 3rd SS Korps can be made available, and I have come to offer their services.”

Manstein turned, a puzzled look on his face. “3rd SS Korps? I have heard nothing of this.”

“That is because the headquarters itself has only recently been established under command of Gruppenführer Jurgen Wagner—a good man. He had a battalion in the *Leibstandarte* before moving on to command regiments in both *Das Reich* and the *Wiking* Division, and he comes highly recommended by Steiner himself.”

“I see,” said Manstein. “What, pray tell, does he command, Herr Himmler?”

“I am moving several of the SS formations assembling for the Leningrad

operation into KG Wagner to form a fire brigade unit for this situation. At the moment, this will be the Nordland Panzer Division, and one more motorized infantry brigade, the Wallonian.”

“Nordland Panzer Division?” Manstein was still nonplussed.

“It consists of two Panzergrenadier regiments, only with three battalions each, like a proper SS division. To that I have added Panzer Regiment Nord. While I have had to equip it with the F2 Panzer IV model tanks, as soon as more Panthers are available, it will transition to that model.”

“I see.... Most enterprising,” said Manstein. “But these troops have no experience, and I daresay little training for a situation like this.”

“I have corrected that. The men have been training for the last six months, and I have seen that they have adequate equipment. Now what they need is experience, correct, my Führer?” He turned to Hitler to bypass what he perceived as a stack of objections forming in Manstein’s mind. Hitler was the one man he needed to convince here, but the Führer frowned.

“I was very pleased when you came to me with the news of these new divisions,” he began, “but I thought it was clear that these troops were to be assigned to the Leningrad Operation, and remain with Armeegruppe Nord.”

“That operation is still months away,” said Himmler. “Don’t you sharpen a good knife before you use it? You saw what my men did in Spain when they were needed there. If the army had provided a few more divisions, I have no doubt they would still be there, instead of the British. This division is fully formed, and what these men need is real live training, the kind that can only come from actual combat in the field. This is a perfect situation for that, so let us kill two birds here with one stone. Let my men help stop this Russian drive on Kharkov, and they will become fanatical veterans in the process. Then, when the really big operation begins in the Summer, they will be honed sharp as a razor’s edge, and ready for that action. I am told that Dietrich has already stopped this drive towards Kharkov. Now let Wagner deal with the other pincer. It is just the perfect situation for them to prove themselves on the field.”

Hitler raised an eyebrow. “Interesting,” he said, always pleased to find new units he could pencil onto the map. He had been sleepless with worry over this Russian offensive, inwardly railing at his Generals for their perceived incompetence, though he never used that word with Manstein. Yet where Steiner went, the situation soon became stable thereafter. The SS had

broken through to Volgograd, linked up with Volkov as planned. They had stopped the Russian Uranus and Saturn offensives, then moved to take Rostov before coming north to intervene at a crucial moment and halt the enemy advance on Kharkov, and they saved Model. The thought that he now had another SS unit on the scene to move about like a good chess piece was very appealing.

“My Führer,” Himmler pressed his argument when he saw Hitler thinking. “With Steiner on one side, and KG Wagner on the other, we will smash the last of this enemy offensive and certainly restore order. I beg you—let me send these men. They are the SS! They will not let you down, nor will they yield any ground you ever order them to hold. Rest assured of that.”

Hitler’s eyes moved about the map table. “Move them here,” he said with an air of finality, tapping the map at Kharkov. “Stop this second enemy pincer, and then push it back where it came from. If you can do that, Herr Himmler, then you will have proved your worth here again. You may give the orders immediately.”

Hitler had just ordered this new, untried division to stop six Soviet Armies! Himmler smiled, saluting again, for he had already ordered his men onto the trains, confident that he could persuade the Führer. Now he was glad he would not have to countermand those orders, and that his Waffen SS would continue to be the last ditch defenders of the Reich, and earn the lavish allocations of equipment that he could demand for his new full scale divisions building in France and Germany. It was all in a day’s work for Himmler, but this was the easy part. Now, he had another problem.

His men had to stop the Russians.

Manstein wanted to again point out that these troops had little experience, and a black SS uniform and six months training would not make them soldiers tough enough for a situation like this. He had a fist full of reports from that front, identifying all the enemy units being poured into that sector. Himmler had no idea what his men would soon be facing, then again, Manstein had nothing he could send there himself, so this was at least a stopgap measure that he could welcome. He had been pulling in Military Police battalions and rear area flak units to try and fill holes in the lines, and desperately needed troops, frustrated to no end over the fact that there were 20 infantry divisions and four mobile divisions in the Caucasus that were now sorely missed on the Don Front. So he said nothing. It was either this, or

nothing, and the latter option would mean Kharkov would likely fall within a matter of days. If Himmler's new *Kampfgruppe* could at least slow the enemy down, or forestall that, it would at least be something.

So the trains would soon deliver this most unexpected reinforcement, which he could further augment by moving up his last reserve, Korps Raus, with two good infantry divisions. Himmler's new men in black would get their chance to learn how to fight. Over 70% of them were foreign volunteers, from rebellious former members of the French Foreign Legion, to surly Poles, dissident Czechs, and even some Hungarians. Himmler had looked for the tough and brutish sort, many with criminal backgrounds, all looking for some place to direct their anger and ill-mannered ways. It had taken the six months in training just to forge them into units where discipline from Waffen SS veterans and small groups of experienced German troops seeded in each battalion would build cohesion. One thing was certain about them—they were men that could fight, and now all that was needed was the proper technique.

"These new troops change everything," Hitler began, finding fresh wind in his sails.

"But it is only one division," said Manstein, "even if it is well padded."

"It is an SS division," Himmler reminded him.

"In name only," said Manstein. "I propose that this new *Kampfgruppe* be sent to relieve Dietrich, and then I can use a real SS division to check the central pincer."

Himmler had no objection. "How the troops are used is an operational matter I will leave up to you."

"Good," said Manstein, his eyes looking over the map. Now he had to recompute a new firing solution on the fly, for it was clear that Hitler had seized upon this unexpected reinforcement as a reason to buttress his insistence that Model and Heinrici should hold their ground. That could soon spill over to Paulus, so Manstein had to press his attack here before he could ever hope to do so on the field.

"In light of this new development, this is what I now propose. Do not send KG Wagner to Kharkov, but instead send it here, to Chuguyev. That is where they must cross the Donets if they want Kharkov. Very well, let Model stand his ground. I will use *Leibstandarte* for the counterattack if it can be freed up, but I will still need to have General Heinrici adjust the lines of his

4th Army to do what I plan. He should consolidate his line in this heavy wooded country around Volchansk. Dietrich cannot stop that second pincer alone, not even with the assistance of the *Reichsführer* Brigades and this new division from Himmler.”

“Then I will get you more panzers,” said Hitler, prompting the general to raise an eyebrow.”

“More panzers? From where?”

“Armeegruppe A will be a good start. OKW tells me the situation near Bryansk has stabilized. I have allowed them to move in infantry from Armeegruppe Nord as a temporary holding measure. So I will detach the 48th Panzer Korps and send it along with this new SS division from Himmler.”

“Knobelsdorff? That is a very good start,” said Manstein.

“He has several divisions,” said Hitler, “but OKW insists that only two can be sent. Do you have a recommendation?”

“11th Panzer.” Manstein did not hesitate one moment. These were resources from *Armeegruppe Mitte* that he had not expected to be available. “Balck would be just the man I need here, and any of the other divisions will do well enough. Send the 9th under Scheller. Those two fought well together in the Don region last winter.”

“Very well,” said Hitler. “I will see that the orders are given immediately, and I have already done one more thing. The 6th Panzer Division has been in Germany for the last two months refitting, but it is now ready for operations. I was going to add it to Armeegruppe Nord, but it would seem the need is greater here at the moment. It is very strong, with all the new Lions and Panthers, and I gave it orders to move here before I left OKW.”

Hitler had come with things in his pockets. His position as Commander of the entire Army meant that he could place these new chips on the table any time he chose, and he would use them to spin the wheel and get his way in the arguments he had been having with Manstein. Model and Heinrici could then be ordered to stand fast, as he wished.

Chapter 24

Manstein was elated—Knobelsdorff, and with two good Panzer Divisions, and now a fresh unit from Germany! Now he had his sword back for the left flank. Counting 1st SS and Himmler's new division, that would make five mobile divisions at his command there—six with the 22dn Panzer—and Steiner would bring three more after the Lower Don operation. It was nothing like the real history of this battle, where the Germans could barely scrape up the troops to hold the line and the Russians nearly went all the way to the Dnieper before Manstein's counterattack.

The discussion would go on another two hours that morning, mostly fiddling over timetables, the lines Manstein wanted to assume with Henrici's troops, and Hitler's meddling right down to the Division and sometimes even the battalion level. The Führer's surprise gift would end the arguments over Model's situation, and there would now be no more talk of any major withdrawals by the 2nd Army. Heinrici would be permitted to adjust his lines as Manstein wanted to allow him to screen Belgorod and help defend Volchansk. The *Reichsführer* Brigades would be used in conjunction with *Leibstandarte* as a defensive foil until Knobelsdorff could arrive.

Hitler eventually relented, allowing Manstein freedom to move Paulus and his 6th Army to facilitate his planned counteroffensive with Steiner. It was a compromise that promised to save the front in the south while actually losing all the territory it had been screening and defending, but it promised to stabilize that sector quickly, and with that, to free up the divisions needed to save Kharkov. This was uppermost on Hitler's mind. Manstein had only won half the battle in this long conference. Time was flying, and now he had to get back to his headquarters at Rostov and win the real battle on the field.

His prospects were darkening by the hour. When the last remnants of the trapped 17th Korps finally retreated towards Millerovo, there was nothing but artillery. It's rear area posting had enabled it to escape the trap that savaged the rest of the Korps. By the time he reached his headquarters again, he had

Grossdeutschland and *Totenkopf* finally assembled at Millerovo, and *Das Reich* was about 25 kilometers northeast of Star O'blesk. He had hoped to have all three of those divisions together at Millerovo, but the lack of train transport had forced 2nd SS to move by road, and with that time lost, the Soviets got between the two German groups. So now instead of the scythe like attack he had planned to launch, the best he could do was a pincer operation against the enemy spearhead formations, the mobile corps of Katukov's 1st Tank Army.

Furthermore, 51st Korps had been slow to withdraw, and though it reached Bolshinka, it was in no shape to turn about and attack north as planned. As an expedient measure, he called General Hollidt at Novorossiysk, and canceled any planned attack along the coast towards Sukhumi. He needed infantry, and Hollidt had four good divisions available, so he ordered him to send three divisions north through Rostov to Voroshilovgrad. His Chief of Staff was told not to send the position update to OKW for 48 hours. Manstein was taking no chance on Hitler intervening again and meddling with his plans. The question now was whether to attack, or wait? How strong was the enemy? Could the three strong mobile divisions he had do the job?

That afternoon he finally gave the order, telephoning General Hausser of the 2nd SS at Star O'blesk and telling him to move. "Meet me at G7," he finished, "if you can get there." That was the grid map designation for the village of Kantimirovka, about 85 kilometers northeast of Star O'blesk. Then he got on the radio to Papa Hörnlein and said simply: "Stage One. Move now."

Operation *Unterhöhlen* (Undercut) had begun, but it was just a sideshow, intended by Zhukov to do exactly what it had accomplished. It had forced Manstein to move three of his best divisions to the scene, and well away from the main attack he had pushed across the Oskol River. The Germans would find the Russians beginning to fall back even as they mustered for the attack, a game of cat and mouse played by Zhukov on the Don Front.

He had smashed a small segment of the line, creating the appearance of a dangerous threat to Rostov that Manstein simply had to answer. His divisions had halted their advance and started to withdraw, sending out delaying groups to draw in the German attack. In fact, he wanted to make it seem like his troops were taken by surprise and on the run, but he had planned this

operation to punch and fade long ago. Mikhail Katukov had become a master of hit and run tactics at Mtsensk against Guderian's drive for Tula. Now he seemed to simply vanish, taking his 1st Tank Army with him, because Zhukov had no intention of pushing for Rostov, at least not with this offensive. He had bigger fish to fry.

He wanted Kharkov.... And all that lay beyond.

* * *

No matter how strong, an offensive dissipates with each successive hour it rolls forward. Even the greatest waves break upon the shoreline and race inland, to eventually slow and fade into the sand. In military parlance, this was known as the Law of Overstretch. As the offensive forces move forward, they create new flanks which must be screened and guarded while the spearheads proceed. This slowly pulled offensive units into defensive roles, weakening the strength of the attack. Units also become scattered and spaced out, some racing ahead, others slower and more cumbersome in the advance.

Manstein knew this well enough, and so his principle strategy on defense was to simply assemble his counterattack force somewhere on the flank of the enemy advance, and then let them push forward into thin air, showing him what they really wanted, and where their terminal objective was. The terrain involved meant nothing, except in key areas like Rostov, or other major communications centers the Army relied upon for its supplies. Otherwise, the whole of the Donbass meant nothing, nor did he see any value in the Donets Basin, aside from the vital rail lines that passed through that sector to cross the Donets and feed his troops.

Where Hitler was obsessed with holding hard won ground, Manstein would hand it back to the enemy without a moment's hesitation, and then lay a carefully planned ambush to tear into his scattered flank and roll up the offensive in a sweeping counterattack. In doing so, he would eventually get back all the terrain he had yielded, restoring the front as he had already done several times. This "Elastic Defense" was something simply beyond the grasp of Hitler's mind, which was why Heinrici would see his army slowly exposed to the danger of being pocketed.

Yet Hitler's intransigence concerning Model and the holding of Prokhorovka had a good deal to do with the dissipation of 5th Shock Group

in the northern pincer. 5th Shock Army had to leave its 87th, 300th and 315th Rifle divisions behind. Zhadov also detached his 39th Guards Division, and these forces had invested Prokhorovka, where Oppenländer's 305th Division sat in a walnut shaped pocket, completely cut off. Then, on the western shoulder of the northern pincer, the remainder of Zhadov's 5th Guards army had been deployed to hold that flank. This removed eight divisions that had been in the breakthrough attack, leaving only four rifle divisions and the mobile forces of 5th Tank Army to continue the drive south.

Those troops were 12 kilometers north of Belgorod when they ran into Model's hastily deployed defensive screen near the village of Ternovka. Model now had the whole of Friesner's 102nd Division, and he had scraped together every Sturm and Panzerjager battalion he could find from Korps and Army level units. The three Soviet Tank Corps built up like water behind a thin dam, taking some time to reorganize after the drive south and start their attack. Just as it seemed that that levee would be breached, Model got news that his 22nd Panzer Division was finally arriving by rail at Belgorod.

"So, one of my lost sheep returns to the fold," he said. "A most timely arrival. Now I have the strength to hold here, and save both Belgorod and Tomarovka." Both were supply depot cities for the Germans, and the rail line from Belgorod also ran northwest to support the rest of 2nd Army. He did not want that rail line cut, for then he would have to rely on the rails through Lebedin and Sumy to feed the western portion of his position.

By contrast, the withdrawal of Heinrici's 4th Army towards the Donets and Volchansk had allowed the string of Soviet Field Armies that had been opposing him to also advance. The Soviets were cracking the whip, slowly jogging west to try and create some snap near the spearheads of the northern pincer. As their line rippled west, it eventually freed up elements of the 5th Shock Army that had been watching that flank of the advance, allowing them to move west to the fight developing north of Belgorod.

Meanwhile, the attack over the Oskol River had completely overrun the Luftwaffe Korps and Osttruppen units, and it was surging southwest like a great tide, unopposed. The long columns of men and machines darkened the steppe and farmland east of the Donets. The whole region between that river and the Oskol was empty space, and the Soviet attack was flowing into it like a great waterfall of iron. The only obstacle between Zhukov's troops and the city of Kharkov was the swollen course of the Donets, and to that barrier the

Germans were rushing every available unit they could find.

KG Wagner and his new Nordland Panzer Division had disembarked from the trains west of Kharkov, and on the morning of April 12 they were marching proudly through the sullen grey streets of the city. Hermann Balck's vaunted 11th Panzer Division was scheduled to arrive there the following morning. To the north, the Stone Man, Sepp Dietrich, had his 1st SS Division dug in east of the river, carving out a sizeable bridgehead between Volchansk and Stary Saltov. Heinrici's 4th Army continued its withdrawal, and was now arriving at the heavily wooded zone east of Belgorod. Model's line in the north was still on its old front, but it fish-hooked at Oboyan, bending almost due south. He made several requests to Manstein for permission to pull out of that city, which would allow him to close a big gap in the front northwest of Belgorod. If the enemy had another army, they might have swept right into 2nd Army's communications and supply zone, but the Russians had only one more Army in reserve, and it was not in that sector.

The quiet that evening belied the storm that was coming, but with the arrival of all these new Panzer Divisions, the Germans were more than ready for a fight. The question was whether to launch an immediate counterattack, or to wait and assume defensive positions.

* * *

Sepp Dietrich had moved his 1st SS Division into the woodland south of Volchansk along the river. It was an old town, dating back to 1684 when it became the stronghold of Cossack leader Vovchi Vody, and in modern times it was called Vovchanck, partly for after its founder, and also for the river Vovcha that ran through its domain.

48th Panzer Korps Commander Otto Knobelsdorff arrived there to confer with Dietrich, the rain heavy that night on the roof of the hotel chosen for the HQ.

"So, we finally have some clout," said Dietrich as he shook Knobelsdorff's hand.

"What's the situation?" asked Knobelsdorff.

"Manstein sent me Rodt's 22nd Panzer, and it arrived this morning. I asked them to get up north and screen Belgorod. I assume you're coming

with some steel in hand.”

“Balck will be at Kharkov in the morning.”

Hermann Balck and his 11th Panzer Division was fast earning a reputation as a fire Brigade for any crisis on the front. His division moved through Bogodukhov on the trains that night, intending to stop at Kharkov and use the bigger rail yards there to unload the heavy equipment and tanks.

“Balck is a life saver,” said Dietrich. Now that his division is on hand, we have a real Panzer Korps here. Manstein has placed my division under your general control.” Dietrich smiled, preferring a slight bow of his head.

“What’s this talk about another SS Division coming in?” asked Knobelsdorff.

“Himmler’s little legion,” said Dietrich. “He’s thrown together a makeshift Panzer division he calls Nordland. It has a lot of volunteers from the Low Countries and Belgium, and to that he added the Wallonian Regiment. He got his hands on some IV-F2’s, and so now he’s calling it a panzer division. Good for him. I’m not sure when they arrive, but I expect we’ll hear about it. Himmler flew all the way to Army Group South and horned in on the Führer’s meeting with Manstein to get permission to send us his latest creation. I’m told some of the men from the *Wiking* Division went over to seed the regiments. If they can fight half as good as Gille’s Division, all the better for us here.”

“And the Russians?”

“Oh, they’ll be here soon too. They pocketed the 305th at Prokhorovka and drove for Belgorod, but Model had stopped them. They may be no more than 25 kilometers north of our lines now, but it’s the attack coming from the east that we need to worry about.”

“How strong are they up north?”

“Model tells me it’s a Shock Army backed by several tank corps. Siebert folded his lines back, opening the gate for the bull. Now we just have to find a way to skewer the damn thing.”

Knobelsdorff was quiet for a moment, nodding his head as he took off his gloves. He had spent the last months of that severe winter beating off a strong Soviet offensive aimed at Bryansk. Now he had another one on his hands.

“And this attack from the east?”

“They blew through the Oskol River line between Novyy Oskol and Valuki—four or five armies. They’ll be here in a day or two.”

“Five armies?”

“At least that many, and first line troops. There are two shock armies, Guards thick as fleas on a mule, and at least four or five mobile formations have been spotted.”

“Good lord... It seems I’m out of the frying pan and into the fire here. I’d better get word to Balck to work quickly. We’ll also get 9th Panzer, but it may be another day getting here from Bryansk. If they hit us with five armies, they mean business.”

“Manstein thinks they want Kharkov.”

“Apparently....”

“Anything more I should know?”

“Only that the Führer wants Kharkov too, so we’re here to restore order and make sure he keeps it.”

“Very well,” said Knobelsdorff. “Are your men in good positions?”

“Of course.”

“Then we’ll wait and see what they throw at us. But be ready to move to a fast operational counterattack on my order. Will we have any infantry freed up?”

“The Luftwaffe Korps that was hit on the Oskol River line has all but evaporated, and most of the Osttruppen as well. Raus is at Poltava with two divisions, and he’s been told to get his men ready to move by rail, but I’ve heard nothing further about that.”

“Then no infantry.” Knobelsdorff cocked his head to one side. “I suppose we should get used to that. What about Model?”

“The Führer has ordered him to hold his front. Heinrici is refusing his right and moving troops back to screen Belgorod. Manstein is trying to get permission to withdraw the entire 4th Army, but who knows how long that will take. At the moment, the only other units in theater are the two *Reichsführer* Brigades at Volchansk. They’ll be watching our back, but Manstein has it in his mind to send my division east after we stop this pincer. With Balck coming to Kharkov, it would be nice if he came along too. That attack over the Oskol river is their main push.”

“Then we’d better get busy.” Knobelsdorff pulled off his gloves, tugging slowly at them, finger by finger. “With my two panzer Divisions, and the two SS units, it seems I’m more than a Korps now.”

“Herr General,” said Dietrich, “You’re a full Panzer Armee!”

“It not going to be mine,” said Knobelsdorff. “It belongs to Hoth—4th Panzer Armee. The only question is what will we do with it once we have it assembled?”

“Do you want me to send out a reconnaissance in force?”

“No I think we’ll wait tonight. Balck will be all morning getting off the train at Kharkov. Let them come. Things get strung out in an advance like this, and well scattered. When they get here, they’ll find we’re well concentrated and ready for action.”

“You plan to attack?”

“That remains to be seen. We’ve got the river, and that will serve for the lack of infantry here for a time. I’ll put my word in on Manstein’s behalf and make the same request to OKW that Heinrici should withdraw. Until we know more, we’ll just lie on the ropes, but be prepared to counterpunch.”

“This city is a sore thumb,” said Dietrich. “Yes, it’s a good place to defend, but a pity it’s east of the Donets. Heinrici is pulling back fast, whether he has permission or not, and he promises me the 168th Infantry will watch the north flank. Another division will probably reach the Donets and cross late tomorrow. The thing is this—there isn’t a bridge behind us here. I had to throw up pontoons to get supply in, and it wasn’t easy. The river is receding, but this is the confluence of several tributaries, and it is still very wide in places. Frankly, I’d just as soon give them the city and retire behind the river, but I thought we might need a bridgehead. I’ve used all the bridging equipment I have, and I could use more pontoons if Model has them.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Knobelsdorff was taking all of this in, his mind working as he considered the situation. “Sepp,” he said quietly, never moving his eyes from the map. “This is going to get worse before it gets better. Make sure you build good bridges.”

Part IX

The Salient

“ Man, everywhere and at all times, whoever he may be, has preferred to act as he chose and not in the least as his reason and advantage dictated.”

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Chapter 25

15-APR-43

The initial northern breakthrough of Operation Star, was beginning to bog down against the stubborn defense being put up by Model. Just when they thought they might seize a valuable prize in Kharkov, up came that German Panzer Division. The 22nd was worn out, but it still had about 48 tanks, all Pz-IIIIN and IV-F2's. It had not received any Lions, but did have several companies of the lighter Leopard and Lynx recon tanks, which could help against infantry even if they were largely ineffective against the T-34's.

It ran right into the Russian 25th Tank Corps, and was enough to stop it in its tracks when supported by 56th Infantry Division from Heinrici's 12th Korps. His 39th Division had fallen back through Belgorod and moved up to extend the German line out to Tomarovka, and slowly, Model had scrapped together ad hoc units to try and fill that gap. Yet the Russians had not one but three tank corps in this attack, and by April 15 when Knobelsdorff arrived, they had begun bringing up more elements of the 5th Shock Army infantry, and several Guards divisions.

Further east, 5th Shock had several brigades of light tanks organized loosely as a mechanized cavalry division, and they swarmed over the infantry of the 56th Division, pushing up the road from Melkhovo and Korochoa. Division Commander Ludek had to use his Feld Ersatz Battalion to put in a counterattack and try to stop those light tanks short of Belgorod, but the situation put that fighting behind the right flank of 22nd Panzer.

Further south, near Volchansk, the 21st Army had forced a small penetration that prompted the 168th Division to make a strong counterattack. So the Soviets were keeping up strong pressure in the effort to take Belgorod and flank Volchansk to the north. The shield, now a combination of troops from 2nd and 4th Armies, had been dented, but it was still holding.

Yet this was no more than a sparring match in the north. As Dietrich had warned, the main event was in the east, and it was coming in behind a

weather front, crossing the empty gap between the Oskol and Donets—cold steel at the edge of hard rain.

* * *

The tide rolling west from the Oskol looked like it was going to come crashing onto the stony defense of Sepp Dietrich at Volchansk, but as they approached the Donets, most of the mobile formations executed a turn to the south. The large 1st Shock Army moved to screen off Volchansk, its lines extending some 18 kilometers south, all along the bridgehead Dietrich had occupied. An attack developed at Volchansk itself, but Dietrich soon realized that this was a masking and holding force, and no attempt was being made to reduce his bridgehead.

Further south on the Donets, there were two decent crossing points at Verkhne Saltov and Stary Saltov. These were held by General Franek's 196th Infantry Division from Heinrici's 10th Korps, and here the Russians moved up their powerful 3rd Guards Army. It would take infantry to force those crossings, and it would be a battle pitting concentrated Soviet Guards Brigades against German battalions, again on a front of approximately 18 kilometers.

South of the 196th, the Donets made a wide hairpin bend around heavy woodland northeast of Chuguyev, which was the main road and rail crossing leading to Kharkov. In this bend, there were also several crossing points, at Martovaya on the northern portion of the bend, Pechengi at the deepest part of the turn, and then at a few locations as the river flowed almost due west in a winding course for Chuguyev. This area was assigned to 3rd Guards Army, and it was here that Himmler's new SS Division had been posted. The dark SS man had wanted to sharpen his knife, and it was about to get a severe test.

All the other mobile formations of 1st Guard Army and the Popov Shock Group had swept south and around that deep bend in the Donets, driving for Chuguyev and points south on the river. The sector near Chuguyev was defended by Korps Raus with the 106th and 320th Infantry Divisions, but the Russians had enough force to contest this whole segment of the river.

South of the 320th, they would find four minor bridges near Zimyeve before the river turned southeast to make its way down through Andreyevka, Balakleya and eventually reach the major rail and road hub of Izyum. Those

four crossing points were only defended by the nine battalions that made up the 2nd Luftwaffe Field Korps. Yet as the river ran on to the southeast again, there was virtually no defense at all. A single battalion, *Feldersats C* from Armeegruppe South, had the bridge at Bishkin some 12 kilometers from the Luftwaffe troops. The rest of the river, nearly 100 kilometers to Izyum, was being screened by two reserve infantry divisions, which had only six battalions each.

If the Soviets wanted to get over the Donets, they had plenty of opportunities to do so. The strongest attack began right there north of the big bend, on the southern end of Franek's 196th Infantry, and against Himmler's new volunteer Nordland Panzer Division. Wagner had neglected to blow the bridge at Martovaya, and the 48th Guards Rifle Division fought hard to gain a bridgehead there for the tank brigades of 3rd Corps right behind it. The Soviets had plenty of bridging equipment and they were soon swarming over the river at every site that looked crossable, slowly driving KG Wagner back.

It was soon clear to Wagner that it would be fruitless to try to defend the deep salient created by the river bend, and he gave orders for the division to fall back to a new line stretching between the two top ends of the big U formed by the river. There was heavy woodland in that area that offered better prospects for defense, and his line would be considerably shorter.

But fresh black uniforms and SS insignia do not make a division like those in Steiner's Korps. The inexperience of the rank and file troops, their zeal for combat aside, was quite apparent. Wagner's orders would be received, but not implemented in time to prevent the surge of 3rd Shock Army crossing the river along a wide zone between Pechengi and Chuguyev. Most of that sector was lightly screened by Wagner's Recon battalion, a Panzerjager unit and one company of motorized infantry.

They were about to get steamrolled.

Zhukov and Vatutin knew the terrain well, and they had planned this attack very carefully. They had no intention of trying to link up the two pincers, unless that opportunity presented itself. The breakthrough on the Oskol was so wide, and the ground so open to the west, that they had ample room to maneuver. In this event Zhukov wanted the strong infantry armies like 1st and 3rd Shock, and the 3rd Guards to cover the river and force crossing points.

"The big bend northeast of Chuguyev will be easy to take and hold," said

Zhukov. I want that area attacked by strong infantry, at least two armies. Once our guardsmen fight their way through the woods, then we can send armor through on the shortest route to Kharkov.”

“What about 1st Guard Tank Army and Popov’s group?” asked Vatutin. They’ll just have to sit there until the infantry gets us those bridgeheads.”

“No,” said Zhukov definitively. “I want them moving south, bypassing Chuguyev and looking for crossings near Zimyeve. That failing, they can go for Andreyevka or Balakleya.”

Kuznetsov’s 1st Guard Tank Army went for Zimyeve, and so Popov veered off south and reached the Donets late on the night of April 15th. His motorized infantry dismounted, rushing into the outskirts of Balakleya, and by sunrise, the Soviets would have that town secured.

Pushed out of the plusher quarters, the German defenders retreated over the Donets, demolish the bridges and counted themselves lucky to be still breathing.

* * *

Sepp Dietrich was on the telephone to Knobelsdorff as reports came flooding in from the south. The Russians had stormed the Saltov position, and had a bridgehead there three kilometers deep. They had also crossed well north of Martovaya, and at Pechengi to seize the entire Donets Bend near Chuguyev. Now the Luftwaffe at Zimyeve reported a strong attack there.

“They are certainly persistent,” said Dietrich. “Do you still want this bridgehead at Volchansk? If we could get 4th Army back to the Donets we might shorten our lines and free up some troops to plug these holes. As it stands, the bulk of my troops are just sitting here.”

“Balck is coming up,” said Knobelsdorff.

“He won’t be enough on his own,” said Dietrich. “If I get over the river and join him, then we can do business.”

“What about Wagner?”

“That division is unreliable.” Dietrich stated the obvious. “It was sent here to get some seasoning, and instead it’s getting cooked!”

“I don’t have authority to order 4th Army to withdraw as you suggest.”

“Then pass it to Hoth.... Pass it up to Manstein,” said Dietrich. “We must do something. They’ll be on their way to Kharkov by this time tomorrow if

we don't."

"Alright, I can give you authorization to abandon the bridgehead at Volchansk. Balck came up the road from Kharkov. He's at Mikhaylovka. Take your division to Ternovka, but I don't want them over the river behind you."

"I'll have to inform General Holts. He's got the 161st just north of Volchansk."

"Correct," said Knobelsdorff, "and then he'll have to inform the 168th on his left, and so on. We haven't time to kick this can from Hoth to Manstein. We have to act. Get your division free for offensive action as soon as you can. Move tonight, and take the *Reichsführer* Brigades with you. I'll speak with you in the morning."

Knobelsdorff hung up the phone and then immediately informed his adjutant to get General Manstein on the line.

"*Generalfeldmarshal*," he said, "It has become necessary to tighten the defensive shield around Belgorod, and to do so we needed to give the Russians Volchansk."

"That is not a problem," said Manstein. "We don't need Volchansk. It's on the wrong side of the river."

"Dietrich agreed with that, and so I ordered him to pull out tonight. Balck is arriving, and I'm beginning to assemble my Korps between Ternovka and Mikhaylovka, northeast of Kharkov. I was planning to stop the incursion over the Donets at the Saltov position, and then reinforce that new SS division at the river bend. They're getting quite an education."

"Himmler paraded in to my meeting with the Führer thinking he was delivering Christ reincarnated with that unit. Well, they must learn their craft. Look after them. Tell Dietrich to take them under his wing and see what he can do with them."

"Then Volchansk won't be a problem?"

"Forget about it."

"Good, and how are things coming along on the Don front?"

"Very odd. We identified their 1st Tank army here, but then it withdrew two days ago. I think they smelled Steiner and wanted no part of him. When the tanks pulled back, their infantry fell back as well. We mopped up yesterday, and I'm moving a few 6th Army divisions into the new line. I'll be taking *Grossdeutschland* through Star Oblesk tonight. Steiner will move by

rail from Millerovo and down through Krasny Liman. We should begin assembling in a day or so, between Izyum and the Oskol as it approaches the Donets.”

“Then that attack was just bait,” said Knobelsdorff.

“Apparently, and it pulled in some big fish down here. But that was Katukov. He slipped out the back door here, but rest assured, he’ll be delivering the mail somewhere else. Be wary.”

* * *

That morning on the 15th of April would bring a major complication to everything Knobelsdorff was planning. Model had been chafing to wriggle his way out of the necessity of holding Oboyan. It was another fortified town, like Prokhorovka, that was the north end of a big salient, but thus far, OKW was silent on his request to redeploy and shorten his lines by eliminating that bulge.

The Soviet 5th Tank Army had been dueling with 22nd Panzer for the last two days north of Belgorod, but on the night of the 15th, it seemed to simply evaporate. German troops on the line reported no activity, and experienced NCOs and officers soon realized that the Soviet armored units had simply withdrawn. But that force had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was Tomarovka, 25 kilometers to the east. The Russians had pulled out of their fight with the 22nd Panzer, and they made a night march due east to push for Tomarovka the following morning.

Model had moved his headquarters down the road to Borisovka, and when he got the news he hardly had the time to digest it when the telephones were ringing again. It was a Lieutenant in the Pioneer Battalion of 102nd Infantry Division near Tomarovka reporting that a small column of Soviet Armored cars had been seen on the road to the town. He was 2 kilometers behind the front line....

A very strong attack had opened in the predawn hours, mostly infantry at first, but now tanks from the 29th Corps were being introduced, with waves of fresh infantry behind them. It was the 7th Guards Army, the old 64th Army now redesignated as a guards unit, with freshly rebuilt divisions. It had two Corps of three Guards Rifle Divisions each, three organic tank brigades, and a lot of artillery. Model knew the Guards were always used in the

breakthrough role, and that they seldom came alone. There had to be something more behind this attack, and there was.

It was Mikhail Katukov.

The mail he was delivering that day was a good chunk of the 1st Tank Army, which he had discretely pulled out of the feint towards Millerovo after roughing up the German 17th Reserve Korps. He was one of the very few tank leaders the Soviets had who could have pulled off such a maneuver—to attack, withdraw, make a quick night march to waiting trains at Boguchov, which then took his Corps swiftly by rail to Stary Oskol and on down to the outskirts of Prokhorovka. But it had not come to reduce that pocket. Instead the troops detrained with lightning speed and began moving south to file in behind 7th Guards Army, a reserve unit that had been sent over from the Central Front. It would be remembered as “Katukov’s March” in the written history of these events, and it was going to be a big headache for the German 2nd and 4th Armies.

It was already bad enough that Model had the 305th Infantry surrounded at Prokhorovka. Now the sudden shift of 5th Tank Army to Tomarovka made perfect sense. This new attack was intending to break through there and extend the deep salient achieved by 5th Tank Army, and the enemy’s intentions were perfectly clear. It was also pushing for Kharkov, and if it got there, it would well behind the 2nd Army on the Psel.

Model again sent an urgent request directly to OKW asking for permission to abandon the Oboyan salient, but got no response. It was clear to him what was happening. Keitel, Zeitzler and the other generals were most likely huddled around the situation map haggling with the Führer. After permitting Manstein to pull back Paulus and his 6th Army, and allowing 4th Army to fall back and readjust its lines, Hitler was digging in his heels. It remained to be seen whether the Generals could persuade him that this salient was of no immediate military use, and instead had become a tremendous liability for the Army.

“Look at the 305th!” Hitler would fire back. “It stands like a rock at Prokhorovka—six days now. Do not tell me that Model’s troops cannot do the same.”

(See Map: “The Oboyan Salient” at www.writingshop.ws)

Chapter 26

Zeitzler shrugged, clearly frustrated, but he resolved to try again.

“My Führer,” he persisted. “It requires five divisions to hold that salient, but this line, across its base, could be held by three. That would free up two divisions that Model would put to very good use. This is only reasonable.”

“Do not presume to lecture me,” said Hitler. “My grasp of the situation is far superior to that of any man here. Who stopped the Russians in the Winter of 1941? I did, with an iron will and enough nerve to stand my ground when it looked like the situation was on the verge of collapse. I have read all of Clausewitz, and Moltke, just as you have, General Zeitzler. So I am well aware that we will free up units if we withdraw as you suggest, yet the price is Oboyan, and all the ground between the Pena River and that city. How long do you think we can give them such terrain without having to fight for it? My Generals have been very generous—oh so very generous. You all wanted to give them back Moscow last year, but I put a stop to that, and so that city remains under our thumb.”

Exasperation. Sideward glances. The Generals had been dealing with this for hours. Every time Zeitzler would bring the discussion to the point requiring a definitive decision, Hitler would launch into a diatribe like this, and then seize upon the next situation report to simply change the subject to some other area of the front.

Unfortunately, those reports kept coming in, one crisis after another, and Hitler move the topic of discussion to another point in the line. So Model would get no permission to withdraw that day. Events would have to conspire to force the matter, and that was what was now underway at Tomarovka.

The position was right on the seam between 4th and 2nd Armies. Hunten’s 39th Division was on the right, a part of 12th Korps in the 4th Army, its lines reaching for Tomarovka from a position north of Belgorod. On the left was Friesner’s 102nd Division, now attached to 5th Korps in the 2nd Army, and its line was near vertical, reaching north along the right side of the initial Soviet Breakthrough. The Pioneer Battalion that reported those armored cars was just about the only unit in the gap between those divisions, and it was about to get a lot of bad company.

When news reached Model, he asked Heinrici if he could send the 22nd Panzer to Tomarovka, even if it meant he would have to move his infantry east to cover the ground it was holding. That was what was decided, so it was almost like a defensive back shifting laterally to follow a receiver on the football field.... But this receiver had protection, the full power of six Guards Rifle divisions pushing into the breach.

Model knew that this attack was not something a single panzer division could master, and he was sending any reserve unit he could get his hands on, which included two military police companies, and the Stug Battalions from his 6th Korps further east, moving quickly by rail to the threatened sector. General Rodt of the 22nd Panzer had no hope of attacking with any success, but he could throw his division at the left shoulder of the breakthrough zone and see if he could at least impede its progress.

Frustrated to still have four infantry divisions strung out from Tomarovka north to Oboyan, Model again sent an urgent message to OKW. *“Strong new enemy attack has developed at Tomarovka. Requesting immediate permission to consolidate front along the River Pena. Situation very serious. Enemy breakthrough imminent.”* (See Map: *“The Breakthrough at Tomarovka.”*)

* * *

That was true almost everywhere.

The Russians were over the Donets on a wide front south of Volchansk. Their 3rd Guards Rifle Corps had obtained a bridgehead 10 kilometers wide between Stary Saltov and Verkhne Saltov, and it had become Sepp Dietrich's first order of business after he withdrew from Volchansk west of the river. Further south, the rest of 3rd Guards Army stormed over the river in an even bigger attack and now Himmler's new SS Division was trying to hold back that attack as well as the push by 3rd Shock Army in the big river bend to the south. Elements of that army were also mustering near Chuguyev to try and gain a bridgehead for the 1st Guards Tank Corps. This sector was being held by the 106th Division of Korps Raus, and they reported that there was also considerable movement south of Chuguyev, and that area was only being held by Luftwaffe Field Division battalions.

The combination of fast moving Mech Battalions in the 1st Guard Mech Corps, supported by three strong Guards Rifle Divisions meant the Luftwaffe

could not prevent a crossing near Zimyeve. By the afternoon of the 15th, it was already advanced 5 kilometers deep. Then word came that Soviet tank columns had attacked the 173rd Reserve Division and captured Andreyevka on the Middle Donets. They were also approaching Balakleya some distance downstream. These were the fast moving columns of the Popov Shock Group, intending to secure bridgeheads at both those cities and await orders to proceed. Needless to say, the news of all these bridgeheads over the Donets enraged Hitler at OKW.

“Where are the panzers I have sent?” his anger rising quickly. “Panzers, panzers, *panzers!*” He pounded the table with his fist. “Why do I not hear of any counterattack by Knobelsdorff? What is Manstein doing in the Don sector? I gave him the free hand he wanted there. Where is he now? Where is Steiner?”

Zeitzler tried to explain that a heavily mechanized Korps like that takes time to pull itself together after an action and then move 200 kilometers by road or rail to a new assembly point. He mollified Hitler by reminding him that Knobelsdorff was assembling three divisions near of Kharkov, and a counterattack was imminent. 11th Panzer was in the city, and the 9th would arrive later that evening by rail. In the midst of all these reports, the crisis with Model’s 2nd Army was completely lost. Hitler only had eyes for Kharkov, and with each position update, he grew more and more tense, his temper hotter, his anger more biting.

Serious situations only get attention when they slip down the treacherous slope of trouble to the edge of complete disaster, and that was to be the case that day. As the Staff officers at OKW studied the map, updating positions with new reports, it was beginning to look like the Soviets were going to now attempt a double envelopment of Kharkov.

If the breakthrough at Tomarovka continued south as expected, it would have good defensible ground on its right flank along the Vorskla River, and with Model ordered to continue to hold the Oboyan Salient, he could not muster any troops to threaten it. The only consolation the Germans had there was the fact that Tomarovka was 80 kilometers north of Kharkov, and it would take time to reach the city. In the south, the 1st Guards Army at Chuguyev and points south was an even more dangerous threat to the city, and only needed to push another 30 to 35 kilometers to reach its objective.

* * *

Model had been frustrated with the silence from OKW, believing he had no recourse other than to begin making preparations to hedgehog the northern end of the Oboyan Salient. He sent instructions to Siebert to move his headquarters to Kurasovka, a town about 18 kilometers south of Oboyan. He was to assume command of the three divisions that made up the nose of the salient, the 299th on the left, 72nd at Oboyan in the center, and 294th on the right. The two divisions on the wings were to make ready to fold back and close their lines at Kurasovka.

“Sorry you get the luck of the draw,” he told Siebert, “but it does not look like I’ll get permission for a general withdrawal. I’m going to have to fold back the lower ends of the salient tomorrow, orders or no orders. If you have Army level assets, get them southwest to General Hell. You may take your own supply columns and Korps artillery. You’ll need them. Hold on as best you can. I can promise you we’ll do everything possible to get to you in time, but be prepared to hold for a while.”

“What about the 46th Division. It’s west of the 299th, and still on the River Psel.”

“I’m going to move the regiment nearest the breakthrough tonight, but I may not be able to get that one out either. In that case, it’s yours. I’ll inform you tomorrow.”

“299th sent a regiment to the right shoulder. Should I leave it there or bring it back to join its division?”

“I’ll make that decision tomorrow. I will do my best to get Manstein to intervene here. Maybe OKW will listen to him if they insist on ignoring me.”

That plea had prompted Manstein to make a heated call to Zeitzler. “You will have Oboyan, for what it’s worth, but you will lose an entire Korps of good infantry for that. What is going on there? Come to your senses. We must conduct an elastic defense!”

“I agree with you completely,” said Zeitzler, but we cannot persuade Hitler. He insists that the entire line of the Psel be held.”

“Well I do not have the time to fly there and haggle with him. Do your best, Zeitzler. Try to get Model a free hand. Whisper sweet nothings in his ear if you must.”

“When can I report a counterattack is underway? That would help calm

him down.”

“Soon. *Totenkopf* is only now arriving on the trains from Kramatorsk. I will need to concentrate before we move. Tell the Führer that I am making a personal request that Model be allowed to reorganize his defense and save that Korps. We’re going to need it. And tell him not to worry. I will stop Zhukov here just as I stopped him last November.”

* * *

Seeing those pincers developing on the map was the medicine that finally moved Hitler from his order for obstinate defense to a more flexible approach. Zeitzler again pointed out the great liability represented by the Oboyan salient.

“Other than to hold terrain, that city is presently useless, as is all the ground in this salient. It has been fatally compromised by this incursion at Tomarovka. Should that pincer turn north, it would pocket half of 2nd Army, but I do not think that is where it is headed. It will continue south, and constrained as he is to hold that useless ground, Model can do nothing whatsoever to stop it. The same can be said of 4th Army on the right closer to Belgorod. If you do not maneuver on defense, then you yield all initiative to the enemy. Knobelsdorff cannot move in two directions at the same time. He must choose one pincer or another for his counterattack, and that will most likely be here in the south. That leaves Model in limbo, and Heinrici could easily be cut off as well.”

Hitler stared at the map, as if it was there to do nothing more than irritate him. Zeitzler knew he was on shaky ground, but tried one more time.

“My Führer, if you let Model maneuver out of that trap, then he can probably muster two or three divisions on the right shoulder of that northern breakthrough. If we could free up even one Panzer Division, a good strong counterattack could be mounted to cut off the enemy breakthrough. It would be your master stroke that would stop that entire offensive in the north—assuming you have the nerve and will to let Model give you that opportunity.”

That last bit was the sugar, and then Zeitzler waited, knowing that the person who spoke next would lose this argument. It was Hitler.

“Very well,” said the Führer. “This was my plan all along, but it was

necessary to see that Model held his ground to determine the enemy's intentions. Now that is perfectly clear, and so I will authorize the measures you suggest here and deal with the situation."

Hitler had covered his tracks, laying claim to everything Zeitzler had said as if it were his own plan, something he had held in abeyance for the right time, and no one would ever say otherwise.

There was an almost audible relief of the tension in the room, and Kluge simply moved his eyes, looking at a nearby adjutant, who then quickly retired to get to the signals room with the message the Generals had been chafing to send Model for the last twelve hours. *"Your request to abandon Oboyan and redeploy on the Pena River is approved and should be implemented with all speed."*

The Generals at OKW did not have to tell Model what to do after that. He was perhaps the most able master of defense in the German Army, and as soon as he had that signal in hand, he went to work, his energy inexhaustible, for he knew he was now trying to save his entire army. The only question is whether or not he would have the time.

By the night of April 15th, the spearheads of 29th Tank and 3rd Mech had pushed another 15 to 18 kilometers to Borisovka, forcing Model to move his HQ northwest. It would now be possible to execute a turn to the east to flank the defense of 4th Army at Belgorod and enfilade the entire line stretching all the way down the upper Donets to Volchansk. That night the Soviet Generals on the scene met to discuss their options. Shumilov had the strong infantry force of the 7th Guards, and Rybalko and Katukov had the two mobile groups.

"We have made a clean breakthrough," said Katukov, "and we have encountered no resistance at Borisovka. I say we should continue south on that road."

"But it leads to Akythrya, not Kharkov," said Rybalko. "I was tasked with moving on the main objective. Are you suggesting we split our forces?"

"No," said Katukov. "Moving on Akythrya may threaten their 2nd Army, but you are correct. You should move southwest, but only as far as Berezovka near the rail line. Then turn due south and follow that rail line all the way to Kharkov. That will be our widest envelopment. I will take my forces south immediately. That will raise the hair on the back of their necks. I'll take Bessonovka, and they will think I am trying to envelop Belgorod, but

that won't be necessary. They will have to give it to us if we get south quickly, just as they are now giving us Oboyan. Speed is the medicine now. Let's beat Kuznetsov to the city!"

* * *

The two breakthroughs, each posing a host of serious threats, suddenly galvanized the German reaction. That was largely because General Manstein had left his headquarters at Rostov and moved to Slavyansk to be closer to the action he was busily planning.

The 2nd SS Division was the to arrive, moving through Slavyansk by rail to Barvenkovo south of the Donets, and then assembling for a road march towards Balakleya. The Germans had moved in Armee Detachment Hollidt, with the 50th, 198th and 336th Infantry Divisions after a long train ride from the Black Sea coast. Hollidt was then tasked with screening the Donets between Balakleya and Krasny Liman, with his main focus being the defense of the important supply and crossing city of Izyum.

That city was being slowly approached by the Soviet 63rd Army, and Hollidt posted his 50th Division north of Izyum between the Donets and Oskol Rivers. On the left of that defense was a less reliable unit, the 187th Reserve Division. It was actually on the other side of the Donets where the river began making wide bends through a heavily wooded area west of Izyum. A Regiment of the 173rd Reserve Division had already been overrun at Andreyevka, its remnants retreating west and north, behind the river. The remaining regiment was at Balakleya, but it now retreated southeast to link up with the 187th.

That regiment now represented the extreme left of Manstein's infantry shield in the south near Izyum, but *Das Reich* was coming up fast. Manstein wanted it to watch what the enemy was doing at Balakleya, and he expected that they might continue to push out well beyond their bridgehead, which was now widening between Andreyevka and Balakleya.

Manstein was finally on the scene, bringing Papa Hörnlein's *Grossdeutschland* Division and Eicke's 3rd SS Division. The Germans could make night marches too....

Chapter 27

16-APR-43

Zhukov got the report around midnight, April 15th—a column of motorized troops, with armor support, was moving up towards Balakleya. This could only mean one thing—Steiner. So, he thought, they moved west very quickly, and where there was smoke, there was always fire.

The Soviets knew all the cards that were in the German hand. They had seen Manstein deftly sweep away their feint towards Millerovo, adjusting and restoring the line in three days of fast paced operations. That was exactly what he had intended, but now they had finally realized what was happening and the jig was up.

They will have three strong divisions there soon, he thought, all the rest of Steiner's Group, including their elite *Grossdeutschland*. This means I must order 2nd Shock, 63rd and 57th Armies to halt and assume defensive positions until I determine what Manstein is going to do here. As for my mobile reserve, I was intending to send it in Popov's wake. We've a good bridgehead over the Donets now between Andreyevka and Balakleya, and Popov reports that there is very little resistance there.

The roads are open all the way to Krasnograd and on to the Dnieper! I did not plan to cross the Donets until after Kharkov was secured, and in light of this development concerning Steiner, I think it best that I pull the reins on Popov. I can't have him galloping on towards the Dnieper with Manstein on my flank. I will order Popov to pause and consolidate. Then we will see what develops. As for my mobile reserve—it stays where it is for now as well, right in the center of the board. One must always have a Knight handy when needed.

* * *

Another old chess player, Manstein had been playing well to Kingside in dealing with Zhukov's gambit in the Don sector. The wily Russian General

had taken a pawn, but his Knight was driven off by the Queen in the first defensive operation. Now Manstein had castled, developing a strong Rook as he did so in *Das Reich*. But he was not yet ready to attack. He wanted to get a few more major pieces developed, most notably, the 3rd SS *Totenkopf* Division, which was re-routed through Kramatorsk well south of Krasny Liman to re-coal the trains. He also had an errant Bishop he wanted to get into play, the 17th Panzer Division on its way from the Caucasus.

Hollidt was getting his infantry into position to watch the river line east of Izyum, so now the General could begin clenching his mailed fist by concentrating his Panzer divisions. Instead of immediately launching the two heavy pieces he had in a premature attack, he opted for position play, maneuvering to watch the flank of any enemy move beyond the Donets from the vicinity of Balakleya. Every move he made had to be carefully considered. The enemy pieces were raging through the center of the board, but he was building up power on the flanks.

Good chess took time, and he was behind in development. Zhukov already had an open file right down the center of the board, and bridgeheads over the Donets. Did he have the nerve to push any further? Would he try to go all the way to the eighth rank?

* * *

General der Panzertruppen, Otto Von Knobelsdorff had a good deal on his mind that morning. Korps Raus, with the 106th and 320th Divisions near Chuguyev, could not hold. The Luftwaffe troops had been shattered in the south near Zimyeve, and the enemy was now across the river on a wide front extending more than 25 kilometers. They had fast mobile units that might swing beneath and behind Kharkov to envelop it, or perhaps just bore in directly for the city. (*See map: "Kuznetsov Crosses the Donets."*)

This new SS Division Himmler delivered can't hold either, he thought. The weight of both 3rd Shock and 3rd Guards Armies is simply too much. We've been trying to hold back three armies with three divisions, and the water is finally coming over the dam. Dietrich pulled 1st SS back over the river as we planned, and he has contained and pushed back the Soviet bridgehead in the Stary Saltov sector, but that is irrelevant now with everything else to the south of that collapsing!

Yet I am not without resources. 9th and 11th Panzer are right here with me in Kharkov, but how to proceed here? If I continue to hold out that infantry shield it may be battered to a point that it will lose all combat effectiveness. I think the infantry must withdraw, but that will not be easy under this heavy enemy pressure.

I could strike now with my sword and probably defeat that penetration near Zimyeve, but it will be no good separating my Korps and trying to stop that and the enemy advance through Chuguyev as well. It must be one or the other, and the Zimyeve breakthrough is the most serious. If I take my Panzers south, then General Raus will have to either hold on as best he can, or fall back on Kharkov.

That was what he decided. 48 Panzer Korps moved south, and it would not be long before the two sides would meet. Balck had sent his “incomparable Hauser” with the 11th Recon Battalion, who reached the town of Beloye at about 4:00 that morning, and a company of panzers were with him. The Russians had mastered the art of night moves, and were not shy about initiating attacks if they seemed promising. It was a battalion of 1st Guard Mech in the van that first ran into Hauser, the German Armored cars spitting out fire that lit up the murky darkness, soon to be joined by the sharp crack of the Panzers 75mm guns.

But that Mech Battalion was not alone. The Lieutenant radioed back that they had encountered German mechanized units, and General Russiyanov knew he would soon have to earn any further advance towards Kharkov, and likely pay for it in both blood and steel. He had 17th Guards Tank Brigade up front, and the 16th Guards right behind it, so he ordered them to engage and secure Beloye. The T-34’s ground up the wet soil, veering off road to take a short cut, and move swiftly to the battle zone, about a kilometer south of the town. Meanwhile 3rd Guard Mech Brigade had two more battalions, and they crossed the Udy River intending to flank and envelop the town on the right, while 1st Guard Mech Brigade would proceed to flank it from the left.

Hauser engaged, but soon had reports of what the Russians were doing, and he deftly slipped out of the trap, falling back on the hamlet of Vlaschevo north of the river. There he met the entire 110th Panzergrenadier Regiment coming up, with a panzer company assigned to each of its three battalions.

“Good to see you,” said Hauser. “Because the Russians are coming for breakfast.”

“Then it is time we served it,” said Leutnant Paulson. “But I’m afraid their eggs will be cold.” He smiled, waving his hand to get the Grenadiers moving. The long column of halftracks would fan out and deploy on a three battalion front, and the regiment would sweep south towards the river, where they knew the Russians would be coming.

The ensuing action was a case of the best mechanized infantry the Soviets had against some of the very best Panzergrenadiers on the German side. Hauser led the attack on the enemy penetration east of Belaye, his armored cars racing from point to point, guns firing as they moved, a fine art he had developed. They would drive back two battalions of the 1st Guard Mech, and the Germans were able to close up the position on the Udy River, where the Russians had now adopted a defensive line.

The Russians had learned that there was also trouble on their left, where Scheller’s 9th Panzer was attacking through a gap in the heavy woodland south of Kharkov. That prompted Kuznetsov to send the 5th Guards Rifle Division to that sector to buttress Kuliev’s Cavalry on that flank. Soon the Russian position looked like a big inverted horse shoe, solid as the iron it was made of, but one thing was immediately clear. Knobelsdorff had stopped the Russians and forced them to go over to the defense.

The problem for the Germans was that this apparent enveloping Russian pincer was not alone. As Zhukov had explained to Sergei Kirov, the plan was to attack along a very broad front. Kuznetsov’s 1st Guard Tank had crossed the Donets at Chuguyev, and it was now 10 kilometers up the road to Kharkov, pushing hard against the persistent resistance of the 320th Division.

That thrust was strongly supported on the right by the entire 3rd Shock and 3rd Guard Armies, which had been methodically pushing out of the bridgeheads at Pechengi and Martovaya, through the heavy woodland. Sepp Dietrich had contained the Soviet bridgehead at Stary Saltov, but from there all the way to Chuguyev, the Soviets were over the Donets in force.

That concentration was going to become a bold thrust for Kharkov, and with Knobelsdorff using both his available panzer divisions to stop Kuznetsov, he could not intervene. To make matters worse, the spearheads of Mikhail Katukov’s fast moving armor were now already 40 kilometers southwest of Belgorod. It was going to put that city on the chopping block next, for it was now the northernmost bastion of Heinrici’s 4th Army, but another sore thumb that Hitler was again loathe to relinquish. Something had

to be done, and the tension was as hard as twisted rope at OKW.

* * *

“Where is Manstein?” Hitler’s impatience never helped the situation. “He promised me he would smash this attack, but we have no word of his doings for hours.”

“Apparently he is still concentrating his forces at Izyum and to the west; bringing up further reserves from the Caucasus.” Zeitzler had finally received the position update on Group Hollidt, penciling in the three division he had brought to the lower Donets, the last of which was only now arriving, the 198th.

“The Caucasus? From where?” Hitler gave him a wide-eyed look.

“Group Hollidt was transferred from the Black Sea coast. Manstein has used them to secure the lower Donets crossings and prevent any further enemy advance or bridgeheads in that sector. This gives him a free hand to maneuver with Steiner’s group.”

“A free hand, a free hand... Herr Manstein takes a good deal of liberty with that free hand of his these days. I gave no authorization for that withdrawal from the Caucasus. Those troops were supposed to be in Sukhumi by now!”

“Obviously that can wait,” said Zeitzler. “Sukhumi gives us nothing, but Hollidt, where he is now, can help us keep the Donets Basin. Don’t forget the coal mines.”

Turnabout was always fail play, thought Zeitzler. The Führer is always throwing out these economic foils to our plans. Now let me stick him with that one. He watched while Hitler put on his eyeglasses and leaned over the map to note the position of those three divisions.

“As you can see,” said Zeitzler. “Hollidt can now cover the lower Donets from Krasny Liman all the way to Izyum. That gives us a strong right shoulder. The real problem now is in the center.”

“What about this big bridgehead the Russians have obtained between Andreyevka and Balakleya?” Hitler shook his head. “What is to stop them from pushing further south?”

“Manstein,” said Zeitzler. “That is the purpose of this buildup here with Steiner’s divisions. In fact, I would invite them to do as you suggest, and then

you will see what they get in return for the ground they think they are taking from us. That is not a concern for now. The real trouble spot is developing south of Kharkov and behind 4th Army. Now Belgorod is in the same soup that the Soviets used to cook Oboyan. It is being strongly held, but the enemy is flanking the entire position.”

“They cannot go much further,” said Hitler Dismissively. “How can they hold the flanks of that penetration in the north?”

“That will not be an issue, as we have nothing there to threaten those flanks, and they will soon know that. Yet if they continue south they will be cutting the vital roads and rail lines that Heinrich depends on to supply 4th Army. That spearhead could turn at any time.”

“If this is a prelude for another request to abandon Belgorod, you may as well forget it,” said Hitler.

“I understand your reluctance to yield that ground, but please do consider the following proposal. Dietrich is on the line containing the Saltov bridgehead, and with the Reichsführer Brigades are merely watching his back along the river. Those are elite mobile troops that could be used to stop this advance in the north, but who will hold the segments of the line they now defend if we give them that mission? The answer is obvious, even if it may be uncomfortable in the short run. The only reservoir of infantry is in 4th Army, and it must adjust its lines to free up at least one division to take the place of 1st SS. Heinrich presently still has three divisions east of the Donets. Allow them to move to the more defensible positions on the west bank, and fewer troops can hold that ground. Once Dietrich is relieved, he can move to intercept and crush this enemy spearhead.”

Hitler rubbed the bridge of his nose. Yielding any ground rankled him, but the image of Sepp Dietrich, his old personal bodyguard, leading the Life Guards of Adolf Hitler on the attack was very compelling. As it was a minor adjustment in the line, he gave Zeitzler permission to do as he had suggested.

“But Belgorod will not be abandoned like Oboyan. I am done with handing out candy to the Russians. If they want that city, then let them pay for it in blood.”

“Very well.” Zeitzler turned and gave the order, putting the emphasis first on what he knew Hitler wanted. “Belgorod is to be designated a fortress and held at any cost. Then he quietly told a staff officer to signal Heinrich to make the further adjustments to his line and pull those divisions back west of the

river.

“Now then,” he concluded. “We must look at the situation closer to Kharkov. Knobelsdorff has stopped this thrust from the south, but a strong attack is developing from the direction of Chuguyev, and we have little in hand to deal with it.”

“Why doesn’t Knobelsdorff simply send one of his divisions?”

“Because that will dilute the striking power of his Korps, which is already one division light, as 6th Panzer has yet to arrive.”

“It is coming.... What about Himmler’s new division? It is already deployed, and he spoke very highly about it.”

“It has fought hard to hold its lines but the weight of two strong enemy armies is becoming too much. I would order those troops to adopt an elastic defense with maneuver and counterattack instead of linear defense, but the division is only now getting its baptism of fire. It may not be able to do as I suggest.”

“Then leave it where it sits. Let them fight and hold the line. Send a personal message to this Wagner and tell him the Führer is watching his division, counting on it to hold. That will put the fire into them.”

Static, unyielding defense was always best in Hitler’s mind. Yet slowly, purposefully, the enemy had been chipping away at the walls the Führer would build, and something had to give.

Part X

Stemming the Tide

“ On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”

—William Shakespeare

Chapter 28

In the early hours of April 16th, General Markian Mikhailovich Popov smelled the clean, rain swept air that he knew so well, and he smiled. *The Ukraine*. It is high time that we returned here. We have missed the wheat, the endless fields to feed our people, the breadbasket of the Rodina.

His spearheads had reached their first objective, seizing a good bridgehead over the Middle Donets. The 2nd Shock Army under Vlasov was on his left, its lines now screening Balakleya and points east along the river. His own 7th and 10th Tank Corps were in the Andreyevka Bridgehead, reorganizing after the long march from the Oskol, and waiting for word from Zhukov.

He had pushed out a recon battalion as far south as Mikhaylovka, about 25 kilometers from his crossing point on the river. It was completely empty, save for a few families of peasant farmers who eagerly embraced the visitors as liberators. He had used the time to resupply and refuel his tanks, though they had seen little fighting. His was an exploitation force, meant to find the holes in the lines and push through to gain ground. Far off in his mind, he could see the wide deep bend of the Dnieper River, and it was his hope that one day soon he would see it with his eyes again. And all he had to do was go there. Nothing was opposing him or barring his way. All he needed was the order to move from Zhukov, and the fuel

He sat, content for the moment to consolidate his Shock Group, and indulged himself in a good cigar for reaching his primary objective. By mid-day, word came that there was a German recon company 15 kilometers to his south at Lozovenka. Aerial reconnaissance had also spotted a stronger German force near the twisting bend in the river west of Izyum. It was reported to be at least regimental strength, with tanks and APCs; undoubtedly sent there to protect the flank of the light German infantry division still holding above that large river bend.

That was all in the domain of 2nd Shock Army, except for that single company spotted to his south. Yet he was curious. He had his own recon troops at Mikhaylovka, and he sent word for them to take the road to

Lozovenka and see what was there.

Meanwhile, 2nd Shock Army was making preparations to engage that light infantry force above the bend. It was never intended that they would cross the Donets, and so they were woefully short on bridging engineers, having to borrow two battalions from the adjacent 63rd Army to the east. One was trying to repair the blown bridge at Balakleya, which was now under 2nd Shock Army's command.

At Popov's urging, Vlasov had ordered two cavalry divisions and the 327th Rifle Division over the river at Balakleya to extend the bridgehead and allow the mobile units to move west. So Vlasov's 2nd Shock Army was split. Those three divisions were south of the Donets in the western segment of his front, and the remainder of his forces were still north of the river to the east of Balakleya.

Popov waited, growing more impatient, until orders were finally received in the late afternoon. *"Consolidate bridgehead, conduct local recon operations, which may include reconnaissance in force to cut the railway line linking Kharkov and Pavlograd. Report any concentration of enemy forces encountered."*

I have already completed the first two items on this list, so now I will cut that rail line. It was no more than 20 kilometers to the west, just beyond the town of Alexeyevskoye, and he already knew that road was open. So he tapped General Burkov's shoulder, the commander of 10th Tank Corps, and ordered him to proceed with that recon in force.

"Take your entire Corps," he said, perceiving no real threat to his position at the moment. Now all he had to do was report that regiment spotted to his south, and his orders for the day would stand fulfilled. He was feeling good that day, even though he was still somewhat eager to get on with his war. The rest of 2nd Shock Group, a motorized Rifle Division and a good Mech Corps, was only 30 kilometers to his northwest. So Popov was feeling fat and sassy that day, and did not yet perceive the peril that was so very close at hand.

The "regiment" spotted that day was actually part of General Paul Hausser's 2nd SS Division. The entire division was there, all formed up for operations, and the "recon company" Popov was now investigating belonged to Eicke's 3rd SS *Totenkopf* just a little southwest of Hausser's *Das Reich*. Steiner had his full Korps assembled, well fueled, and ready to rampage north at Manstein's next word.

* * *

That word would come as the sunlight faded on the 16th of April. The third division now assigned to Steiner's Korps was *Grossdeutschland*, which Manstein had sent by rail to Izyum, where it then moved up behind the lines of Hollidt's 50th Infantry Division. The river split this force, with the SS on the left and *Grossdeutschland* on the right, but there was a convenient bridge that would allow Manstein to shift forces in either direction, and these moves would be well concealed by heavy woods.

The move to concentrate the Korps had been lightning swift, a combination of fast rail moves and night marches, with the divisions taking rest in well screened terrain in the daylight hours. The troops were well rested, and ready to fight, and the power those three divisions represented could not be underestimated.

Manstein launched his counterattack with Steiner's SS Korps on the left. Supported by all the Korps artillery, including heavy Nebelwerfers, the thunder of that opening barrage in the darkness was just the opening round. Behind it came *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf*, in a tightly concentrated attack sweeping north and west towards the enemy bridgeheads. The sudden appearance of a force this large, with two full SS divisions in their prime moving side by side, was a shock akin to that delivered by Stonewall Jackson after his famous night move around the Union flank to attack on May 2nd of 1863 at Chancellorsville.

The attack would fall heavily on those two Cavalry Corps that had moved south from Balakleya to screen the bridgehead, and the steel chariots the SS were riding in were a little more than the Russians could handle. To make matters worse, Manstein had also moved all four of the *Schwerepanzer* Battalions in *Armeegruppe South* to support these attack, with two on each side of the river.

On the right, Manstein waited two hours, and then he would throw the power of *Grossdeutschland* Division right on the seam between 63rd and 2nd Shock Armies, very close to a sharp bend in the Donets. That attack would also be spearheaded by the 501st and 502nd *Schwerepanzer* battalions, each having 36 new Lions with the 88mm main gun.

As a feint, he ordered the division artillery to fire due north at the lines of

63rd Army, to deceive the enemy into thinking that would be the point of imminent attack. It was well away from the river, which was where he wanted to make his *Schwerpunkt* with the bulk of the division. Hörnlein would take his division around that river bend, and push northwest to Balakleya, severing that communications link to the troops south of the Donets. In so doing, he would essentially be the right flank of Steiner's attack, and all three of these powerful divisions would move to crush Popov's deep incursion south of the Donets.

Two regiments of the 346th Rifle division bore the brunt of the initial attack, and they were driven back, rallying with their HQ when two reserve tank battalions came up in support. They each had about 16 T-34's and nine T-60's, with a few more 57mm SP AT guns, but they had not yet made the acquaintance of the Lions. 346th Rifle Division fell back and tried to re-establish the front, and the Army artillery pool was beating a hasty retreat.

28 kilometers to the northwest, at Balakleya, Popov was chafing at the bit to continue his advance over the Donets. Now he knew why Zhukov had reined him in. He reported that there was an attack in progress, but initial reports did not indicate that there was anything more than a strong regimental scale attack. That was *Das Reich*, leading with the regiment on its left. The full weight of that division, and all of 3rd SS had not yet engaged. So Popov decided to surprise the upstart German regiment he thought he had in front of him, and ordered his two tank corps to sweep south and east, thinking to pin whatever the Germans had out there against the river and annihilate it. He was soon about to learn just exactly what the Germans had out there.

Higher command must have gotten wind of something Popov did not yet know, for he received an order near midnight to consolidate and defend his bridgehead, but to prepare to withdraw the bulk of his force back north of the Donets if so ordered. That was all the message said, with no mention of the German counterattack already underway north of Izyum. Popov was confused. He scratched his head at the message, for he was now doing the exact opposite, swinging his Shock Group into the attack.

Why does Zhukov want me to sit here, he thought? I have already given him Balakleya and Andreyevka? He reluctantly sent a staff officer out to draft an order that would halt his attack, but not yet knowing the full scope of what was happening, he was in no great hurry. In his mind, he could crush this German regiment first, and then make his preparations to consolidate the

bridgehead again.

* * *

General Zeitzler had always been a very energetic man, so much so that he had been called “General Fireball” in the early years of the war when he laid the planning for *Fall Grun* in Czechoslovakia and took over Army Group D in the low countries. Many thought he would become just another yes man at OKW when he was appointed there, but he had finally come to see the misery that Halder had to put up with in Hitler’s intransigence and the nonsensical way in which he tried to interfere with daily operations on the front.

In a fast moving battle like this, the ability of improvise, make snap decisions based on sound military principles, account for the necessary supply to allow the army to maneuver, were all qualities entirely missing in Adolf Hitler. He never gave a thought to logistics. His troops needed no fuel to move when all they had to do was sit in static positions and defend as in the last war.

Yet now the deep thrust made by Mikhail Katukov simply had to be answered. His spearheads and forward patrols had moved as far south as Trosnoye, 40 kilometers south of Tomarovka where Model was slowly building up infantry freed up by his withdrawal to the Pena River line. In making adjustments intended to free up 1st SS, General Heinrici had freed up a full infantry division, the 167th, but this is when the hand of fate intervened.

Katukov turned east.

He had taken Bessonovka, and now he was swinging his mechanized forces south and east around that town, pushing for the main road and rail line that led to Belgorod from Kharkov. Heinrici’s own HQ was now right in Katukov’s path, along with the entire logistical train for the 4th Army. Something had to be done, and because the 167th Infantry Division was 25 kilometers closer to the threat than Dietrich’s troops, it was immediately ordered to move towards the Udy River, one of three watercourses that flowed south to the vicinity of Kharkov.

There was a village with the impossible name of Shchetinovka there, which the Germans simply called “Shetovka”, and that is where Katukov’s

6th Tank Corps encountered the arriving German infantry. If the Russian tanks could move another 10 kilometers, they would sever the jugular for Heinrici's 4th Army.

Zeitzler then did something that was very uncharacteristic. He had been a loyal Nazi, properly awed by the Führer for some months. Now he was seeing the reality, and knew he had to do more than make persuasive arguments at the map table. So he made a private call to Colonel-General Heinrici.

"What is your situation?" he began.

"The line is holding. Belgorod is strongly defended as ordered, though I cannot see why I must hold that city when the enemy is about to kick me in the backside."

"De Führer," said Zeitzler, and he did not need to say anything more. Then he made plain the reason for his call. "If you stay put, there is a good chance that the entire northern half of your army will be cut off in another day or so. The 167th may not be able to stop what's happening behind you. Furthermore, Korps Raus cannot hold much longer. This could all be academic soon. The Russians are pushing very hard for Kharkov, and they are now only 15 kilometers from the city. That too, would cut your entire army off and make a withdrawal an absolute necessity—one the Führer would simply ignore. Understand? Now... I have freed up the *Reichsführer* Brigades to try and clear your lines of communication, but you will remain in a dangerous position if you stay where you are."

"Well, if I could simply pull back we could stop this entire northern offensive! Model and I could pinch it off easily enough. Stuck where I am, with my troops anchored on the Donets, we can do very little. This is ridiculous!"

"Agreed," said Zeitzler. "Getting the Führer to agree is the problem. And yet.... If you found that enemy pressure on your lines was so great that the troops simply could not hold...." He let that hang in the silence, the meaning of his suggestion evident to Heinrici.

"I see... You propose we hand the Führer a *fait accompli*, and then blame it on the Russians. Heads could roll if Hitler ever found out we had this discussion."

"I am prepared to lose mine, if you are prepared to lose yours," said Zeitzler. "What I am not prepared to lose is the 4th Army. General, I think

you should send me a report that strong enemy attacks have developed all along your front, and the line is simply too thin to hold.... But do so only after you have made some judicious redeployments. I can keep things off the situation map at OKW for 48 hours, but no longer.”

“I understand,” said Heinrici. What about Festung Belgorod?”

“Who is there?”

“Ludecke and the 56th”

“*Gekreuzte Säbel*,” said Zeitzler, Crossed Sabres, the Divisional insignia. It was fated to be dissolved in September of 1943 in the real history after suffering heavy losses, and would not be rebuilt for another year. “If we throw the dog a bone, it will likely sit like the 305th in Prokhorovka. This is a lot to get done, General. I will place 22nd Panzer under your direction as well, and do what I can to stop that attack behind you. Good luck....”

This little conspiracy was going to reshape the front, and cause a major row at OKW when it was finally clear that the line of the upper Donets had been lost. But it was the only chance the Germans had to save that army, and both Zeitzler and Heinrici knew that, even if Hitler would have to accept the agony of yet another “withdrawal,” undertaken by his unreliable Generals.

Heinrici ordered the 56th Infantry Division to adopt hedgehog defense around Belgorod, then he folded back the two divisions on either side of that city to build a new line about 12 kilometers to the south. His plan was to slowly peel his divisions away from the Donets, sliding them west as he did so, to build up strength near the farthest point of Katukov’s advance.

As the *Reichsführer* Brigades moved toward the Udy River as Zeitzler had promised, they ran into trouble immediately. The enemy had already slipped south of Shetovka where the 167th had deployed, and they were 15 Kilometers southeast of the Udy River, now crossing the next minor river barrier, the Lopan, at the town of Kazeya Lopan. Katukov’s 3rd Mech Corps was there, with heavy tank support from the 6th Tank Corps. They had already cut the rail line to Belgorod, and were just two kilometers from the main supply road as well. Heinrici’s little conspiracy with Zeitzler was enacted just in time to stave off disaster.

Chapter 29

Balck ordered his 11th Panzer Division to pull out and move north when he learned that Knobelsdorff himself had to use his Headquarters company to aid in the defense of Kharkov. The situation at Borovoye south of Kharkov was now stable, and he could not see his division sitting there head butting Kuznetsov's 1st Tank Army for very much longer. So he got with Scheller and they conspired to have his 9th Panzer take over defensive positions, ending the combined offensive the two divisions had been engaged in. The 11th was needed elsewhere.

"Hauser!" Balck got hold of his Recon Battalion. "I need you to pull out fast and get up north to the main road into Kharkov from Chuguyev. A Soviet tank brigade has broken through and Knobelsdorff has been using his Korps assets to try and stop it. Be aggressive. I'm bringing up the rest of the division right behind you."

"Very good, General," said Hauser. "I'll move immediately."

And he did.

His battalion was quite strong, with an armored car company, a second company in halftracks, and a heavy recon company, also mechanized. They could move fast and hit hard, which is exactly what Hauser did, arriving to find the 48th Korps Pioneers trying to stop 15th Guards Tank Brigade. It had slipped through a hole in the line like a good running back and boldly raced another 10 kilometers up the road from the village of Rogan to Kharkov. That has sent off alarm bells in the city, and the reaction was now bringing one of Germany's best Panzer Divisions into that action. But by the time Balck arrived on the scene, Hauser had smashed that brigade, the 75mm guns on his armored cars just good enough to do the job, particularly when he caught them from behind.

Balck was also moving north because the 3rd Shock Army was making increasing inroads in the lines of Korps Raus. It was now only 16 kilometers due east of the city, and Wagner's Nordland SS Division had to fall back to straighten its lines and free up units to send in support.

This crisis so near the city had the effect of fixating Hitler's attention, and Zeitzler seized upon it to focus the Führer's attention, personally intercepting

position reports concerning his little conspiracy with Heinrici. The net effect was that the belated arrival of 6th Panzer Division was finally resolved. Hitler had equivocated over actually sending the division from Berlin, now he ordered it to Kharkov with all haste.

Then word came from Manstein: “*Beginning counteroffensive operations, effective 04:00.*”

17-APR-43

While General Popov was contemplating the meaning of his orders, and equivocating, the west wing of 63rd Army was being ground under the heavy steel tracks of *Grossdeutschland* Division. The 346th Division was mauled and pushed back, reorganizing its defense as close to the river as possible to try and prevent a breakthrough. The 266th Rifle Division on its eastern flank was also giving up ground, along with the 203rd. General Shurkin of the 63rd Army began shifting units west to try and reinforce the threatened sector, but *Grossdeutschland* Division was not going to be stopped.

Behind it, Kirchner’s 57th Panzer Korps was finally arriving from the Caucasus. The lead unit was the 17th Panzer Division, followed by 3rd Panzergrenadier. The 29th Motorized was coming as well, for after the fall of Groznyy, Volkov’s forces retreated to Makhachkala, and the line was compressed considerably. This allowed Kleist to order 17th Army to that sector, freeing up Hansen’s entire 11th Army. Some divisions would be used to relieve those two mobile divisions, and other would also be made available to send north.

Kirchner would throw his two divisions in to the right of *Grossdeutschland*, and Shurkin soon found his line was being stormed along an 18-kilometer front, with numerous regiments already surrounded by the fast moving German forces, surging through any gap to envelop the defenders. The smoke and fire of the battle obscured the sun and made for a blood red dawn on the 17th, an ominous portent of what was now happening.

It was Manstein’s Backhand Blow.

* * *

General Shurkin of the 63rd Army was in a state of shock. The two tank

brigades he had rushed to backstop his infantry had been destroyed, the heavy German Tigers grinding through the muddy fields and simply chopping them to pieces, firing at ranges out to 2000 meters. Nothing remained but the smoking wrecks of gutted, burning tanks. 346th Rifle Division had been overrun, with two regiments crushed and the last in a desperate retreat. 266th and 203rd Rifle Divisions had been hit just as hard, and his 1st Rifle Division had been surrounded and then completely destroyed.

63rd AT tried to throw up a Pakfront, but it was simply overwhelmed before the gunners to get properly positioned. His army had fielded 15 rifle regiments among its five divisions, and seven were destroyed or completely routed. Shurkin ordered a general retreat, which would soon become a cascading rout of his entire army.

While this carnage was underway, 57th Army heard the frantic reports and realized big trouble was rolling like thunder to the west. General Gagan's army was east of the Oskol River where it flowed down to the Donets near Izyum, and he immediately began issuing orders to fold back his line. This army was better organized, with many of its regiments dug in, but when word came that the 63rd Army was in full retreat on their right, Gagan's 57th had no recourse other than to withdraw north.

Popov was listening to his radio, and heard those same frantic calls of one colonel and lieutenant screaming orders or asking for help. He now surmised that the German *Grossdeutschland* Division was emerging from the Izyum Bend, smashing its way through 63rd Army, and heading for Balakleya, where the hapless bridging engineers had just finished repairing the bridge there, only to find demolition engineers come rushing in to set charges in case the Germans broke through. The cacophony on the radio was deeply disturbing, for he had heard all this before, over the first two long years of the war, and he knew what it meant—chaos was coming his way, a threat well behind his bridgehead over the Donets if it reached Balakleya. Now he realized that his impudent order to sweep away what he thought was a single reinforced German regiment had suddenly become two full SS Panzer Divisions!

It was Steiner, and *Das Reich* was going right through those three cavalry divisions that had been screening the eastern face of his bridgehead. He realized he was in serious trouble, but he knew what he had to do to save his command.

“Order all units to break off their attack to the southwest and retire north immediately! They are to reassemble south of the bridge at Andreyevka.”

“Not at Balakleya sir?”

“Are you deaf? I said Andreyevka! Now move!”

He still had time.

Vlasov’s 2nd Shock Army would be falling back over the bridge at Balakleya, and the rest of it was strung out along the north bank of the Donets to the southeast. There was nothing he could do to save the 63rd Army, but he could save his own Shock Group if he acted quickly.

If he had the privilege of reading the books shared by Sergei Kirov and Berzin, he would have seen how badly he was treated in this battle, though the situation now was not as grievous as it was in the old history. There, Popov had pushed out nearly all the way to the Dnieper, his lines and columns very overextended and ripe for the counterattack that Manstein delivered. Here Zhukov had wisely reined Popov in at his Donets Bridgeheads, and this was largely because the plan did not call for any concerted push over the Donets until Kharkov had been captured. If Popov perceived he was in danger, it was peril of his own making with that brash attack contrary to Zhukov’s written orders. That said, his tank corps here were better provisioned, and a more cohesive force than in Fedorov’s history. Now it remained to be seen whether they could measure up to the task and redeploy as he wanted. The Popov group had been all but destroyed in Manstein’s counterattack, and its fate here was as yet undecided.

The General then sent a message to Zhukov indicating he was under aggressive attack by two SS divisions, and moving to secure his easternmost bridgehead and possibly retire north of the river—and he requested support. That would soon come from a man who was well up to the task General Rodion Malinovsky, commander of the 2nd Shock Group that had been slowly following in Popov’s wake.

The big, broad chested man with the dour face received the news with studied calm. Then he gruffly issued orders for his forces to prepare to move out.

Malinovsky’s Group had been Zhukov’s last mobile reserve, the Knight in the center of the board ready to leap off to any threatened corner. Oddly enough, Malinovsky’s central square was in a town called Volkov Yar, one of the few that still retained the name of the renegade leader of the Orenburg

Republic. A good chess player, Zhukov now looked at the situation as if he were studying a complex position on the board.

2nd Shock Army was now to be the front most directly engaged with the enemy, both north and south of the river. Those were his pawns, and some were too far into the enemy camp to be protected now, particularly since he had to withdraw his Bishop, General Popov.

East of the Oskol River, Gagen's 57th Army was still secure for the moment, so he would not worry about that side of the board. His Knight, Malinovsky, had 2nd Guards Mech Corps and the 2nd Motor Rifle Division in hand, with strong artillery. That piece had to move—or should it stay right where it was, guarding the center of the board? Zhukov needed to look several moves ahead to see what the enemy was up to here.

Manstein has castled, he thought, and Steiner has finally reappeared. So here comes his Queen and a strong Rook, looking to cut off all the forces exposed south of the Donets. Steiner will get north of the river in time, and he will then make one concerted push north, most likely towards Chuguyev, and that will cut off Kuznetsov and all of 1st Guards Army. So I have to stop him.... Somewhere. To do that I will need everything Popov has, and Malinovsky as well. That will give me two Tank Corps, a Mech Corps, and two Motorized Divisions. Malinovsky soon received the news: *Deploy for combat but maintain your present position until further orders.*

The plight of the 63rd Army worsened by the minute. 60% of the army would cease to exist that afternoon. When the stragglers found their way to Malinovsky's line, a Lieutenant asked whether the rest of the 63rd Army was coming this way or not. A haggard Sergeant replied: "We *are* the 63rd Army, and there's very little left behind us." The Sergeant exaggerated, but the truth was just as grim. General Shurkin's the 63rd Army would be left with no more than five regiments.

* * *

Manstein's attack had already had a dramatic effect on the Soviet offensive as a whole. It had shattered one army and put it to rout, then prevented Popov from moving any further over the Donets. The commitment of Malinovsky's reserve also had an effect on the battle for Kharkov. The attack by Kuznetsov's 1st Guards Army had pushed over the Donets bend near Zimyeve and was half way to the city before it was checked by the

sudden appearance of the 9th and 11th German Panzer Divisions.

Scheller's division had come in by rail the previous day, intending to join Knobelsdorff's Korps, but the situation at Zimyeve was so bad that it had to be diverted there. The Soviets had crossed the river and advanced another 20 kilometers, half way to Kharkov, before Knobelsdorff stopped them near the small village of Borovoye.

Kuznetsov informed Zhukov of the situation, requesting Malinovsky be sent to get his attack moving again, but that was not to be. For the first time, the Soviets were being forced to react to German countermeasures.

The only front where the Soviets still held all the momentum was in the north, where Heinrici had been forced to order the creation of "Festung Belgorod" under Hitler's direct order, abandoning the 56th Division. Mikhail Katukov's stunning march and sudden breakthrough had gone nearly half way to Kharkov, threatening the entire rear communications Zone of 4th Army and prompting Zeitzler's conspiracy to try and save those troops.

Katukov had punched a big hole in the line between Model and Heinrici, and he was going right through it like a cold north wind. The two German Generals had been struggling to close it for the last four days, but that was not to be. Even though Model built up forces near Tomarovka, they were countered by the growing commitment of 5th Guards Army. Model's flank was still hanging in the air, but now long promised reinforcements from Army Group Center were finally arriving, the 42nd Infantry Korps under Dostler, with two more infantry divisions.

On the other side of that hole, was Heinrici, struggling to free up enough troops to stop Katukov's sudden left turn against his communications. The *Reichsführer* Brigades had halted 3rd Mech Corps at their bridgehead over the Lopan River, but all of 5th Tank Corps was still at large. One spearhead was 36 kilometers north of Kharkov, but when 6th Panzer finally arrived from Germany, Knobelsdorff ordered it to detrain at Kharkov and prepare to join Hermann Balck. Now only 15 kilometers west of the city, the 3rd Shock Army had to be stopped.

Balck decided to attack immediately, throwing his entire division astride the main road from Chuguyev. His troops moved forward with grim determination. Their enemies had driven over 125 kilometers from their Oskol River bridgeheads, and now were within 15 kilometers of grasping their prize.

They would go no further.

Chapter 30

The timely arrival of German Panzer reserves was slowly changing the tide of the battle. The sudden appearance Balck's division at the point of 3rd Shock Army's attack was a stunning blow, but Balck soon found out what others before him knew only too well. He was up against at least four rifle divisions and the entire 1st Guards Tank Corps, backed by three breakthrough artillery regiments three Katyusha regiments, and two more artillery regiments from 3rd Shock. The enemy response to his sudden attack was to unleash a barrage of over 300 guns all along the lines of his division.

The iron fell heavily all along the line, and the PzJager Battalion of Korps Raus got the worst of it, the guns particularly vulnerable to the artillery fire. There were casualties, but the division weathered the storm. The Russians then thought the Germans had had enough, for they saw the panzers and halftracks pulling back, but Balck was only maneuvering. He had delivered his first hard punch; now he was going to roll his division south to make room for Hunersdorff's 6th Panzer Division.

General Hunersdorff brought up 6th Panzer as close to the front as he could by rail, and after assembling, he began an advance. His division would come onto the line just north of Balck's and with all new tanks fresh from the factories in Germany.

The German tankers saw what they thought were a group of T-34s, and they were correct, but when the enemy tanks fired, the crack of the main guns sounded distinctly different. They were T-34 85's with an all new main gun that had much better range and hitting power. The arrival of 6th Panzer was the tonic, with all new VK-75 Lions, and a platoon of the better VK-88's in each battalion. It became a mini-battle of Kursk, with the best new tanks on each side hammering away at each other, and largely bringing both sides to a standstill.

Further south, the rest of General Kuznetsov's 1st Guards Army was still frustrated by the stalwart defense of 9th Panzer. His attack had been brought to a complete halt. The Udy River flowed down through Kharkov to join the Donets near Chuguyev, and the Germans had been trying to hold that line.

Kuznetsov's troops had fought hard the previous day to gain a small bridgehead over that river, the Germans counterattacked to push him back. He reported the situation to Zhukov, who was getting more news along the same lines with each passing hour.

All his shock groups were slowly being stopped, and Popov in the south had not even waited for the order to move north of the Donets. He crossed near dusk on the 17th, preferring the safety of Andreyevka and a good river behind him rather than having his back to that same river during a possible night attack against his position. 3rd SS had pursued him, nipping at his heels, and then suddenly vanished. The darkness was the German's friend, and it was time for another stunning night move by Steiner.

Das Reich led the way, its bridging battalions already at the river in a pre-arranged plan to lay a pontoon bridge. They would cross that night, screened by the woods southeast of Balakleya, which would put them behind the line of resistance 2nd Shock Army was trying to build along a wooded stream further east. As dusk fell the sounds of battle continued, rumbling over the steppe as *Grossdeutschland* Division ploughed into a line of three NKVD machinegun units that had thought to halt the Germans that day. Hörnlein would smash that line in a matter of two hours, his heavy tanks simply unstoppable. The roar of the Lions could be heard far away, and little by little, the morale of Vlasov's army was ebbing away with the coming of night.

* * *

Katukov may have been stopped, but he was not deterred, believing he could maneuver and find a weaker point in the enemy line. In fact, the gap he had driven into the German lines was now 50 kilometers wide, a huge gaping hole that he could move into at any time, and it was completely undefended. but that attack was now of secondary importance. On his right, and behind his position, Rybalko's 5th Tank Army had probing columns no more than 40 kilometers from Kharkov, steel fingers groping into that emptiness, reaching for their distant objective. Yet even if he did move south, Katukov knew it could still take a very long time to get to the city from his present position.

The Germans had reacted by folding back their lines along the upper Donets, peeling away from the river and then moving to concentrate forces

near his spearheads. The same had been done by the enemy 2nd Army on the other side of the breach, where 5th Guards Army was tasked with holding that shoulder. They now reported a growing buildup of German infantry.

They are planning to try and pinch this salient off, he thought, but they won't get through my troops easily. Yet with all this strength building up on this flank, I cannot move south without taking a great risk that I might not be able to get back again. If we had another army behind me, moving into that gap, things might be different. But those troops are now investing the two German strongpoints at Prokhorovka and Belgorod. I could still move, with Rybalko, but by the time we got to Kharkov, our tanks would be bone dry, and the fuel trucks 50 kilometers behind us.... He went to his signals unit. It was time to inform General Zhukov of the situation, and see what might be done.

* * *

East of the city, the big inroad achieved by 3rd Shock Group had finally been brought to a halt. The combination of 11th and 6th Panzer divisions, had brought that attack to a standstill. 3rd Guards Army north of Chuguyev could not be driven back, and it was still pushing hard against the Nordland SS Division, but now Dietrich was sending strong Kampfgruppen to help shore up that line, and beginning to counterpunch. With the appearance of these tough, battle-savvy troops, Nordland Division finally found its backbone, fighting side by side with the senior SS division in the army.

Hitler had raged about the withdrawals on the upper Donets when that situation finally became apparent, but seeing these counterattacks slowly halting the enemy offensive, he had begun to recover his composure.

So all Zhukov's attacks had been stopped or contained, and in the south, where there was still gaping hole along the Donets, he did not dare to move any further to exploit the situation. Popov had moved back north of the Donets when 63rd Army was routed, and now Malinovsky was shoulder to shoulder with him, the two groups waiting while Steiner and the *Grossdeutschland* Division battled against 2nd Shock Army.

"Should we move now to support Vlasov?" Popov had asked in a terse signal.

"Stand fast with Malinovsky," came the reply.

Even Zhukov had men he had to answer to, and this was such a time. He left his front HQ and flew to Leningrad that night to make his report and consider how to proceed. Wary from the long journey, he greeted Sergei Kirov and Intelligence Chief Berzin on the grey morning of the 18th of April. He unrolled the battle map with grave silence, then adjusted his hat and spoke.

“I regret to inform you that Operation Red Star had not been able to achieve its primary objective. Our troops fought bravely, and fought well, but there was sufficient resiliency on the other side to bring this offensive to a halt.”

“But Popov was over the Donets,” said Kirov. “He had open roads all the way to the Dnieper.”

“I stopped him,” said Zhukov, “and that was fortunate. This attack the enemy threw at 63rd Army was very strong. I have had to commit my last mobile reserve and then recall Popov to create a force sufficiently powerful to have some chance of contesting it. 63rd Army has been routed, and 2nd Shock Army is now heavily engaged. It will not hold much longer, and then I expect this strong enemy counterattack will begin moving towards Chuguyev.”

“Steiner?”

“Who else.... And he has their elite Guards division on his right, with fresh units arriving from the Caucasus. The fighting with 2nd Shock Army is still underway, but there are now five enemy mobile divisions reported in action there. The initiative had passed to the enemy, so now we must decide how to proceed. We have two options. The first is to use our mobile reserves, combined with the Popov Shock Group, and counterattack. The advantage would be that we protect Kuznetsov’s position south of Kharkov, and that of the 3rd Shock Group as well. The disadvantage is that we expend our last reserve. If our attack is defeated, then we have no further mobile reserves in this entire theater.

“The second option?” asked Berzin.

“To take what we have gained and consolidate our position.”

“Then we will not get Kharkov?” Kirov folded his arms.

“Not immediately as planned. We are very close south of the city, and now we must do what we can to preserve that position.”

“Can a counterattack with Popov and Malinovsky succeed?”

“We might, but there will be heavy losses to those armored formations. We may have enough to stop this attack, but that is not certain.”

“I see...” Kirov nodded gravely. “What do you propose?”

“The situation in the south is the danger zone for us now. We reached the Donets, but I do not think we can stay there—not with this hole between Kuznetsov’s position and Andreyevka. If we counterattack, then Kuznetsov should pull back and extend his lines to cover that gap. He might even be able to send one of his mobile corps to stand as a small reserve. Then it’s up to Popov and Malinovsky.”

“Is this what you wish to do?”

“The safer play is to pull out, give up the Middle-Donets, and withdraw here, to a line between Chuguyev and Kupyansk on the Oskol River. We will try to retain the Chuguyev Bridgehead with 3rd Shock Army, but Kuznetsov, Popov and Malinovsky must all fall back and consolidate. Otherwise we invite a good deal of trouble. This General Manstein wants to roll us up from behind, and Steiner gives him the strength to do so.”

“I agree,” said Kirov. “That is the danger zone.”

“Katukov still has a deep penetration in the north. He might be able to gain more ground if I let him continue, yet that may also be trying to reach what we cannot fully grasp. In my opinion, I would pull him out as well. The Germans are building up too much strength on either side of his salient.”

“So close,” said Kirov, “and yet so far. We are 15 kilometers from the city, and cannot take it! We have driven all the way to the Donets, and cannot cross it!”

“Then let us fight to stay as close as possible,” said Zhukov. “Let us fight, and if they prevail, then we retreat if we must. But I am willing to do everything possible to preserve the gains we have achieved.”

Kirov hesitated, ever so briefly, and then decided.

“Attack,” he said. “Use Kuznetsov’s mobile units if his infantry can hold, but do anything to hang on to the Middle Donets. Pull Katukov’s 1st Tank Army and Rybalko’s 5th Tank Army out of that big penetration in the north if you think it best. Then perhaps they can become our new mobile reserve.”

“Very well,” said Zhukov. “I am sorry we could not achieve our purpose in taking Kharkov, but we will fight as best we can to hold everything else we have taken from them.”

Kirov put his hand on Zhukov’s shoulder. “Have no regrets,” he said.

“This has been a solid victory. We have pushed back their 4th Army, carved up their 2nd Army, and come within a whisker of taking Kharkov. We ran all the way to the Donets! Yet as you point out, the enemy was not without resources. I consider Red Star a success, even if we could not take the city. Don’t worry, we’re that much closer, and we’ll take it this summer.”

It was not the reaction that Zhukov expected, and he felt gratified that Sergei Kirov chose only to see the good in what his armies had accomplished.

“You have my permission to start your battle in the south,” said Kirov. “Yes, hold that southern flank. I want Steiner stopped.”

Red Star had achieved much, as Walther Model would be the first to admit. He realized that the divisions left in the fortress cities at Hitler’s insistence were now as good as lost. Kharkov had been saved, but the Russians had gone far, from the Oskol to the Donets, and with good prospects to advance further until they were given pause by Manstein’s counterattack in the south. Zhukov’s caution had avoided the debacle this battle had become in the real history, and he had wisely opted to consolidate his gains instead of reaching too high on the tree for the sweeter fruit. Now the battle to see if he could hold the Middle Donets was about to be engaged.

“You see,” said Berzin when Zhukov had departed for the front again. “He avoided the trap by stopping Popov near the Donets. Manstein will not get his famous backhand blow this time around.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Kirov. “We are sending Popov into battle. Ah... but what if Zhukov had let Popov go? When he crossed at Balakleya, even I was so bedazzled by the thought that we could reach the Dnieper, that I all but forgot the outcome of that choice in the Material.”

“So we take things slowly,” said Berzin. “Small bites will still finish the beef. Zhukov was correct to stop this attack and consolidate. This further fighting in the south could be a mistake. We may lose a lot of tanks, and this summer, we could always try again.”

“You know they’ll also be planning a big offensive,” said Kirov. “In the Material, it was at Kursk, but that bulge has all but been eliminated with this attack. Assuming we can hold the Middle Donets, that may end up being the next critical sector. So why not fight for it now?”

“Then there will be no battle of Kursk,” said Berzin.

“Perhaps not,” said Kirov. “Their Counterattack went all the way to

Belgorod in the Material, and it is not finished. We may still have to give ground here if Popov and Malinovsky can't stop Steiner. If the battle this summer isn't fought at Kursk, then it will be somewhere close by, somewhere on that same map Zhukov rolled out for us here. In fact, it may be this very fight we have ordained! So we must be prepared. I'll want your best effort at intelligence in the months ahead."

"Don't worry," said Berzin. "Once things settle down here, I will find out what they are planning. Rest assured."

Part XI

Grim Realizations

“In these kinds of sudden realizations, the tacit and creeping nature of technology has only been detected after the fact. Once one notices the change in one’s altogether altered surroundings, it already has happened: the technology has already risen to prevalence.”

—**Indrek Manniste:** *Henry Miller, The Inhuman Artist*

Chapter 31

18-APR-1943

General Vlasov clearly perceived the peril he was in, and the realization was grim. His 2nd Shock Army was strung out on too wide a frontage, with half south of the Donets, and the rest on the north bank. He received word to consolidate everything he could near Balakleya, and that is what he did, pressed hard the entire time by Hausser's 2nd SS. Only when he had managed to compress his army to a 12-kilometer front did he begin to think he might hold, but he was still underestimating the power of the iron that was about to fall upon him now. (*See map for the battle of "Volkov Yar."*)

Das Reich had formed a screening line, pressing the northeast end of Vlasov's line, which was now anchored on the Donets. Behind this front, Eicke had crossed the river and he now had the entire 3rd SS tight as a coiled spring and ready to attack at dawn on the 18th. *Das Reich* engaged the line and then *Totenkopf* swung around the right flank of that division like a halfback looking for a hole to exploit. That maneuver would force Vlasov to refuse his left slightly, but his confidence grew with the arrival of Popov's 7th and 10th Tank Corps to his rear.

As Popov neared the front line, he could hear the sound of the fighting off to the northeast. That was *Grossdeutschland* Division, already engaging Malinovsky's 2nd Motor Rifle Division. The battle lines would now stretch out in that direction, all the way to the road and rail line into Chuguyev. The hissing launch of 82mm rockets told him that his 7th Tank Corps was announcing its presence, and giving challenge. Then he heard the Super Heavy Howitzers of Malinovsky's Group, and took heart.

The two sides would meet like armored knights, each thundering towards the other bearing long, lethal lances. It would be the largest clash of armored forces thus far in the war, four German Panzer Divisions, with two more Panzergrenadier Divisions as the 29th arrived. The Russians fielded two Tank Corps, a Mech Corps and two Motor Rifle Divisions in this initial clash, but General Kuznetsov's 1st Guards Army was already hastening to the battle with another Mech and Tank Corps.

For the first time, Manstein and Steiner hit the enemy line with all three divisions in one coordinated hammer blow. A company of heavy Lions had been parceled out to each of the three other divisions in 57th Panzer Korps, but that still left over 60 Lions on the line for this assault, each with 88mm guns. The SS Divisions also had companies of Tigers organic to their Panzer regiments. The tanks lined up, fearsome shadows of steel in the early dawn, their long, dangerous gun barrels looking like evil lances. Then a harsh command was given, and one by one the Lions fired, the shots streaking like hot bolts of lava across the deadly field between the two sides.

T-34's were blasted at long range, some having their turrets blown into the bloody dawn. Halftracks of the mechanized infantry were seared and scalded with fire, and dark, pallid smoke loomed over the scene. Then came the awful din of massed artillery, regiment after regiment pouring on the fire, thick and heavy.

It was Ironfall, burning lead from the sky, a rain of molten steel, and it fell heaviest on the dismounted motorized infantry, which had no time to prepare positions or dig in. Then the German tanks gunned their heavy engines, growling Lions at Dawn, and the big cats charged. The only thing missing were the trumpets, for this was the equivalent of the finest heavy cavalry in the world raging forward over the sodden ground to tear into the lines of their enemy.

Popov's 7th Tank Corps had been hit only on the left side, but that was enough to savage a motor rifle battalion and send the tank destroyers defending with it into retreat. The 10th Tank Corps was on the right, seeing German armored cars and halftracks from *Das Reich* emerge through the heavy smoke, and the order was given to attack. The entire weight of that Corps would fall on the breach, where a battalion of Panzergrenadiers was advancing with a company of armored cars in the van. It was going to be more than enough to stop that little breakthrough, but the real problem was to the north.

It was Malinovsky's 2nd Motor Rifle Division that took the brunt of the attack by 3rd SS and *Grossdeutschland* Division, with five of its nine battalions shattered and falling back towards Volkov Yar. The entire line buckled and withered away, but the Russians were desperately trying to reorganize their broken battalions further back. NKVD Colonels stood defiantly, legs wide and firing pistols into the air to stem the ebb of the

infantry. Some ignored them completely, for that pistol seemed a small and harmless thing compared to the rolling thunder of the German attack.

General Ermakov of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division knew his line had been shattered and pushed back. He had reformed a thin front, the troops manhandling their 57mm AT guns into position, only to find those shells unable to penetrate the frontal armor of the heavy German tanks. On came the tide of steel and iron, falling on Ermakov's division for a second attack.

The Germans were relentless, panzers firing as they advanced, the infantry crouching in halftracks behind that wall of Lions and Tigers. They pushed another two kilometers into the mid-afternoon, until they were driving the Russians back to the southern edge of Volkov Yar. In places the line had been pushed all the way back to the Russian artillery positions, and the crews were desperately limbering up the guns to get them north out of harm's way. Some, unable to get the guns hitched up, simply lowered the barrels and began to fire.

Clearly beaten, Ermakov was about to order a general retreat, when up came a runner through the hovelled streets of Volkov Yar. Reinforcements had arrived from Chuguyev. It was General Kuznetsov's 1st Guard Tank Corps, forming its brigades a kilometer north of the town. Zhukov was risking everything here in a desperate attempt to stop the German counteroffensive.

This was the heavy Armored division in Kuznetsov's Army, and it had four tank brigades instead of three, with two of them heavy tanks, including two dozen SK-I, the "Sergei Kirov" model tank that looked very much like the one that had been named for Josef Stalin. With a 100mm BS-3 main gun, it was a match for anything the Germans had, and now all four brigades surged forward in a mad tank rush. The action would include another 66 T-34's, some with the 85mm gun, 35 heavy KV-2's, and 36 lighter T-60 and T-70 tanks.

The word was shouted forward: "Kuznetsov! Kuznetsov is here!" and the Russian infantry began to reform their lines. They had been pushed back a full five kilometers, but there was fire and steel behind them now, and they would turn and fight. They watched as the T-34's raced past their positions, then were up off the ground in a crouching run behind the fast moving tanks. Some leapt atop a passing KV-2 moving slow enough for them to do so, and shouting in Russian so the tank crews would know they had been mounted by

friendly infantry.

It was *Grossdeutschland* Division that took on the brunt of this new attack, its tanks and infantry grinding forward against the oncoming T-34s. The Lions halted briefly, their big turrets training and firing, the hot shells lancing out and slamming against the frontal armor of those big KV-2's. One hit sent three soldiers who had picked the wrong tank to ride to a quick death.

Tanks were being hit, slewing off the muddy slopes, burning, the hot molten steel running down the sides of penetrated turrets like metal blood. The Germans stormed into Volkov Yar with the 2nd Grenadier Battalion of *Grossdeutschland* Division only to be counterattacked on three sides by motor rifle troops heavily supported by those big KV-2's. They would be pushed out at a little after midnight on the 18th, the rubble of the town fought over with the ferocity of any street fight in Volgograd.

Then the second of Kuznetsov's two mobile Corps arrived to join the battle against the lines of 3rd SS. 2nd Guard Mech was bringing nine battalions of tough troops in halftracks, with two more tank brigades amounting to 55 heavy tanks, KV-2, KV-85 and SK-I models, the best the Russians had. Yet they were shocked to find that their T-34-76 could no longer penetrate the frontal armor of those Lions at any decent range, and it became necessary to maneuver for side or rear shots to have a chance of knocking one out.

That prospect was made more difficult by the fact that the Germans were now restructuring the TO & E of all their independent armor brigades and tracked PzJager units. They were adding in a full company of Schwere Assault troops in halftracks, with three scout Leopards, three SdKfz 251/21's for AA support, mobile mortars and even a section of SdKfz 250/8 halftracks mounting a 7.5cm gun. That infantry protected the sides and rear, watching for enemy tanks maneuvering to gain advantage, and the Lion's quick turning turret would then engage.

The 85mm gun had a better chance at a direct kill, but it had to get to the German tanks first, and the long range of those 88's made that a risky proposition. The KV-2 stood out on the field like a lumbering war elephant, easy to spot and hit. Its frontal armor was no more than 75mm on the hull, sides and turret, and the main gun was a 152mm howitzer, so this was basically an infantry support tank, a water buffalo, and no real match for a tank killer like the Lion.

The Russians had mass, but did not yet have the equipment they needed to offset and prevail over the great leap in tank technology the Lion represented. Only the SK-I model tank was found to have an equal chance when coming face to face with a Lion or Tiger. The first in the series were mounting the 100mm BS-3 main gun, but a newer version was already in the works that would upgrade to a 122mm gun. The smaller gun was actually better at armor penetration in testing, but quantities of that weapon were very limited.

The Russians thought they had a real tank killer now, particularly against the German Panther, where they found that they could penetrate the enemy armor at 1000 meters, while the Panther's 75mm gun had to get within 600 meters to have a chance against the new Soviet tank. The Lion, however, was better armored than the Panther, and it was even odds when encountering an SK-I-100. The real problem now was that the Germans were fielding large numbers of Lions, all being up gunned from 75mm to the 88 in these elite divisions, but the SK-I was only available in very limited numbers.

The arrival of all these reinforcements brought the German advance to a halt, as both sides continued to slug it out, with the line rippling with small advances and retreats all along the front. But something was happening near Kharkov that would now present Georgie Zhukov with a most uncomfortable decision.

It was Knobelsdorff and his 48th Panzer Korps. The withdrawal of Kuznetsov's heavy armor and mech corps had forced the Russians to suspend the advance of 3rd Shock Army and readjust their line near Kharkov to cover ground formerly held by the mech units. This gave the Germans the time they needed to regroup their own panzer divisions behind the front.

Sepp Dietrich was able to pull out of the head knocking battle he had been fighting with 3rd Guards Army, and assemble his division near Rogan, on the main road to Kharkov. Then Knobelsdorff had two excellent divisions in 6th and 11th Panzer. He concentrated them as one mailed fist, and attacked towards Chuguyev. Balck achieved a clear breakthrough just north of the Udy River at Temovoye, with Hunersdorff's 6th Panzer attacking a little north. Together the two divisions pinched off a three-kilometer segment of the enemy front, which was now completely encircled....

"There," said Zeitzler. "The situation in the north has changed, and Knobelsdorff is now restoring order near Kharkov; driving the enemy back

from the city.” He turned to Hitler, gesturing with the latest position updates from the front.

“The enemy mobile groups are withdrawing from this deep salient. Heinrici and Model are now advancing their respective flanks to suture up this wound, and 22nd Panzer will do the stitching. I expect that sector will stabilize by midnight tonight, and then we can plan the relief of Belgorod.”

“Excellent,” said Hitler. “But just remember—ground lost is not always easy to regain. You have given up much more than Belgorod. Our lines were on the Oskol River and the Psel when all this began. Can you tell me they will be there when it ends?”

There was clearly an admonishing tone in Hitler’s voice, for he resented any backward step, the loss of terrain being equated with defeat in his mind.

“Look at the 305th at Prokhorovka,” he said. “They are still holding like a rock. Once we retake Belgorod, we must see if we can get to them. I will personally decorate every man in that division. That is backbone, General Zeitzler. And that is what I want to see in my Generals. You must have the nerve to order the troops to stand and fight when necessary. Why should I have to lecture you on such rudimentary defensive tactics?”

Because they *are* rudimentary, thought Zeitzler, though he said nothing. We will get Belgorod back only if the enemy chooses to give it to us, for there are five strong mobile corps withdrawing from that salient, and as long as they remain in this sector, they represent a clear and present danger. The enemy can crush the 305th Division like a walnut any time they choose, so I do not think Hitler will be handing out those decorations any time soon. As for the line on the Oskol—I do not think we will see it again either, but I cannot tell that to the Führer. He updated the map, seeing that Heinrici’s 4th Army was now bent in the shape of a massive question mark, and it seemed to sum up the uncertainty of this entire situation in his mind.

Look how they fought. The Russians assembled fast moving Shock Groups, coordinated over ten armies on the field with good results, and they came damn close to taking Kharkov. We no longer have the luxury of resting our panzers in rear areas. They must be closer to the front line now, and ready to intervene and stop these breakthroughs when the enemy attacks. We had to pull in units from as far away as Groznyy and the Black Sea Coast to hold the line of the Donets. That is very sobering to contemplate, and my job is likely to get a good deal more difficult, particularly if the Führer insists that we

launch Operation Downfall in May as scheduled.

“What about Manstein?” asked Hitler.

“He has reached Volkov Yar, with fighting all along that minor river line. We shall know more soon....”

* * *

With a hole in his lines 5 kilometers wide southeast of Kharkov, Zhukov now realized that his position on the Middle-Don was fatally compromised. He had to pull back from his tantalizingly close positions near Kharkov and cover Chuguyev. His risky ploy to try and stop and defeat Steiner in the south had failed. Now he had to worry about getting those troops on the Donets to the line he had proposed to Sergei Kirov, particularly the slower moving infantry of 2nd Shock Army.

Furthermore, while Kuznetsov and Steiner slugged it out on the line of the Volkov River, Kirchner's 57th Panzer Korps had defeated Malinovsky's 2nd Guard Mech Corps to the north and east, and that flank was also becoming very unstable. It was time to retreat, and he crossed his fingers with the hope that his commander could coordinate such a move under heavy enemy pressure.

So this battle in the south will be called Volkov Yar, he thought, and the Germans will claim it as a victory. That rankles me, to have that bastard's name plastered on the history of these events. We must rename that town....

The afternoon of the 19th, the Germans paused, with some battalions down to 30% supplies. The Russians were now in full retreat towards Chuguyev, and Manstein was in possession of Volkov Yar. The first great clash of all these rebuilt armored formations was over, and with a clear and decisive outcome.

When it was over, Soviet tank losses would be 20% of their lighter T-60/70's, 23% of all T-34's, and 40% of their heavier tanks, including 60 of the 90 SK-I model, which had borne the brunt of the defense against those Lions. In that heavyweight division, both sides fielded about 525 tanks each, but the German losses were only 10%. The Lions were simply beating their armored enemies to death, and in that tank, Germany had a war winner if the Russians could not adapt quickly.

Chapter 32

That was not the only war winner Germany had in hand, and this was yet another grim realization that settled on the busy minds of Whitehall. Sir Alan Brooke got the full report on the incident in the tube that caused such loss of life, but it was what came after that really shook the command tree in England.

The Bomb.

“Concerning that incident at Victoria Park,” said Brooke. “I’m afraid it wasn’t a thermal bomb as we first thought.”

“Not a thermal bomb?” said Churchill. “I was told the trees and foliage were completely burned.”

“Yes, that was so, but we’ve now determined some most unusual after effects occurred. It took some time, but the casualty rate has been creeping steadily upwards.”

“How so? From injuries sustained by the blast?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Brooke did not mean to beat around the bush, so he came right out with it. “Radiation,” he said flatly. “The estimate is that anyone within the blast zone may have received as much as 500 Rems. I’m not entirely conversant with the meaning of that myself, but according to reports, it can be quite lethal, with a fatality rate between 50% and 90%.”

“Radiation.... My God, then we’re talking about an atomic weapon?”

Churchill knew about them, for he had given his own authorization for Britain to begin working on such a project in August of 1941, the T.A. series projects, where the T.A. stood for Tube Alloys. That was the covering code handle for Britain’s effort to develop the bomb, but now it seemed, and with the shock of cold water, that Germany had beaten them to the punch, quite literally.

“Casualties were relatively light,” said Brooke. “We were lucky this one landed where it did, in an open park. Frankly, we’ve also been lucky that they haven’t visited us again. I’m afraid we’ll have to put the emergency protocols into effect now. I know you’ve grown quite fond of your bunker office, but concrete and earth only give so much protection against this sort of thing. It’s the radiation...”

“Yes,” said Churchill. “The ghastly perfected means of human destruction; the monstrous child of our war technology has finally been born, and it seems we were the ones unfortunate enough to hear its first cry. Yes... Put the protocols in place.”

That had to do with the scattering and dispersal of key government offices, personnel and vital records. Nothing could be centralized to a point where it might fall victim to one blow. The bomb that fell on Victoria Park was quite small, just a tenth of the size that the Americans used on Hiroshima in one telling of these events, but the fear it produced was of an equal nature, once it was fully understood what had happened.

“We finally get air superiority, and then this damn thing gets through. I’m told it was delivered by a Zeppelin? Well, why in god’s name didn’t we get up after the damn thing. Surely we must have seen it plain and clear on the radar sets.”

“It was seen,” said Brooke, “and tracked. We did have fighters up, but they couldn’t reach it. The Spits top out approaching 12,000 meters. This thing was up over 15,000 meters—50,000 feet.”

“They dropped it from that high up?”

“Apparently. The Germans have been experimenting with glide bombs. They used one effectively at Novorossiysk.”

“Not all that effective if they had to send Admiral Raeder into the Black Sea. That said, the prospect of another great Zeppelin scare is already frightening. This time it will be an atomic Zeppelin bomber....” Churchill shook his head.

“Concerning the Black Sea,” said Brooke, “the developments in the Caucasus have certainly changed things.”

“Quite so,” said Churchill. “Sergei Kirov must be very relieved, yet he hasn’t buried the hatchet with Volkov yet. I suppose I can understand why after 20 years of hostility.”

“He seems happy to let Orenburg get a good taste of what the German Army can do when its guns and tanks are put against you,” said Brooke.

“Volkov has the devil to pay now.” Churchill shook a finger, forcing a smile. “Hitler is after his oil too, and he’s already got Maykop and Groznyy.”

“It doesn’t seem like they’ll go any farther. That big Soviet offensive got their attention. And our interdiction of the Baghdad rail line in Syria and Iraq has had a good deal of success. They got another infantry division through to

Baghdad, but we took out a big supply train yesterday. Air power, Winston, that's the ticket. It's a long way yet to Basra and Abadan. Frankly, I think Jumbo Wilson will hold, particularly after he gets the reinforcements we've sent. But this General Guderian certainly delivered the goods, wouldn't you say?"

"Unfortunately so," said Churchill. "If General Wilson can hold him at bay, then we might be able to focus on finishing the job in Tunisia. What's the holdup?"

"The Americans teed up an operation that was largely successful—Operation Hammer. It forced the Italians to give up Mareth and retreat north. Then the rains set in, thick and heavy. General Eisenhower is hopeful they can make another big push soon, and the objective is to try and get to Tunis in May."

Churchill nodded. "Then it's on to Sicily—possibly even Sardinia. Hopefully Jerry has no more Easter eggs to throw at us any time soon. They haven't come again with that Zeppelin since the attack on Victoria Park. I wonder why? Nor have we had any word from them by way of a threat to repeat that attack."

"Bletchley Park thinks it was a prototype, a kind of macabre test to see if they could deliver the goods, and gauge its effects."

"Well they delivered alright," said Churchill. "Ghastly... How is Whitehall taking this? I certainly hope there isn't any talk of our surrender to this monstrous technology."

"Quite the contrary," said Brooke. "It's been stiff upper lip, but they certainly want to get moving with our own TA projects. Time seems to be running out. If this was a prototype, then the Germans know it works. Now their effort will be to increase the size and lethality of the damn thing, which is what really worries. It may not just be Victoria Park and the surrounding neighborhood that gets the blast next time. It could wipe out most of central London if they get one big enough."

"Then we need aircraft that can get high enough to stop their Zeppelins. It's maddening that they can take technology from the turn of the century and mate it with this monstrosity of a bomb."

"There's been work on getting a high-altitude fighter worth the name, as you well know. We did get modified Spitfires up as high as 45,000 feet over Egypt when Jerry was running those JU-86 Photo recon missions. They had

to strip them down, adjust the engine compression, ditch fuel capacity, and swap out the 20mm cannons for lighter machineguns. They even put on wood propellers to lighten the load. The same sort of effort is being mounted here, with the Special Service Flight at Northolt. They've been working with Mark IX Spitfires. The guns tend to freeze up and jam above 40,000 feet, and the pilot needs an electrically heated flight suit, but the work is promising. It also takes a pressurized cabin and a better engine, but we can get up there. That new American fighter, the P-51, seems to be a good candidate for similar modifications, and then we have our other little secret project, the *Meteor*."

"The jet aircraft?"

"Yes, but it will be some time, and I'm not sure of its specifications as yet. We'll continue to look at defensive tactics to intercept their high-altitude attacks."

"Indeed," said Churchill. "I might have a word with Miss Fairchild. They have weapons that might help us out in the short run. And while we're at it, we must also consider a more proactive approach. We know where they have their eggs, at Peenemünde. RAF had better get after the place. We might even see if my Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare can do something about that facility."

Churchill was referring to the secret Special Operations Executive set up early in the war to conduct sabotage operations against the German war machine wherever they could find it. It was often called "Churchill's Secret Army," or went by names such as "The Baker Street Irregulars." The Prime Minister preferred his own more colorful handle.

"Getting at Peenemünde with saboteurs would be somewhat chancy," said Brooke. "However, Bomber Command has a plan calling for a 600-plane raid. They were thinking to make a go of it in August this year, but that's been moved up. The code is Operation Hydra. It's all a part of the entire Operation Crossbow effort to disrupt their special weapons programs. Can you imagine what would happen if they got these atomic warheads atop a missile?"

Churchill did not have to imagine it. He had been given a very detailed description of such an event by one Admiral John Tovey, who's memory of all his many encounters with the ship they had once called *Geronimo* was now clarifying to an alarming degree. Tovey thought he was going right off his rocker at first, getting all these snippets of memories that seemed so real

he could swear he lived them. But he knew at the same time that they had never happened... at least not in the life he had been living up until they emerged in his mind. That enterprising young Russian Captain Fedorov had a good long chat with Tovey, and now he finally understood what was happening to him.

The Prime Minister also did not know that the Germans already had such a warhead mounted on a missile. The bounty of *Kaiser Wilhelm's* little jaunt to the South Atlantic had delivered this nightmare to the Reich. They had used one of the two missiles mounted warheads they received, but as yet, they had not replicated the design with weapons grade materials of their own. So the danger was not as imminent as it seemed, but the British acted sensibly as if it was.

Brooke was still rambling on. "We've got conventional weapons in the works that we might use by way of retaliation, but they're nowhere near the scale of the thing that hit Victoria Park. We estimate that blast was about 1500 tons TNT equivalent. One of our new Grand Slam bombs packs only 6.5 tons of explosive power, and we were going to roll out 50 in the first batch. Even if we dropped them all on one target, that's no more than 325 tons of TNT."

"These dreadful atomic weapons will be the end of us, Brooke. If we can build one, will we dare use it, even against a madman like Hitler?"

"Assuming we're still here, we can revisit that question when we've got the damn thing." Brook put a fine point on the matter.

"Well, we need to find out just how advanced their program is at this stage," said Churchill. "I had no idea they would be able to produce a real prototype this year."

"Nor did anyone else. But things are changing rapidly now. We'll have to be on our guard. I'll issue that order to put the special protocols in place, but I assume there will be no rousing speeches in Parliament or public statements concerning this incident."

"Right," said Churchill. "Like a good boxer, you never want to let the other fellow know that he's hurt you. But good lord, Brooke. I saw the last real cavalry charge mounted by the British Army at Omdurman in 1898.... Now this. Unfortunately, by the time you become aware that some ferocious new technology is in the works, it is already a clear and present danger. The nights are going to be a good deal more sleepless now. When Singapore

finally fell after Montgomery packed up for Java, the Germans crowed that I was to be the undertaker of the British Empire. Well, with this development, the job title seems all the more probable.”

“Now don’t get all gloomy,” said Brooke. “However, you’ll be traveling a good deal now, every few days according to the protocols.”

“Every few days? How can I possibly get any work done hopping from one bunker to another like that?”

“Oh, it won’t always be bunkers. We’ve singled out safe houses in out of the way places where Jerry would never think to waste a bomb. They’ll be a small bunker in the cellar, but otherwise a nice country cottage will serve well enough, and we’re rigging them all out with good communications equipment. It’s time you got a little country air anyway, isn’t it?”

Brooke smiled, always one to lay on a cross of tasty frosting, even if the bun was burned....

* * *

Churchill summoned the Fairchild group to a secret meeting to discuss what had happened and consider defensive measures. The weapons possessed by Miss Elena Fairchild & Company were the Aster 30 missile system, with an operational ceiling of 20,000 meters, and a speed of Mach 4.5. With the *Argos Fire* sitting in the mouth of the Thames, it could see anything attempting to cross the Channel on its Sampson radar, and engage targets out to 120 kilometers, as far off as Dunkirk. From there it could also cover the whole of London, as far west as Oxford, or anything approaching the city from points north of Cambridge.

In effect, they would easily see the approach of any Zeppelin hoping to get close enough to deliver another bomb, but the worry was that the Germans might attempt to use regular bombers for the job. That would complicate the defense, because even though the attacker would be exposed to the RAF fighters, there would be no way to know which bomber might be carrying the bomb. To protect the city, they would have to get them all, and that was an unlikely prospect.

Yet defense against the high-altitude attack was at least something, until England could modify enough fighters to reach the 45,000 to 50,000-foot ceiling of the big German Zeppelins.

“I am much in your debt,” said Churchill to Elena. “You and your intrepid destroyer have been of immense help. Your sonar work on the Atlantic convoy runs helped us at a time when we most needed it. The job you did at St. Nazaire helped chase those German naval raiders from our doorstep, and now you receive my thanks, and those unspoken from tens of thousands of Londoners, for this watch you stand over the city. Your radar alone is of immense help—much more accurate than our own systems, which must seem primitive.”

“Primitive, perhaps,” said Elena, “but absolutely necessary. They are the foundation for all our own systems. Remember, my ship was built right here in the U.K.”

“And what of this business at Gibraltar you mentioned? I understand you were doing some cave explorations beneath the Rock.”

“Correct—at St. Michael’s Cave, and we found something most disturbing there, a fissure, deep beneath the cave.”

“A fissure? Well, what is remarkable about that? The entire site is a network of underground caverns and tunnels, and we’ve added to them year by year with our own artisans.”

“This fissure was something more,” said Elena. “It was both a physical and temporal rift, a disturbance of both matter and time...”

That got Churchill’s attention. “Time? Please go on, Miss Fairchild. Explain.”

“As I’ve related to you earlier, my ship is here because of a very special key that actuated a device we recovered from Delphi. We believe that both the key, and the device it engaged, were engineered in the future. In effect, they were engineered to displace matter in time, and the effect was limited to matter within a given radius of the device when engaged. Apparently, that radius was large enough to encompass *Argos Fire*.”

“And why do you suppose your ship appeared here, in the 1940s?”

“I think that was the work of the key we used. The device has apertures, all in the exact shape of the key—seven, to be precise.”

“I see.... Then this explains why you are so keen to recover the key that was aboard our HMS *Rodney*—a fine old ship, and a pity we lost her.”

“Yes, because I have it on good authority that the key aboard *Rodney* was associated with St. Michael’s Cave, and lo and behold, we find this temporal rift there.”

“Temporal rift... I understand that in theory, but what does it mean?” Churchill took a sip of the brandy he was nursing.

“Like any physical rift in stone, it can permit movement in time, like a gorge or passage through mountains that would be otherwise impassable.”

“You know this to be a fact?”

“I do.”

“This is not speculation?”

“No sir, I put men through this passage, and we thought we lost them for a time. Indeed, we did lose them, for they simply vanished. We even had one linked to our base team by a sturdy rope, but it was completely severed, as if something burned right through. I was considering how to proceed, when the two men finally returned, a full day later, and with quite a story to relate.”

Churchill gave her a long look, waiting. “Well, come on, my dear woman. Get on with it. You certainly have a captive audience here, and there’s a good deal more brandy in that flask.”

“To make a long story short, this fissure does, indeed, become a rift in time. They told us they climbed back out, only we were gone, our entire base force, and all the equipment we had brought in to excavate the place if necessary. So they made their way upwards, and out of St. Michaels Cave, only to find they were somewhere else. Not in space, mind you, but in time.”

“Where?” said Churchill. Then he corrected himself. “When?”

He took a long sip of brandy, his eyes gleaming in the wan light of the room.

Chapter 33

“**The** men were not entirely certain,” said Elena, “But we’ve done a bit of research to see if we could determine the date. One clue they brought back was quite unexpected.”

“What was it?”

“A rather nasty bug, and by that I mean disease. The men made their way up and out of the tunnels, finding Gibraltar to be a very different place. In some locations, the conditions were quite decrepit, particularly along Town Range. From all appearances, they thought they were back in the time of Victorian England. Well... There was trouble. A local officer got suspicious of my men, and they thought it best to make a hasty retreat. They were pursued, but their pursuers did not know the tunnels as well, and took a wrong turn. My men laid low, then made their way back, eventually finding the bit of severed rope, which we threw back in the hopes that they might find it. They did, spying it with a torch, and that was a strong clue as to which passage to take. By following it, they were brought back to their point of origin, here in 1943.”

“Astounding,” said Churchill. “And this nasty clue?”

“Yellow fever. It took us a few days to identify it, but our medical people confirmed it, and that gave us a clue.”

“The epidemic of 1804,” said Churchill. “There were small outbreaks along the Spanish coast in the late 1700’s and the turn of the century, particularly at Cadiz and Seville. The worst to hit Gibraltar was in 1804. If your man contracted the disease in that brief visit, I would assume it was rather widespread, as it was in that year. Over one third of the territory’s population succumbed to yellow fever.”

“Well that’s as good a guess as mine,” said Fairchild.

“I’ll caution that by saying the fever was quite common on the Rock all through that period. They came to call it ‘Gibraltar Fever.’ Well, I certainly hope your man recovered.”

“He did, but there was one other clue we had some difficulty understanding. My men were on Town Range, near the officer’s quarters when they were spotted by a sentry. They overheard some between the

officers—of an imminent invasion. They seemed quite alarmed.”

“An invasion? Of the Rock? That doesn’t ring a bell for 1804.”

“Not the Rock,” said Elena. “It was England that seemed to be the threatened place.”

“I see.... Well this is all adding up,” said Churchill. “There was quite a stir over Bonaparte’s plan to cross the Channel. He had built an enormous fleet at Boulogne for that very purpose. In late 1804, he was there to rally the army that had been training for the attack. So that does seem to narrow down the date to 1804. There were further outbreaks of yellow fever on the Rock in the years after that, particularly in 1813, but there was no epidemic of fear concerning Bonaparte invading England in these years.”

“So our men reached the year 1804,” said Elena. “Which means anyone with the knowledge of that passage could do the same, and that brings us round to the matter of the key we lost on *Rodney*. We think we know where it was, that very year, in 1804.”

“Indeed... Now you can be the history professor, Miss Fairchild. Enlighten me.”

“It was in the salvage operation at the wreck of the *Mentor*, a ship owned by one Lord Elgin, a man you must certainly be familiar with.”

“Ah, yes, the Elgin Marbles. You say this key was found in the base of the Selene Horse, and that artifact was recovered with the rest of the Parthenon Marbles, by the Earl of Elgin.”

“Correct. The *Mentor* was caught in a storm, sought refuge off the Greek Island of Kythera, and went down when her anchor could not hold. That was in September of 1802, and a salvage operation was immediately planned to recover the crated marbles. By September of 1803, they had recovered eleven of sixteen boxes. Five more were still on the seabed, and of those, two had not even been located. In April of 1804 they renewed the diving operations, and by June of that year they had finally located and recovered all sixteen boxes, and also recovered the Throne of Prytanis.”

“You’ve done your research,” said Churchill. “But weren’t they subsequently moved to England?”

“Not until February 16th, of 1805. They were loaded aboard the British vessel *Lady Shaw Stewart*, Royal Transport Number 99. So between that date, and the date of the final recovery, all the crates were simply kept right there on the beach at Kythera, covered with sand and brush, and kept under

daily guard. So the Selene Horse is there—right there, in late 1804. If that passage in St. Michael's cave holds true and delivers a traveler to that time, then we can go and find that key before it ever reached England."

At that, Churchill raised an eyebrow. "How would that be possible, because it clearly *did* reach England. How else would it have been loaded onto the *Rodney* with the rest of the marbles?"

"An interesting point," said Elena. "However, since 1804 predates the arrival of the Marbles in England, there is no reason why I would not find it there."

"Yes, but if you do so, then you never had reason to come here looking for it aboard the *Rodney*. Yes?"

"Possibly," said Elena. "It sounds like a little paradox, but we think we have the answer. The rift crosses the line to another meridian of time."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Well let me put it this way... In all the history I know, the Germans never occupied the Rock, nor did they ever reach Moscow. This is an *altered* meridian, and that rift is reaching one where no change has contaminated it. I could go there, retrieve that key, and why would Time object? I had no idea the key I was given, or the device I discovered at Delphi, would move my ship here. I had no knowledge of this other key, nor any thought of the Earl of Elgin in my mind at all when our displacement first occurred. So there is no paradox of intent being foiled by the fact I already possessed the key."

"I suppose that's sound enough reasoning," said Churchill. "But suppose you do send those gentlemen of yours through."

"You mean my Argonauts?"

"Yes. Very handy fellows. Suppose you send them and they bring back this key. What then? What would you do with it?"

"Another good question. All I know is that there are seven apertures on the device in my cabin aboard *Argos Fire*, and one is most likely reserved for that key. If we're ever to solve this mystery, I'll need to go and fetch it. Would you have any problem with that?"

"If you're asking for my consent, it is given. But Miss Fairchild, I was told that all these alterations you spoke of first originated in the year 1908. Now here we are talking about a little jaunt to 1804, over a hundred years earlier. Might I advise caution while you are there. I know your Argonauts are quite effective, but a bullet in the wrong place might have some alarming

repercussions. You might shoot someone's grandfather, if you fathom what I'm getting at."

"Understood," said Elena. "We'll be as cautious as we can, but the mission must succeed. The order will be that no one of that era is to be harmed, but we may have to make a show of force if stealth and guile won't serve."

"Show it if you must," said Churchill, "but be a little reticent to use it."

It was more than someone's grandfather on the chopping block of time. Fairchild had taken hold of a rope that was leading her to a most dangerous place. It didn't start off that way. In the beginning, it was just a little competition between two men with more time, money and accompanying ego, than common sense. It was the sort of thing that sent them to hire experts to go and fetch ashes for sport, and those of Mister Churchill himself had been collected at St. Martin's Church in Bladon. The substance of his very being had been gathered up, compressed, and made into a trophy diamond to garner little more than bragging rights in a selfish contest between two very powerful and vain men. What the Prime Minister might think or say about that would be something to hear.

The man behind that little caper was one we have met long ago, and perhaps forgotten, but he has been about his business all this time, a keyholder, and one that has remained hidden from the Watch, Elena Fairchild, and even avoided the scrutiny of a man like Director Kamenski.

That man was, of course, one Sir Roger Ames, the Duke of Elvington, and his secret trip to Lindisfarne was undertaken, in part, to do exactly what Miss Fairchild was now about. The Duke knew more than he ever told, and was aware that other keys existed in this world that could open some very well hidden doors. His was but one of them, and it turned out to be a most useful key indeed, for it delivered him to a most fateful time and place, the eve of one of the great battles of modern times—Waterloo.

Duke Elvington had something to do there, someone to kill, as he put it to his so-called footman, and it was all a part of the same game he had been playing with his rival, one Jean Michel Fortier a wealthy French industrialist like Ames. Fortier had no love for England, dubbing it the bully of the 18th and 19th centuries.

"The world would have been so much better off," he claimed, "if the British Empire had died at Waterloo instead of French Imperialism." The

man claimed he was directly related to the French Capetian King Philip IV, The Fair, also called the “Iron King,” for it was he who had completely annihilated the order of the Knights Templar in his time. Ames never knew whether that lineage held true, but it hardly mattered. The deprecating remarks Fortier would constantly make about England quickly set the two men in opposition, and history was to be the shuttlecock they would slam back and forth at one another.

They had competed in everything since that moment, wheeling and dealing as they attempted to gain advantage over one another in their business ventures. They competed for the same real estate, sought investment control over the same companies, and when their economic sparring had run its course, they jousting for the favors of the same elegant and well placed women. The competition led to some very odd games. Fortier once also boasted that he would one day wear Churchill on his little finger. Ames had countered by saying he would secure the remains of Bonaparte himself, fashion them into a pendant that he would dangle around the neck of the woman Fortier was obsessed with at the time, and take her away. Then he had commissioned a resourceful man to secure Churchill’s ashes before Fortier could get to them, and he fashioned the diamond himself.

And so went the game.

Now, however, it was getting quite serious, for the key that the Duke had acquired gave him what he first believed to be an unassailable advantage—Lindisfarne. It opened the doorway to a hidden passage within that ancient coastal keep and monastery, and it led to a most remarkable place. He had explained it to his hired man, Mister Thomas, when the real truth of what had happened as they traversed that hidden tunnel became evident.

“Few men or women will know what I will now tell you.” He began. “To put it simply, the world we have just come from is in real jeopardy, not just with that war brewing up like a storm on our near horizon, but because it seems time itself has simply run itself down there. Things are starting to come apart and it’s about to get very strange, which is why it was necessary that we go somewhere else.”

“I don’t understand, sir. How could we move in time?”

“Of course you don’t. Let me see if I can explain it. You are given to thinking of time as something you always have, and always spend, like these shillings in my leather pouch here.” He cupped the pouch under his waistcoat

and went on. “You think of your life as beginning at birth, when you are handed a nice big bag of coinage in time, and you spend two pence a day until you run out. You move through time every day. Yes? But you always move in the same direction, forward. The thought that you might ever take a step back, to unsay an ill made remark, or correct some other misjudgment often crosses every man’s mind, but it’s not something he can ever do—or so he believes. You’ve heard the poetry by Omar Khayyam: ‘The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.’ So it has seemed to be true for most of our lives. Yet I have found it to be in error, Mister Thomas. Other men have too—though they are very few in number.”

“Others have done this—they have traveled back here?”

“Not here. This is my keyhold, and I paid handsomely for it, believe me. But there are other places like Lindisfarne in the world, and they open hidden doors like the one you and I just went through. I only know of a very few, but they are there.”

“You’re telling me these doorways and passages exist elsewhere?”

“They do. There’s one in the Great Pyramid, and others in Greece and China. There may be more that I do not know of, and each one leads to a different place—or I should say, a different *time*. This one led us here to the eve of a great moment in history, and it was much coveted. I had to pay a great deal for the key, and there it is.” He touched the chain that held the key where it hung about his neck.

It was not long until his arch rival Fortier became aware of that key’s existence, and of the fact that others existed as well. Not to be upstaged by Ames, Fortier committed all his efforts to finding and securing his own key, one that had been hidden in the history for ages, until it was inadvertently discovered by French troops in Egypt in the year 1799. It was his eventual acquisition of that key that finally evened the odds, for the game had begun to focus on a bet he had made with the Duke.

“I’ll see England under Bonaparte’s foot, come hell or high water,” said Fortier. “And there will be nothing you can do about it.”

Ames took that for wanton braggery, until a certain book was delivered to him one day, dating to the mid-1700’s. Fortier had vanished, undoubtedly off on some nefarious safari to get one up on the Duke. On that day, however, Sir Roger was shocked to open the book to a place that had been carefully

marked, and there to see his great rival's face staring at him with a wry smile, a man standing behind one Count Maurice de Saxe in a portrait. There, inscribed below, was the last will and testament of the Count, which read in part:

‘I likewise bequeath my great diamond named Prague, now in France, in the hands of Mr. Fortier, Notary, to my nephew, Count Frife. And I beg his most Christian majesty to grant him my regiment of light horse, and my habitation at Chambord...’

That widened the eyes of Sir Roger Ames, for it was Fortier who had often boasted about his possession of the Prague Diamond, given to Count Maurice de Saxe, a Marshal of France, after his first great achievement in the capture of Prague. It was bestowed upon him by the people of the city itself as a gift for preventing his soldiers from looting, but it had come into the possession of Jean Michel Fortier, and now Ames finally realized how he had acquired the jewel. But how? How did Fortier get back to that place and time to worm his way into the graces of the Count, and become his “Notary?”

Before he could learn that, both men became aware of the existence of yet another key, and each was now trying to find it. So the journey Ames was undertaking with his footman was more than an escape, and more than a mere safari for sport. It had a most sinister purpose. That was a move in the game made by Fortier that the Duke was now seeking to counter, and it would soon lead both men to settle their differences on the same fields of glory that settled the enmity between Britain and France.... In the early 1800's.

The fate of one of history's most significant and colorful despots, Napoleon Bonaparte, was riding in the balance. For the game these two men were playing was a kind of tug of war on the history itself. It could only end with that history taking one of two pathways. The first led to the royal halls of London, where Bonaparte would sit in triumph over his most stubborn and tenacious enemy, the British Empire. The other path led to Elba, Waterloo, and eventually the far forsaken Island of St. Helena, the place where Britain buried its monsters, and the resting place of French Imperialism once and for all time.

History knows well the path that was actually trodden. France fell to the combined might of her enemies, and not even Bonaparte could prevail with all his skill and prowess on the field of battle. But things change, and in ways many would never give a moment's thought.

Things change.... As Elena Fairchild knew all too well.

Part XII

The Mission

“A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Chapter 34

The great ship eased around the headland of Cape Agustin, Mindanao, and into the deep sanctuary of Davao Gulf. Battleship *Yamato* was always an awesome spectacle on the sea, its sheer mass conveying power, and equal grace in the smooth lines of its clipper bow and hull. It was accompanied that day by a pair of heavy cruisers, one light carrier for air cover, and a flock of destroyers.

The battleship was carrying the Admiral of the fleet, Isoroku Yamamoto, who had canceled his planned tour of bases in the Solomons at the urging of Captain Harada, and instead traveled by sea to this place for a most secret and fateful rendezvous. That was a decision that had saved the Admiral's own life, for the Americans had gotten wind of his planned itinerary, and they were going to send long range fighters out to look for him, and end his life. So now Yamamoto was a Zombie, the walking dead, and living a life he had never been meant to experience. Soon it would be his turn to stare in awe, for his forward air reconnaissance soon reported ships ahead, a full task force, and with two carriers.

That alone was surprising enough, for Yamamoto knew the locations and missions of every carrier in his fleet. They were the vital backbone of the navy, in spite of the power of his battleship, and he knew the fate of the Japanese Empire as it now existed rested on the integrity of those flight decks. And suddenly, unaccountably, here were two more!

This Captain Harada had called and reported the loss of his destroyer, *Takami*, but he nonetheless urged me to come to this place, thought Yamamoto. He stepped out onto the broad weather deck off the bridge of *Yamato*, to raise his field glasses and see for himself. There they were, unmistakably carriers, and around them was a small group of what appeared to be light cruiser escorts.

He was reminded of the old Zen proverb of a farmer's only plow horse which ran off one day. The neighbor lamented the loss with him, for how would he ever sow and harvest his crop, but the farmer was steadfast. "Who knows what is good or bad," he said quietly.

The simple wisdom of that statement was proved a few days later, when

the horse returned from a foray in the wild, but with two others it met along the way! Again the neighbor came to rejoice with the farmer, telling him that his great good fortune would now allow him to complete his work three times faster. But he received the same reply: "Who knows what is good or bad."

There is no end to that proverb. The farmer's son breaks a leg trying to tame one of the new wild horses, but who knows what is good or bad, for the next day, when war came to the province, all the able bodied young men were rounded up—except that of the farmer.... And on and on it went.

So, thought Yamamoto, what have I here? Two fresh horses come from some far off wild place, and all those other ships look very much like the one this Captain Harada brought to me last year. How very strange. He would soon learn all that had happened. The meeting would be held aboard *Yamato*, for Admiral Kita was every bit as eager to see that ship up close as Yamamoto was to visit those two new carriers.

The experience the Admiral had with Harada and Fukada made all these impossible things easier for him to grasp. How this had happened would never be known, but he would accept the verdict of his own eyes. There, just beyond that headland and into the deep blue bay, was a harbor full of miracles. The ships were sitting at anchor and flying the flag of Japan, warriors from another time, returning to fight for the Empire.

After introductions, Admiral Kita, with Captain Harada and Lieutenant Fukada, were sitting at the table in Yamamoto's stateroom aboard *Yamato*. Kita had offered a deep bow when he first laid eyes on the legendary Admiral, for there was the living history of the fleet, the most significant officer to serve Japan since the great Admiral Togo. Then these strange men from another time told their story, while Yamamoto listened quietly, struggling to believe in spite of his own eyes.

"The question now is how we should proceed," said Admiral Kita. "My Captain Harada here has told me he pledged the service of his ship and crew to fight for Japan. They were here, impossibly here like I now find myself, and like them, we have no way of knowing if we will ever be able to return to our own time. So we put the same question to our own Captains and crew, and the answer was that we would stand and fight for Japan, in any time, any era of our nation's history. So my little fleet is at your service, Admiral, and it is a most capable force."

"Tell me. What are these ships I have seen? Are they the same as that of

Captain Harada?”

“For the most part, Kita gestured to the nearest porthole, and the admiral followed. “That ship is the *Atago* , a vessel in the same class as *Takami* , those others are *Kongo* and *Kirishima* , capable destroyers, and with systems and weapons much like those of *Atago* . There is *Omi* , our replenishment ship, guarded by the helicopter destroyer *Kurama* , and that is yet another destroyer, *Takao* , sitting off the bow of the carrier *Kaga* , my flagship. The other carrier is the *Akagi* . All these names are familiar to you, for these ships were all named after their historical counterparts, now under your command.”

“Yet I see only two planes on the decks of each carrier. I assume you have others?” Yamamoto, always the pragmatist, came right to the point. A carrier had no more power than the planes it brought to sea. These ships seemed the same size as his own fleet carriers. His *Kaga* displaced over 38,000 tons, with a length of 247 meters. Admiral Kita’s ship was actually two feet longer, but not as heavy, displacing only 27,000 tons.

“At the moment, *Kaga* has seven fighters and an equal number of helicopters. *Akagi* has five more fighters, and six helicopters.”

“Twenty-five aircraft, and only twelve fighters? Then you have no strike aircraft?”

Admiral Kita smiled, giving Harada a sidelong glance. “These fighters are a good deal more capable than planes of this era,” he said calmly.

“May I sir?” asked Fukada, and the Admiral nodded.

“Admiral Yamamoto, sir,” Fukada bowed slightly, “The planes we carry are dual purpose fighter bombers, capable of serving in both roles. As a fighter, we can provide CAP coverage out to 250 miles, and see any approaching enemy plane within that envelope—unfailingly. Each plane is equipped with highly advanced sensors and radar, and so there is no question of our ever failing to detect an inbound aircraft. Each of our planes can then carry up to eight missiles similar to those we demonstrated to you here when we first met. That means that each of these twelve fighters can destroy eight enemy aircraft, again without fail, or a total of 96 enemy planes. That is, in effect, the entire compliment of an American *Essex* Class carrier. Our planes can kill from an extremely long range, and furthermore, they will be entirely invisible to the American radar.”

“Invisible? How is this possible?”

“The structure and shape of these aircraft is quite unusual, and you will

see when we tour the modern carrier *Kaga* . It is a combination of that shape, and the special materials used in the construction of the plane, but I can assure you, they cannot be seen on radar of this era. We call this technology, ‘stealth.’”

“Indeed,” said Yamamoto, raising an eyebrow, and obviously surprised. “How do they perform in the strike role?”

“In much the same way, only we can extend our strike range with certain loadouts out to 470 nautical miles. At slightly shorter ranges, we can put up to six 500 pound bombs on a single plane, or two 1000 pound bombs, and each and every one will strike its target.”

“They do not miss? Ever?”

“That may be possible in modern defended airspace, but not likely here. So our twelve planes could deliver two dozen bombs in the 1000-pound category, or seventy-two 500 pound bombs. I do not have to tell you the kind of damage that will do to enemy carriers and cruisers.”

“Great Buddha,” said Yamamoto. “We might send many squadrons all in the hope of obtaining two or three good hits.”

“Our planes will deliver much more, sir, and after that, they can become fighters, for they also carry missiles in the strike role, though only two to four instead of eight. That said, our *Kaga* and *Akagi* could probably find and sink any American task force we face in battle, and the enemy will most likely not even know they are under attack until our bombs actually begin striking their ships. We should take no losses whatsoever.”

“Surely you make close dive bombing attacks to be this accurate. What about enemy flak?”

“No sir, these are not dive bombers, nor are they torpedo planes. These are high altitude strike fighters. In some loadouts, we can deliver our ordnance from altitudes of 50,000 feet.”

“What? That is well above our highest flying fighters.”

“It is, sir. Other loadouts require us to release weapons at about 36,000 feet, but that is still 4000 feet above the service ceiling of the American F4F-Wildcat, which is why the enemy will most likely never see us coming.”

“But how could you possibly hit anything if you release your bombs at such altitudes.”

“These weapons have sophisticated guidance capabilities. Our planes can vector them right into the targets. With some ordnance, we release as far

away as sixty nautical miles, but can still hit the targets we aim for, almost without fail.”

“Astounding.” Yamamoto was deeply impressed. “If this is all true, then we can do exactly what you boasted earlier, and destroy an entire American carrier task force, and with only twelve planes. I cannot imagine what war must be like in your time—truly frightening. How does any sea Captain hope to ever prevail when he sets sail against such aircraft?”

“Because we sail in task forces like this one,” said Admiral Kita. “Each of our destroyers carries missiles. *Atago* , for example, like *Takami* , carries 96 missiles, and 84 of those could shoot down an incoming enemy plane. You can multiply that, roughly, by the number of destroyers you see out there, though some carry fewer missiles. And we have reloads aboard our replenishment ship *Omi* , which we also use as a fleet oiler.”

“But a good offense is our best defense,” said Captain Harada. “Our carriers, even with the few planes we now have, can get to the enemy before they ever know we are close, and destroy their carriers. Our destroyers may not ever need to use their missile compliment.”

“Suppose you encounter an enemy surface action group—with many cruisers or perhaps even a battleship.”

“Our planes would see them long before they could approach us, but granting your premise as a hypothetical, each of our destroyers carries up to eight larger missiles that target ships, and again, what we target, we hit, and without fail.”

“Yet you fought the Siberian ship, and where is your destroyer now, Captain Harada?”

“That was most unfortunate. However, my ship was not sunk by the enemy you call *Mizuchi* . It was hit by another Siberian vessel operating in these waters—a submarine.”

“I was not aware of this.”

“Neither were we, sir, and that was a surprise that was, in part, the reason I lost *Takami* .”

“So you are vulnerable to enemy submarines.” Yamamoto was covering all bases. “The Americans have many.”

“That is where our helicopters come in,” said Admiral Kita. “They can find and kill submarines of this era easily enough. In our time, a submarine is also quite stealthy. They carry missiles and torpedoes—a much more

dangerous adversary.”

“Rocket weapons? On a submarine? I assume they must be on the surface to use those.”

“No sir, they can be fired while submerged, which is a reason why this enemy sub is so dangerous. We must maintain an almost constant anti-submarine patrol with our helicopters to keep watch for it, and also use highly advanced sonar, but it is very stealthy. We have only so much aviation fuel aboard, so it is obvious that we can function much better as a part of the navy you now command. In exchange for our service, we may need fuel.”

“Of course,” said Yamamoto, still dizzy with the capabilities these men were describing. Two ships, twelve planes, and he could break the American fleet and effectively win this war. Would the United States sue for peace if that happened, or would they persist, building more carriers like they have already done?

“How many times could you strike and kill an enemy carrier task force? I assume your magazines are not limitless.”

“Yes, we have limited stores of these weapons, but certainly enough to win this war,” Kita explained.

“But the Americans are a most persistent enemy. What if they will not accept a peace offer. I saw a terrible end in the library aboard your ship, Captain Harada. What of that terror weapon the Americans unleash upon Japan?”

“That will never happen,” said Fukada. “Even if the Americans do build their atomic weapons, they must get close enough to Japan to deliver it. We can prevent that from ever being the case.”

“And if they should then unleash it on our fleet? Suppose they targeted our base at Truk?”

“Again, we could prevent it.”

“Could you? I read that this weapon was delivered by a single bomber. Can you stand by every potential place they could send such a plane? Suppose they send them by the hundreds, as I also read in that library. How would your planes or missiles know which plane might be carrying their terror weapon?”

“You ask very good questions,” said Fukada, “but may I also point out that if we destroy the American fleet, they will not be able to defeat your navy. The Imperial Japanese Navy will reign supreme in these waters, and

your ships and carriers, with our help, can then destroy all the bases they attempt to build for their bombers. We could even revisit Pearl Harbor.”

“We may be getting into too much here,” said Kita. “Suffice it to say, that we believe we can prevail in this war, but only fighting side by side with your own fleet, Admiral Yamamoto. This we are now prepared to do.”

“And the Siberian ship? Their submarine? They will undoubtedly fight on the other side.”

“That is the war we are prepared to fight here. We have already encountered that enemy, and driven him off, but not without cost. We are prepared to do so again.”

Chapter 35

That was the same issue that was now plaguing Volsky and Fedorov. Admiral Kita's task force was out there somewhere, and how could they proceed with their mission, while leaving it to ravage the American fleet?

"The whole problem is a false one," said Karpov. "This is all academic. Once we get to 1908, we can reset the entire history of this era. It will be as though none of this has ever happened."

"That's what is bothering me," said Fedorov. "We devised this plan to go to 1908 precisely because all of this did happen. If it doesn't occur, then we have no reason to go there—ever."

"More of your fear of paradox," said Karpov.

"A most justifiable fear," said Fedorov back quickly. "Look what it did to you. There are two of you now! And what about your brother in all of this?"

"He will be what he will be. The way I look at it, the fact that there are two of us gives us twice the chance of surviving whatever we do in 1908. Hopefully, we will both survive."

Volsky shook his head, a dazed look on his face. "I found one of you more than.... Sufficient," he said. "No offense."

"None taken, Admiral. But what I and trying to convey is this—we all know our personal fates are entwined in all of this business. If I am willing to put my fate on the line here, then you two must do the same—and you as well, Captain Gromyko. Now then, I've thought this through. You all have memories in your heads that are clearly not a part of this time line of events. You remember when you used the test reactors in the Primorskiy Engineering Center to move back to the 1940s at Vladivostok?"

"How could I forget that," said Fedorov. "It led to this entire mess. I stumbled upon the crown jewel of your little empire, the railway inn at Ilanskiy, and that changed everything. I warned Sergei Kirov; he killed Josef Stalin, and Volkov came looking for me all in that same mission. There we have the entire train wreck, and all because of me."

"You forget the Admiral who authorized you to do this," said Volsky.

"Yes, and you also forget all I did in 1908 when I found myself there," Karpov confessed. "But none of that is the point. That mission of yours first

delivered you to September of 1942, right there at Vladivostok. From there you took the Trans-Siberian Rail to move west and look for Orlov at Kizlyar. You fought a battle there against the Germans, if I recall. Yes, in late September. Orlov was at Kizlyar on the 30th, because that's what he put on that letter you found. Then you ran off on your mission to retrieve him. Well now, we didn't do that this time around, did we? Not at all. In fact, in September of 1942 you and I were scheming on a plan very much like this one, to go back and deal with Sergei Kirov. I called that off, but you persisted, and then eventually failed to develop... what was it? Ah, yes, timely cruelty. You could not bring yourself to kill young Mironov."

"Alright," said Fedorov. "So what is your point?"

"The two months of September were not on the same time meridian." He folded his arms, smiling. "You see? Your first mission to try and retrieve Orlov was in September of 42, but this time around your scheme was to get rid of Sergei Kirov—also in September of 1942. It was two different time lines! There's no other way to explain it."

"I suppose that must be true," said Fedorov.

"Yes, but you thought everything would go to hell after September 30, 1942. Remember? You said this world would have no basis to exist after that, the day Orlov wrote that letter that you discovered. That set everything in motion, your mission to fetch him, your visit to Ilanskiy, your chat with Kirov, Volkov, the Orenburg Federation, and then all that I did. That is what built the world and war we've been fighting. Well, here we are, smack dab in the middle of 1943, and all still friends." Karpov gave him a devious smile, then came to his point. "Nothing fell apart, Fedorov. The world did not end, nor did it start disintegrating, and it hasn't spun off into an interminable loop like you suggested. It's just blundering its way forward through all these Altered States. It's a new time line, a new meridian—and guess what. Time has to settle her bets one day or another. We put an end to the old time line when we built this one. So this is all she's got to work with now. See?"

"You mean to say—"

"Yes, I do. This is it, Fedorov. This is the new Prime Meridian! All that other stuff is dead and gone. Everything in the first loop we made here is nothing more than a fond memory in our heads. I challenge you to find anyone among the rank and file who remembers one lick of it, and there were some very memorable moments."

“Like when you fired off that nuke in the North Atlantic?” Volsky gave him a recriminating look.

“Exactly!” said Karpov, unphased. “That caused Japan to enter the war early, remember, but not here. We have the old tried and true on this meridian, Pearl Harbor. So the old meridian is gone. This time line is all that matters now.”

“But it can’t be the new prime,” said Fedorov. “It’s a complete dead end. It continues to diverge from the old history, which makes the creation of this ship more and more impossible with each passing day. And yet, this ship *must* be built for this time line to even exist. It’s maddening!”

“Yes, it is,” said Karpov, “but the mistake you make was believing the world we came from was the prime meridian in the first place....”

He let that hang out there, waiting a moment. “That may have just been our selfish arrogance, but it was probably just ignorance instead. We had no idea that time travel was even possible until the *Orel* blew up while we were on fleet exercises. We just assumed there was only one meridian of time, but now we know that is not the case. There are many, but this is the way things are now. The altered states we created have become the new prime. Whether that gives rise to the building of this ship or not is irrelevant. Yes, we were first cause for the foundation and building of this new meridian, but where is the big bang, eh? They say that’s what built the whole universe, and it’s over—done and finished. This is the result, and the result is all there is.” He gestured with his hand to the ship and world around them.

“But how could a ship from 2021 be a part of this world?” Fedorov persisted. “We’re here because those other meridians *did* exist once. At one time, they were all that mattered.”

“Yes,” said Karpov, “but their time has come and gone. So let’s just take my proposition as a starting point. This is the new Prime Meridian, and here we all are trying to reach some unified intention of going back to 1908 and reshuffling the cards. Why? Because we still cling to some notion that this history is wrong. We’re still trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again, and make this world look like the one we came from. We’re trying to raise the dead....”

“I need a good stiff drink,” said Gromyko.

“Agreed,” said Volsky, actually getting up and going over to a cabinet on the far wall where he shifted about some books and suddenly produced a

hidden bottle of vodka!

“Well,” he said with a smile. “This new Prime Meridian was kind enough to keep my vodka safe and sound, just where I always stashed it. Gromyko, find some glasses.”

* * *

“So what do we do here,” said Karpov when they had all finished a few rounds of vodka. “Do we still combine our willpower as we planned. What was the principle Fedorov?”

“Absolute Certainty.”

“Yes. Who knows what that means, but you say if we put our heads together, we’ll get right where we decide to go—back to 1908. Do we persist with this? Do we still try to go and change this new Prime back into something that looks like the old one? Then what? Do we shift back and find everything in this world is suddenly back to normal?” He made opening and closing quotes in the air with his fingers to emphasize the word “normal.”

“Just what is it you two want to accomplish?”

“Well,” said Karpov, “for starters, we thought we’d do what Fedorov failed to do last time and get rid of this Mironov. That puts the Man of Steel back at the helm, and our assumption is that he will deal with Volkov.”

“Can you be sure?” asked Volsky. “Volkov is a very cunning man, and quite determined.”

“Yes, he was quite a pain in the backside when we first met him,” said Karpov. “That’s one thing that hasn’t changed either.”

“Alright,” said Volsky. “Suppose Stalin prevails. That unites the Soviet Union, and since you will not do anything to bother Admiral Togo, the situation here in the Pacific should be back to something we all would recognize from our old Meridian. But isn’t this all speculation? Frankly, I don’t see how we could possibly know what would result from the actions we now contemplate.”

“Correct,” said Karpov. “In fact, we don’t even know if we can get out of there again, and move forward in time. Will power and absolute certainty may get us there, but Time might have no other use for us after that. Hell, she might just get rid of us if we try to shift again. That would be a nice solution.”

“Shift again?” said Fedorov. “We haven’t even discussed how we intend to go back to 1908. Are we going to use this ship? Are we going to use that back stairway at Ilanskiy?”

“Or a good Zeppelin,” said Karpov, smiling. “Yes, there are lots of ways to go. Frankly, I’d prefer to take the ship along. We’d have a good deal more clout that way, if we ever needed it.”

“True, but using that clout is another matter,” said Volsky. “That is what got the world into all this trouble in the first place. Our missiles have a way of Unsettling things in the past. They don’t belong there, and taking the ship along could be risky. We’d be taking the whole crew back with us. And what about Gromyko’s boat? If *Kirov* shifts, does she come along as well with *Kazan* ?”

“Good point,” said Gromyko.

“Yes, and in my mind, the more mass we try to move, the more complex and dangerous the operation becomes. You saw what happened last time we tried to move both vessels at the same time.”

“That’s because Rod-25 could not handle all that mass on its own,” said Fedorov. “It moved us, but we could not get all the way home.”

That brought back uncomfortable memories, so they moved on. “Besides,” said Fedorov, “*Kazan* has its own control rod now.”

“But how can we be certain they will work in harmony with one another. Ideally, we would all want to arrive in the past at the same time, but, as we have seen, when two vessels move, they can reach very different times.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “It could also be dangerous. We could experience... anomalies.”

“Anomalies?” Karpov gave him a sour face.

“That’s a real possibility,” said Volsky. “This old head of mine still has memories of that last shift we made. We emerged in a region of eerie fog. The helo could not climb high enough to penetrate it, and the sea was deathly calm, a kind of dead zone, the doldrums of infinity. Then people started to go missing—including you, Mister Fedorov. I could feel my number was up, and I had a chat with Mister Rodenko, by way of warning him that he was to take over as acting commander in my absence. The next thing I know that was all a fanciful memory. My point is this—if we do try to use the ship to run this mission, we could just end up in that same borscht.”

“Then Fedorov’s Absolute Certainty proposition would be wrong,” said

Karpov.

“Well it might not happen on the initial shift,” Volsky equivocated. “But it’s a real possibility that this would become a one-way trip—for us all, and for this ship and crew as well.”

“We’ll get somewhere,” said Karpov. “This isn’t magic. We’ve determined that Rod-25’s effects are physical, and in 1908, it should be at the height of its powers, because we’ll be very close to the Tunguska event. So we’ll get somewhere, mark my words, but I can also guarantee one more thing: if we do make a return shift, we’ll land in a completely new meridian of time, not this one. This world will be dead, over, kaput. Understand? So forget any notion that we’ll be fixing this meridian, or restoring it to what it once was. We’ll simply be destroying it, annihilating it completely, and then we will be building an entirely new meridian that logically arises from the action we take. If we do shift again, that’s where we will appear, and from there, the rest is done with mirrors.”

There was silence all around.

Where would they end up if they went to 1908, did all that they planned, and then initiated a shift again? That question had many possible answers, and they all seemed to rest on the choice of how they would attempt to go there.

“I still say the ship gives us power if we should ever need it. On the other hand, the back stairway at Ilanskiy has been quite reliable—old faithful. It always seems to reach that moment of the Tunguska event when we go down the steps from this time.”

“Yet coming back could incur the same risk the Admiral pointed out,” said Fedorov. “Don’t forget Orlov. He was right in front of me on those stairs, and then he simply vanished.”

“Ah, yes, Mister Orlov. He’s the man who jumped ship in the first looping of these events, and that set everything in motion. And now it seems he’s found a way to jump ship again! I wonder where he ended up? Was it in the future? Might he have shifted months or years ahead of the rest of your team? Or did he slip back further in time?”

“My guess is that he went forward,” said Fedorov. “No shift of any kind has ever reached a point earlier than July of 1908.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but Fedorov is to be forgiven for not knowing anything at all about the Duke of Elvington, or his rival Fortier.

“He’ll probably just appear on the upper landing one day down the road. Who knows, maybe he’ll appear in 1944.”

“Not if we do what we’re planning,” said Karpov. “Remember, this meridian gets destroyed if we tamper with things in 1908, so our good Mister Orlov will have no place to come home to. Perhaps he’ll be in that borscht that the Admiral mentioned. Frankly, he might be better off there than he would be blundering about on the new Meridian we create in any case. Orlov is a bit of a bull in a china closet.”

That he was....

Chapter 36

Orlov sneezed, his nose getting too much of a whiff of all that dust and soot in the darkness of that back stairway. Orlov sneezed, a reflex, an impulse, and his hand moved to his nose, as anyone’s might. In that fleeting instant, he lost contact with the man ahead of him on the stairs, and then it became very cold.

In that same awful moment, Orlov suddenly realized that he could no longer feel Fedorov’s hand on his own shoulder. He passed a moment of sickly uncertainty, as if he was suspended in mid-air. It immediately produced a feeling of great anxiety, and a sensation that he was falling. For some reason, he suddenly felt feather light, completely free, his being unfettered from the grip of gravity itself. He had not felt this way since that terrible moment when he had leapt from the helicopter over the Mediterranean, off the coast of Spain. Yes, he still had that memory in the back of his head, and he could follow the path it led him down, through the bars and brothels, onto the backs of old rusty ships, into the stony tunnels beneath the Rock of Gibraltar.

He had been interrogated, then put on a steamer heading for the Black Sea. There he was transferred to a trawler, operated by the NKVD, and he found that his knowledge of future events, all stored neatly in his computer jacket, gave him a most interesting peek at the events he was living out at that moment.

Eventually, he found the way to his Grandmother’s home in the Caucasus, but found that she, as a much younger woman, had already been hauled away by Beria’s men. A name came to him, that of a certain Commissar—Molla. He was the man responsible for his grandmother’s fate, and Orlov was

determined to deal with him. He would still grin, inwardly, as he recalled the look on Molla's face as he choked the breath and life out of the man. After that, in the midst of the battle on the Caspian coast, there was Zykov.

They had come back for him.

Fedorov had hatched the plan, always scheming, even as he always worried over everything they were doing in the past. But that world was long gone. It was as if it had never happened, for there were other memories in Orlov's head, of Zeppelins and wild rides in sub-cloud cars—or bone numbing sound so deep that it reached inside you and pulled at every instinct in your body, with throbbing fear. There were raids, on this very place, Ilanskiy, and Orlov was a part of one. Then Fedorov had tapped him for this mission as well, another Zeppelin ride that ended up in a time none of them ever expected to reach aboard the *Irkutsk*.

When that happened, Orlov thought a long time about the great devastation he had seen from the Irkutsk. He sat there, in awe, staring at the Tunguska Event. Fedorov had wanted to go to 1908, and then he suddenly was. They found the man he went there to look for, just as Orlov finally found Commissar Molla, and there had been some ruckus in the dining hall between the two of them—Fedorov and Mironov. Then, they were simply ordered to gather up all their gear and get in a line to file up that back stairway. What in the world was that all about?

They filed in, one by one, and each man with his hand firmly on the shoulder of the man in front of him. Fedorov was right behind him, so close that he could hear him breathing. The sound of the heavy booted Marines was loud in the dark and narrow passage.

Then Orlov sneezed.

The dizzy sensation of falling subsided, and he could feel weight and substance returning to his heavy frame; feel his feet solidly planted on the wooden step. He had been in a strange fog, but it was dark again, the murky, dusty stillness now so thick that he felt he could not breathe. He groped forward for the man in front of him, feeling nothing.

Sookin Sim! Where's that Marine gone? Then he realized there was no one behind him either. Fedorov was gone as well. He stood there, looking over his shoulder for a moment. Then he spoke.

“Fedorov? Son of a bitch.... Fedorov? *Skatina*, where have you run off to?” The other men must have gone on up the stairs, but where was Fedorov?

He turned, peering into the inky darkness, and then went back the way he had come.

* * *

“If we do this,” said Volsky. “If we go back, by any means, then when will we arrive there?” He looked at Fedorov, as he had always been the one to sort these things out.

Fedorov cast a glance at Karpov, then spoke. “I’m going to assume that 1908 puts us back on the old Prime Meridian, because we think Tunguska was the source of all this time fracturing. That happened the morning of June 30, 1908. I was there that morning, via the back stairway at Ilanskiy. So I can’t get to that time because co-location is impossible.”

“So we once thought,” said Karpov, thinking of his brother self.

“I know what you’re thinking,” said Fedorov. “But weren’t you.... elsewhere on Paradox Hour?”

“On my Zeppelin, again named *Tunguska*. How’s that for irony.”

“Alright... So I don’t think we could reach June 30th, but I was only there for a brief time. It might be possible, but it would also be extremely dangerous, because I was also there the following morning, July 1st. That was when I arrived using the *Irkutsk* on the mission to get Mironov.”

“Yes, and that was very strange that you could go there simply by overflying the site of the event in 1942.”

“The rift was obviously in play,” said Fedorov. “I might never be able to replicate that shift if I tried it again, but it happened. Call it fate, call it Absolute Certainty because of my earnest desire to get there—but there I was.”

“And I was blown back to 1908 aboard the ship after one of my little indiscretions,” said Karpov.

“Yes,” said Volsky. “Blowing the Americans to hell with a nuke.”

“I’ll have to admit, it did feel good.” Karpov was only half jesting with his smile. “In any case, I was there from the 10th of July through the 26th, having a good deal of success until you spoiled the party. I realize now that is what set Japan loose early, and why we lost all of Primorskiy Province, but that is.... History, at least from where we stand now. Those dates are out for me.”

“Then that leaves the period of July 2 through the 10th when you first arrived there,” said Fedorov. “That’s a very narrow window for you, and for me it would extend to July 17 when I went back on the Anatoly Alexandrov. I was there through the 19th trying to persuade you to come home peacefully.” He looked at Karpov.

“That’s not much time for me if we get to July 2nd. We could try, but as we approached the 10th, I’d have to make an exit.”

“But the earlier we get there, the better,” said Fedorov. “Mironov will be long gone if we wait until after July 26th to avoid these paradoxes.”

“This may sound stupid,” said Gromyko, “but do we get to pick the time we might appear there?”

“A very good point,” said Volsky. “In fact, isn’t this all up to Mother Time? We can’t assume we’ll get to any specific date.”

“To avoid Paradox, Time would have to make the same deliberations we are now engaged in,” said Fedorov. “So considering our combined intention as Prime Movers, we might just get the best seats in the theater available, and arrive on July 2nd. Time would know that our chances of success would be very low if we had to arrive after the 26th. Mironov could be hundreds of miles away from Ilanskiy if we take that route.”

“Which is, I think, the way we must go,” said Volsky. “Taking the ship gives us power, but it also becomes very complicated. We would then have to fly by helicopter to Ilanskiy to find this Mironov, and so we would have to take the ship north of Sakhalin Island to get as close as possible. Even then, it is 2500 kilometers to Ilanskiy from there.”

“But those helos at least give us mobility,” said Karpov.

“Until the aviation fuel runs out, which it will on a flight of that length,” said Volsky. No, Mister Karpov, I think the back stairway is our only choice here.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov. “That puts us right where we need to be, and with the best chance of finding Mironov, or even Volkov. If we take the ship, our chances diminish considerably. We’d lose too much time trying to get to Ilanskiy, and then we’d have to get back before the 10th and get the ship out of there before Karpov’s arrival on that date.”

“Alright,” said Karpov, relenting, though he was inwardly disappointed. He had inner visions of taking the helm again in 1908, and settling affairs, but this mission was going to need cloak and dagger, not the muscle of the

battlecruiser.

“Let’s assume you are correct, Fedorov. We go there, and I’ll take care of Mironov this time. Then we do everything possible to find Volkov before he slips away. He can’t get far. Where would he go?”

“East or west,” said Fedorov. There was a train heading east to Irkutsk—Train 94. It was approaching Kansk on June 30th, and they saw the event. That caused quite a stir, and they stopped at some debris on the line, sending men ahead on horseback to see if the rest of the line was clear. With all the commotion the event caused, the Engineer decided to re-coal at Kansk on the 30th and then proceed east, with a brief stop at Ilanskiy at the outset on July 1st. They had to stop there to pick up tourists and passengers that went by carriage to the inn there while the train was re-coaling. I think Mironov gets on that train. Zykov found him 10 klicks east of Ilanskiy on the morning of July 1st, so he was already heading that direction.”

“July 1st?” said Volsky. “Does the train leave that day?”

“This is where it gets complicated,” said Fedorov. “Yes, I think Train 94 probably left Kansk on the 1st of July, though we didn’t see it while we were there. It may have come later that morning, or even in the afternoon, but it had a schedule to keep, so I doubt if they lingered at Kansk long. They were heading for Irkutsk, a journey of 500 miles.”

“They might get there in one day,” said Karpov.”

“I doubt it. They probably stopped many times along the route, but they would certainly get there in 48 hours, unless something happened we don’t know about.”

“Then why not go to Irkutsk and wait for this Mironov at the rail station there?” Karpov was angling for something again. “We obviously can’t catch the train leaving Ilanskiy, because the earliest we can get there is July 2nd. We’ll be a day late, and Mironov will be hundreds of miles to the east if he gets on that train July 1st. The only way we could get to Irkutsk ahead of him would be to take the ship to the Yellow Sea, use Rod-25, and then go by helo to Irkutsk. That should cut down the range and fuel burden too.”

“You really want that ship back there,” said Gromyko.

“I’m just being practical,” said Karpov.

“Practical?” Fedorov gave him a wide-eyed look. “The Yellow Sea is a Japanese lake right now. We’d certainly be spotted if we tried to take *Kirov* there.”

“Well, I’d get you there safely aboard *Kazan*,” said Gromyko. “But my boat carries no helicopters.”

“Damn complicated,” said Volsky. “We may be determined to go back there, and perhaps time will send us right to July 2nd as you suggest, Mister Fedorov. However, there we will be, with a good chance Sergei Kirov has already gone east on that train. Can you imagine us all trying to find horses and then off we go, chasing a train through Siberia? Me? On a horse?”

The Admiral had made his point.

They all sat there, the Vodka setting in to soften their minds, glum expressions all around. “This Sergei Kirov is one slippery fish,” said Volsky again, using a term Kamenski was fond of. “And he’s carrying all this history we’re trying to reset on his back.”

“What about Volkov?” said Karpov. “That bastard will be on foot when he arrives. He couldn’t get far. We may not be able to get Sergei Kirov, but we would certainly have a good chance of collaring Volkov. He’ll have a service jacket on. We could rig out a device to find and track its signals.”

“What if he has it turned off?” said Gromyko.

“No,” said Karpov. “He’ll be confused. He’ll be wondering where his men are, and using the jacket to try and contact them. We could pick up that signal, home in on it, and get him. That at least solves part of the big problem here. It stops the Orenburg Federation from ever arising. As for Sergei Kirov, Fedorov has grown rather fond of him, and frankly, he’s much better for Russia. If we could at least solve the Volkov problem, that alone would introduce dramatic changes to this altered meridian.”

Fedorov raised an eyebrow at that. Getting Mironov was looking like a very difficult prospect. He had the man right in front of him, and now he was likely to slip away. We had our chance, he thought, and again, I blew that all to hell, though maybe that will be for the best.

“Yes...” He began. “Getting Volkov does do a great deal to fix this mess. It eliminates the Orenburg Federation, and even if Sergei Kirov survives as he did, he at least has a united Russia. In fact, without the strong opposition Volkov organized in the White Movement after Denikin’s demise, Kirov may have also subdued Kolchak, so there goes your Free Siberian State.” He looked at Karpov.

“Easy come, easy go,” said Karpov. “I told you I was willing to let all that pass.”

“Then what do we do here?” asked Volsky. “Is it just Volkov we’re after now?”

“If we can get him at all,” said Karpov, “then this may be our only chance. He’ll slip away just like Sergei Kirov if we don’t act, and take this opportunity while we can.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov. He had harbored reservations about killing Mironov, and was inwardly wondering if that would wreck their plan to get Absolute Certainty on this mission. But in his mind, Volkov was fair game.

“So then the four of us go blundering down those steps to look for Volkov?” Volsky folded his arms. “I’m not sure how much help I would be in that scenario. You younger men might have an easier time of things, but this old man will be of no use to you.”

“None of us have to go,” said Karpov. “I can send my Man Tyrenkov. He’s already seen Volkov there once, and that was on the very day of his arrival, June 30th. He could get back there, and with no time limit like we have to worry about. Tyrenkov is a very reliable man. With a couple good snipers, he’ll get the bastard. I’m certain of that.”

“Just how certain?” asked Gromyko.

“Absolutely certain...” Karpov smiled. “Then all we have to worry about is Orlov.”

* * *

All they had to worry about was Orlov.

The Chief had turned and started back down those stairs, reaching the bottom and groping for the door handle. He pushed it open, the grey light a welcome relief from the stuffy darkness of the stairwell. This was the only way Fedorov could have gone, he thought. He certainly didn’t get past me in the dark.

He pushed the door open, and stepped into the alcove near the fireplace. Easing out into the dining room, he saw it was empty.

“Fedorov?” he called, looking around. “Captain? Are you here?”

Then he heard something, not in the room around him, which was still and quiet, but on his collar microphone. His service jacket was on passive mode, listening, but not broadcasting, and he heard a voice he did not immediately recognize, sounding a rather plaintive call.

“Team Seven, this is team leader. Come in team seven, this is Volkov—over.”

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s ass,” Orlov said aloud.

The Saga Continues...

Book 31: Nexus Deep

Fedorov always thought Orlov would continue on up the stairs, appearing in the years or months ahead, but instead, the big Chief simply turned back. The mishap on the stairs of Ilanskiy sees Orlov now make a most unexpected choice, and it is already beginning to have an effect on the altered meridian where Fedorov and company try to reach a consensus on how to proceed.

Meanwhile, the war continues in Tunisia, and the unexpected power of the Soviet offensive Manstein fought to contain forces Hitler to make some very difficult decisions. How can the army continue to fight on all these disparate fronts and still have the power to launch Operation Downfall, their great summer offensive against Leningrad?

With Churchill's blessing, Elena Fairchild continues her quest for the key lost aboard *Rodney* , as the Argonauts embark on a most hazardous journey through the passages beneath St. Michael's Cave. If they should reach the year 1804, everything Fedorov worries about could now be put at risk by an intervention that takes place over a century *before* the strange event at Tunguska that fractured the continuum. The shifting meridians of time have become the sporting ground of two vain and foolish men, even as Britain and France begin to square off for the long 11-year war that ends on the sodden fields of Waterloo.

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 the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to 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 continues the saga in *Altered States* , which begins the second “Season” in the series, extending through Volume 16. The series is presently in Season 4, covering the Allied offensives in North Africa, and the winter battles of late 1942. Boldly enters the crucial year of 1943 in Book 27, aptly titled “1943.”

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 in “seasons” with 8 books in each season. In Season 1, 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. Book 4, *Men of War* stands as a sequel to that trilogy and the bridge novel that links it to the second segment of Season 1, beginning with *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 books 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war in 2021 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. Several subplots are also launched that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021, and deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The season 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 season finale, *Armageddon* .

Season 2 begins with the *Altered States* trilogy, where *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. It is here that a sequential alternate history retelling of WWII begins that will extend to the war's conclusion in 1945. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has powerful new ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov*'s earlier actions.

The *Altered States* saga spans books 9 through 16, initially covering the German attack on the 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 battles!)

The second half of Season 2 begins with *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive, Operation Sonnenblume. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues 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 also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

Book 14, *Hammer of God* , covers a surprise German airborne attack, and the British campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom* , the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

Book 16 is the Season 2 finale, *Paradox Hour* , where the ship faces the prospect of annihilation on the day it first arrived in the past, 28 July, 1941.

This impending event overshadows all else as *Kirov* joins Tovey in a pursuit of *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* as they break out into the Atlantic.

Season 3 then begins with Book 17, *Doppelganger* , where the aftereffects of the Paradox are finally sorted out. Fedorov is strangely displaced, and appears on the newly arrived ship, while Vladimir Karpov survives in Siberia, even as another version of himself defies paradox and appears on *Kirov* . Now Fedorov struggles to prevent the same dominoes from falling and keep the ship from engaging the Royal Navy as it did in Book 1. At the same time, the Siberian Karpov plots to seize control of the ship, and that action invariably involves Ivan Volkov, who has his own plans to strike at Ilanskiy in *Nemesis* .

The war then heats up on the East Front as the Germans launch Operation Typhoon, reaching a dramatic event on the outskirts of Moscow in Book 19, *Winter Storm*. These actions continue through *Tide of Fortune* , as Japan enters the war at Pearl Harbor, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The action then depicts the Japanese Malayan Campaign and the battle for Singapore, naval actions off Java and the invasion of the barrier islands, and then Operation FS, leading to battles in the Coral Sea and of the Fiji Island group.

In *Knights Move*, Montgomery is brought in to try and save Singapore, and coordinate the defense of Java. In the West, as the Germans battle for Gran Canaria in Operation Condor, Admiral Raeder turns his fast raiders loose in Operation Rösselsprung, but the Germans find something far more than they ever expected in the deep South Atlantic.

Turning Point resolves the fast naval actions in the Canaries as the German raiders attempt to return to Casablanca with their mysterious prize of war. Meanwhile, the Japanese invasion of Java is interrupted by an event that threatens to change the balance in the Pacific. A most unusual challenger to the ship they call *Mizuchi* appears on the scene. Meanwhile, in the Western Desert, the British launch Operation Supercharge to try and push Rommel off his Gazala line and liberate Cyrenaica.

In *Steel Reign* , the Japanese offensive reaches its high water mark as Yamamoto launches Operation FS in a bold attempt to storm the Islands of Fiji and Samoa and isolate Australia. He is opposed by a determined stand made by Admirals Fletcher and Halsey in the desperate battles of the Coral

Sea and Koro Sea to decide the fate of Empires. Meanwhile Vladimir Karpov continues his long planned invasion of Sakhalin Island, but Japan now has a powerful new champion as the Destroyer *Takami* is detached north to join Admiral Kurita's task force. The showdown is resolved in the season finale, *Second Front* , as the Allies storm ashore at Casablanca and Lisbon in September of 1942.

The series continues in the premiere of Season Four: *Tigers East*, where Rommel regains his lost glory in the deserts of Libya while Patton drives east in an attempt to enfilade Von Arnim's defense in Algeria. Manstein takes his hammer east as well to Volgograd, where the grueling fight for the city begins in *Thor's Anvil*. As the new year of 1943 dawns, the Allies now begin their war in earnest, and the outcome of the battles looming ahead will decide the course of the war.

Book 27, *1943* starts the critical middle year of the war as the action moves to the Pacific. The U.S. goes on the offensive, mounting a major push on Fiji, and amphibious landing by Halsey at Efate and MacArthur at Noumea. Carriers clash and the Japanese rush new hybrid ships into battle as the first of the new Essex Class carriers arrive to redress the balance on the US side. Then Japan's secret weapon, the destroyer *Takami*, receives an unexpected order to return to Yokohama, but the journey there will open a door to new opportunities.

In Book 28, *Lions at Dawn* , the war moves back to North Africa, where Eisenhower, Montgomery, Patton and the Air Marshalls plan their drive on Tunis. General Patton has ideas of his own, and they do not involve waiting for Monty to fight his way along the Algerian coast. His plan presents a major crisis for Kesselring and Von Arnim when Hitler orders the withdrawal of all Germany's elite paratroop units. The Führer has eyes on a new prize in the Middle East, and devises a daring return to that theater in Operation Phoenix. Meanwhile, General O'Connor's British 8th Army begins its big push to capture Tripoli, but he meets a determined and skillful defense by the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel.

An exploration of St. Michael's Cave at Gibraltar by Fairchild & Company leads to a hidden mystery beneath the Rock, and far to the east, the isolated atoll at Eniwetok receives some very unexpected visitors. The surprising developments set the destroyer *Takami* on a dangerous collision course with Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Gromyko, when the Russians set out

to cleanse the timeline of all contamination, including their own! Events lead to a dramatic battle at sea that neither side ever expected.

Book 29, *Stormtide Rising* , covers the Allied forces campaign in Tunisia. The Germans conceive a bold new plan that sends Rommel west to the heartland of Tunisia where he confronts the American Army under General Patton. The Axis forces launch Operation *Sturmflut* (Stormtide) as the famous names etched in the original history at Kasserine, Faïd, Gafsa and El Guettar will again see the rising tide of war.

At the same time, Hitler presses his daring invasion of Iraq and Syria in *Operation Phoenix* , while launching the cream of his airborne troops against the British outpost on Crete with a much belated *Operation Merkur* . As Guderian pushes into the heartland of Persia, Hitler sets his eyes on the richest prize in the world—all the oil the Reich will ever need to fuel the fires of war. Yet before Guderian can drive south, he must first secure his lines of communication. That necessity leads to a dramatic battle for the ancient capital city of Baghdad, with both sides risking all they have to rule the hour.

Meanwhile, Fedorov and Karpov face the grim reality of their situation and come to a decisive conclusion about how they must proceed.

In Book 30, *Ironfall* , the war continues in 1943, as Japan launches a bold new attack against the Fiji Islands that leads to a decisive battle off Yasawa. In Syria, Erwin Rommel unleashes a classic flanking attack towards Damascus with “Operation Eisenfall,” as the Allies attack Kesselring in Tunisia with Eisenhower’s “Operation Hammer.”

Then, as the German 11th and 17th Armies slowly grind down the last of Soviet resistance in the Caucasus, tensions reach a breaking point when they meet Volkov’s forces dug in west of Maykop. The Führer has ordered his legions to take and occupy that place, and Ivan Volkov chooses to stand his ground. The war in the east now threatens to spiral out of control, with new fighting erupting on every frontier when General Zhukov opens his Spring offensive in a massive attack towards Kharkov that now threatens to reshape the entire front.

Meanwhile, Elena Fairchild finally learns the fate of the men she sent into the hidden passage beneath St. Michael’s Cave, and also makes a surprising discovery that will give her the means to find and retrieve the key that was lost on the Battleship *Rodney* . As she plans her mission, Fedorov and Karpov arrange a meeting with Volsky and Gromyko to discuss their new plan to

shatter this altered meridian by traveling to 1908.

Detailed information on the battles covered in each book, including battle maps, is available at www.writingshop.ws.

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